

Sailor's Story  
*Moses Smith*

## **Before Joining USS *Constitution***

I was born in 1783, and at the age of 28, I shipped on board USS *Constitution*. I was rated an ordinary seaman and earned \$10.00 a month.

Many years after my service on *Constitution*, I wrote and published a narrative of my life at sea called *Naval Scenes in the Last War or Three Years on Board the Frigate Constitution*. Let me share my experiences by reading some passages.

## **Life On board**

I got along well with my shipmates, and was “considered quite a favorite” by *Constitution*’s

Captain Isaac Hull. My shipmates and I took great pride in the ship and were proud to defend our young nation.

## **Dangers of the Sea**

Even in times of peace, a sailor faced numerous dangers. Before the war of 1812 began, I sailed on *Constitution* to France and the Netherlands. The transatlantic voyage proved a rough one, with several severe storms that tested the seaworthiness of *Constitution*.

Here’s my description of the gale:

“*Deeper and higher the waves rolled up around us, till the sea seemed like a boiling pot. It was not a long, high, steady swell, but a foaming cauldron,*



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*which defies all description. First our noble craft would pitch headlong into a chasm, and then she would roll over almost upon her beam ends. In a moment she would sink as if into the abyss, and then a clash of meeting waters would make her reel and stagger as if she were coming all to pieces."*

On this same voyage a deadly plague struck my shipmates:

*"It was an awful time to us, so suddenly were one and another cut down from our number. Frequently they were seized without the slightest warning, and in less than twenty-four hours were in their watery grave. . . At 4 o'clock in the afternoon, I spoke to Bill Lang . . . and asked him how he did. He replied that he was well. At 4 o'clock the next morning he was found dead in his hammock! Not much warning this."*

## **Battles and Engagements**

During battle my job was to sponge out the cannon after it was fired to put out any leftover sparks. I was on board during our battle with HMS *Guerriere*. I saw *Constitution's* cannon shot destroy the enemy ship's mizzen mast and her main-yard:

*"The braces of both ships were now shot off. The *Guerriere* swung round into our mizzen rigging, so that a part of her laid right over our taffrail. One might see the whites of the eyes, and count the teeth of the enemy. Our stern guns were pouring in upon them, so that we raked the ship fore and aft. Every shot told well. In a few moments the foremast was gone and our prediction was fulfilled. The great *Guerriere* had become a sloop. Soon after the mainmast followed, rendering her a complete wreck."*



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## ***After Constitution***

When Captain Hull gave up command of *Constitution*, I, with several other sailors, chose to leave the ship rather than serve under another captain.

In December 1812 I shipped on board the USS *Adams*, but while the ship lay in the Potomac, near Washington DC, I met up with a former officer from *Constitution*, Lieutenant Reed. Against my better judgment, I agreed to Reed's request to join his gunboat, the *Scorpion*. We experienced sailors regarded the small defensive gunboats as inferior vessels, and although I was promoted to quartermaster, I did not enjoy my service aboard *Scorpion* and returned to *Adams*.

The poor old *Adams* was finally destroyed by the hand of our own captain. Overtaken by several British ships in Penobscot Bay, off the Maine coast, we abandoned ship and fought from land, and the captain, Charles Morris, blew up the ship to prevent it falling into enemy hands in October of 1814.

## **Family Life**

I was married to Cecelia (Donahue) Smith on March 19, 1849, and I died on October 4, 1870 in Quincy, Massachusetts at the age of 87. Cecelia received a pension for my navy service of a whole \$8.00 a month in 1879. She died 4 years later in Boston.