



USS Constitution  
Museum

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Finding Aid For

# **James Sever Collection**

USS Constitution Museum Collection [2506.1]

**Finding Aid**  
**James Sever Collection,**  
**1764-1801**

**Summary Information**

**Title:** James Sever Collection  
**Inclusive Dates:** 1764 - 1801  
**Extent:** 0.63 linear feet  
**Catalog Number:** 2506.1  
**Language of Materials:** English  
**Repository:** USS Constitution Museum  
**Processed by:** Kate Monea, 2021

**Access and Use**

**Access Restrictions**

Records are unrestricted.

**Copyright**

Copyright status is unknown.

**Citation**

USS Constitution Museum Collection.

**Acquisition and Provenance**

The USS Constitution Museum purchased the collection at auction in 2020. Previously, the collection was descended through the Sever family in private hands for over a century.

**Biographical Sketch**

James Sever was one of the six founding captains of the U.S. Navy, and the first captain of the frigate *USS Congress*. Sever was born in Kingston, Massachusetts in 1761. He graduated from Harvard College in 1781 and was commissioned an ensign in the Continental Army that year. He rose to the rank of lieutenant, serving until 1794. After the American Revolution, Sever worked as a merchant ship captain, but he had no previous naval experience when he was appointed in 1794 as construction superintendent and future captain of *USS Congress* in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He lost the position when construction on *USS Congress* was suspended in 1796, following peace with Algiers.

In 1798, as the Quasi-War with France was heating up, Sever was recalled and appointed to command the 20-gun ship *USS Herald*. When construction of *USS Congress* was

completed and the ship was launched in August 1799, Sever was returned to command of that frigate.

Under Sever's command, USS *Congress* was dismantled in a gale in January 1800. He faced a court of inquiry for his seamanship performance and leadership of the crew, but no ensuing court martial was convened. Sever was the only one of the original six captains not retained by the navy following the Quasi-War.

Sever returned to Kingston after the war, where he lived until his death in 1845. He was married to Jane Russell Sever. They had five children.

## Scope and Content

The James Sever Collection is an exceedingly rare and meaningful assemblage of materials related to the construction, launch, original outfitting, and initial manning of the United States Navy's first frigates (specifically USS *Congress* and USS *Constitution*), as well as the conduct of the U.S. Navy during the Quasi-War with France from 1798 to 1801.

Included is correspondence to and from the Secretary of the Navy, other navy captains including Silas Talbot and Edward Preble, and U.S. consul regarding naval operations during the Quasi-War with France in the Caribbean Sea and surrounding islands. There are documents related to courts martial of crew, and Sever's standing orders to the crew when he was in command. The collection is particularly strong in two naval topics:

- Outfitting and initial manning of first U.S. naval frigates
- Conduct of the early U.S. Navy in the Quasi-War with France

**Box 1** contains mostly correspondence dating from 1781 to 1801, including: correspondence related to Sever's commission and orders, construction of the frigates, logistics of shipping provisions and supplies, discipline and courts martial, various administrative business mostly related to USS *Congress*, and the conduct of U.S. navy vessels during the Quasi-War.

**Box 2** contains mostly receipts and memorandums dating from 1764 to 1801 including: dimensions of rigging and blocks for USS *Constitution*, dimensions of masts, spars, and cannon for USS *Congress*, lists of supplies and provisions, bills of lading, indents of stores, lists of commissioned and warrant officers, Rules and Regulations for USS *Congress*, private signals, and various financial accounting.

**Key People:** James Sever, Henry Knox, Edward Preble, James Burns, Oliver Wolcott, John B. Whidbee, James P. Watson, Thomas Truxtun, Silas Talbot, Charles C. Russell, Benjamin Stoddert, Henry Seton, Joseph Saunders, Thomas Robinson, Timothy Pickering, Samuel Haight, Charles Morris, Samuel R. Marshall, Toussaint Louverture, Samuel Llewellyn, Joseph Larcom, Seymore Hooe, Henry Hammond, Thomas Nicholas Boudet Gautier, Josiah Batchelder, Larkin Thorndike, Edward Brock, Patrick Brown, John Blake Cordis, Nathaniel Cutting, John G. Cowling, Isaac Garretson, John Davies

## Arrangement

Box 1: Folders 1-102

Box 2: Folders 103-134

## Folder List

Box	Folder	
1	1	Copy of letter from Nathaniel Cutting to James Sever re: commission, January 25, 1781
	2	James Sever to his father, William Sever, and mother, January 7, 1787; with typed transcription
	3	Henry Knox to James Seaver [sic] re: assigned superintendent of frigate to be built at Baltimore, July 18, 1794
	4	Henry Knox to James Seaver [sic], August 8, 1794, with list of captains of the original 6 U.S. Navy frigates
	5	Copy of letter from Timothy Pickering to James Sever re: enclosing copy of <i>Remarks, Instructions, and Examples relating to the Latitude and Longitude etc. with an Appendix on the Masting of Ships</i> , March 31, 1795
	6	Circular from Timothy Pickering to James Sever re: requesting opinions on length and diameter of each mast, yard, and bowsprit, and length and size of mastheads and yard arms, January 25, 1796
	7	James W. Henry to James Sever, June 4, 1796
	8	Partial copies of letters between James Sever and James McHenry, 1796-1797
	9	Extract of a letter from Henry Wadsworth to Edward Nottey, Esq., June 10, 1797 (also dated 1857)
	10	Oliver Wolcott to James Sever, May 17, 1798
	11	Private signals by day for the ships of war of the United States, July 12, 1798
	12	James Sever to Captain Chapman re: orders for U.S. brig <i>Pickering</i> to cruise in concert with USS <i>Herald</i> , August 16, 1798
	13	Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, July 22, 1799
	14	Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, August 6, 1799
	15	Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, August 12, 1799
	16	Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, August 12, 1799
	17	Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, August 19, 1799
	18	Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, August 28, 1799
	19	Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, August 30, 1799
	20	Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, September 10, 1799
	21	Joseph Saunders to James Sever, September 12, 1799
	22	John Rutledge to James Sever re: introducing unnamed brother who will be aboard ship, October 3, 1799
	23	Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, October 8, 1799
	24	Copy of letter from Edward Stevens to Christopher R. Perry, October 11, 1799
	25	Joseph Saunders to James Sever, October 13, 1799

- 26 Joseph Saunders to James Sever, October 24, 1799
- 27 Joseph Saunders to James Sever, October 27, 1799
- 28 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, October 30, 1799
- 29 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, November 10, 1799
- 30 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, November 14, 1799
- 31 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, November 14, 1799
- 32 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, November 15, 1799
- 33 Joseph Saunders to James Sever, November 21, 1799
- 34 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, November 28, 1799
- 35 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, December 3, 1799
- 36 John Blake Cordis to James Sever, December 5, 1799
- 37 Copy of letter from Edward Stevens to Silas Talbot, December 17, 1799
- 38 Edward Preble to James Sever re: request that USS *Essex* be supplied with fresh provisions, December 29, 1799
- 39 Copies of orders from Silas Talbot to: Edward Stevens, January 23, 1800; Richard Law, June 21, 1800; Archibald McElroy, July 12, 1800; Charles C. Russell, July 15, 1800; David Jewett, July 22, 1800
- 40 Joseph Larcom to James Sewar [sic], February 26, 1800
- 41 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, March 31, 1800
- 42 Papers re: charges against Patrick Brown, signed by Thomas Truxtun, John Blake Cordis, and Isaac Garretson, April 1800
- 43 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, April 15, 1800
- 44 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, April 18, 1800
- 45 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, April 19, 1800
- 46 Copy of letter from Thomas Truxtun to Samuel Barron, April 21, 1800
- 47 Copies of 3 letters from James Sever to Thomas Truxton [sic], April 22, 1800
- 48 Thomas Truxtun to James Sever, April 24, 1800
- 49 John Blake Cordis to Thomas Truxton [sic], April 29, 1800
- 50 Papers re: courts martial aboard USS *Chesapeake*, signed by Isaac Garretson, May 12, 1800
- 51 Copy of letter from Thomas Truxton [sic] to William Tinsley, May 15, 1800
- 52 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, May 27, 1800
- 53 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, May 31, 1800
- 54 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, May 31, 1800
- 55 Henry Hammond to James Sever, July 20, 1800
- 56 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, September 1, 1800
- 57 Alexander Murray to James Sever re: proceeding to St. John's Porto-Rico [San Juan, Puerto Rico], September 3, 1800
- 58 James P. Watson to James Sever, September 7, 1800
- 59 Alexander Murray to James Sever re: proceed to St. Iago [Santiago de Cuba] where there are several piratical vessels, September 9, 1800
- 60 Thomas Nicolas Boudet Gautier to James Sever, September 16, 1800
- 61 James P. Watson to James Sever, September 18, 1800
- 62 James P. Watson to James Sever, September 24, 1800
- 63 James P. Watson to James Sever, September 25, 1800

- 64 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, September 27, 1800
- 65 Copy of letter from Benjamin Stoddert to Henry Hammond, September 17, 1800
- 66 Charles C. Russell to James Sever, October 1, 1800 with enclosed letter to Alexander Murray
- 67 James P. Watson to James Sever, October 1, 1800
- 68 Correspondence between James Sever and John Davie of HMS *Tisiphone* re: an accident, October 2, 1800
- 69 Copy of letter from Richard Law to James Sever, October 12, 1800
- 70 Toussaint Louverture to James Sever, October 13, 1800
- 71 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, October 24, 1800
- 72 Thomas Nicolas Boudet Gautier to James Sever, October 27, 1800
- 73 Henry Hammond to James Sever, November 20, 1800
- 74 Benjamin Stoddert to James Sever, November 25, 1800
- 75 Samuel R. Marshall to James Sever re: hospital stores, December 19, 1800
- 76 John W. Whidbee to James Sever re: permission to return home, December 20, 1800
- 77 Thomas Robinson to James Sever re: cruise to Turks Island, December 20, 1800
- 78 Letters from James Sever to James Burns re: charges, 1800-1801
- 79 Silas Talbot to James Sever, January 3, 1801
- 80 James Sever to Edward Preble, January 6, 180[0]
- 81 Samuel R. Marshall to James Sever re: bread unfit for consumption, January 19, 1801
- 82 Papers re: court martial of Edward Brock, signed by Silas Talbot, February 1801
- 83 Thomas Nicolas Boudet Gautier to James Sever, February 10, 1801
- 84 Charles Morris to James Sever, February 16, 1801
- 85 Orders from Silas Talbot to James Sever, February 26, 1801
- 86 John Sever to James Sever, April 5, 1801 (with typed transcription)
- 87 Thomas Nicolas Boudet Gautier to James Sever, April 6, 1801
- 88 Henry Selon to James Sever, April 8, 1801
- 89 Samuel Haight to James Sever re: his son, James Haight, a midshipman on USS *Congress* who is under arrest for disobedience of orders, April 14, 1801
- 90 Samuel R. Marshall to James Sever re: requesting leave to attend to sick child, April 26, 1801
- 91 Thomas Nicolas Boudet Gautier to James Sever, May 3, 1801
- 92 Samuel Llewellyn to James Sever, May 7, 1801
- 93 Seymore Hooe to James Sever, May 18, 1801
- 94 Josiah Batchelder to James Sever re: estate of Dr. Larkin Thorndike, May 26, 1801
- 95 Samuel Smith to James Sever, June 4, 1801
- 96 Thomas Nicolas Boudet Gautier to James Sever, June 9, 1801
- 97 John G. Cowling to James Sever, June 12, 1801
- 98 John G. Cowling to James Sever, June 17, 1801
- 99 Edward Field to James Sever, July 22, 1801, enclosing letter from Charles Morris
- 100 Thomas Nicolas Boudet Gautier to James Sever, August 13, 1801
- 101 Charles Morris to James Sever, August 15, 1801

102 John G. Cowling to James Sever, August 16, 1801

Box	Folder	
2	103	Port of Salem Custom House receipt for Joseph Adams of the schooner <i>Defiance</i> , May 10, 1764
	104	Signals to be observed by those vessels proceeding under the convoy of the U.S. Frigate <i>Congress</i> , n.d.
	105	Private signals between the U.S. and British navies, by day and night, n.d.
	106	Memo regarding return of officers, n.d.
	107	Indent of pursers stores for USS <i>Congress</i> , n.d.
	108	Indent of carpenters, blockmakers, and boatswains stores for refit of USS <i>Congress</i> , n.d.
	109	List of supplies signed by John Barry, n.d.
	110	List of provision supplies ordered to be shipped on board merchant vessels for USS <i>Congress</i> , n.d.
	111	Copy of instructions for the Clerk of the Yard, c.1794
	112	Letters from William Simmons re: James Sever's accounts for pay, 1795-1796
	113	Amount of pay and subsistence due to James Sever, May 9, 1796
	114	Dimensions of standing rigging for USS <i>Constitution</i> , 1797
	115	List of principal blocks for USS <i>Constitution</i> , c.1797
	116	Dimensions of masts and spars for USS <i>Congress</i> , c.1797
	117	Dimensions of cannon for Frigate <i>Congress</i> , c.1797
	118	Financial accounting from James Sever to William Hutchings, 1798
	119	Receipt re: advance pay for surgeon's mate Asa Sargent, August 2, 1798
	120	Bills of lading for provisions shipped on board the <i>John Bulkley</i> and <i>Dominick Terry</i> for USS <i>Congress</i> , December 1799
	121	Papers re: provisions shipped on board the ship <i>China</i> , December 1799
	122	Bill of lading for USS <i>Congress</i> , January 1, 1800
	123	List of commissioned and warrant officers for USS <i>Congress</i> , January 3, 1800
	124	Copy of letter from James Sever to Gibbs and Channing re: rum, January 6, 1800
	125	James Philips to James Sever re: bill of lading, March 1800
	126	Receipt re: pay for midshipman Robertson Brown, May 9, 1800
	127	Rules and Regulations for USS <i>Congress</i> , May 22, 1800
	128	Memorandum of articles furnished from the Navy Yard at Gosport for USS <i>Congress</i> , July 23, 1800
	129	Boatswains stores on board USS <i>Congress</i> , July 24, 1800
	130	Copy of receipt for gunners stores on board USS <i>Congress</i> , July 24, 1800
	131	Copy of receipt for carpenters stores for USS <i>Congress</i> , July 24, 1800
	132	Duplicate receipt for provisions, 1800-1801
	133	Copy of returns and receipts for warrant officers for USS <i>Congress</i> , 1800-1801
	134	Papers re: James Sever's financial accounting with Willings & Francis, 1801