USS Constitution Museum

A Demographic Survey of USS *Constitution*'s Marine Detachment 1812-1815

Matthew Brenckle
Edited by Carl Herzog, 2025

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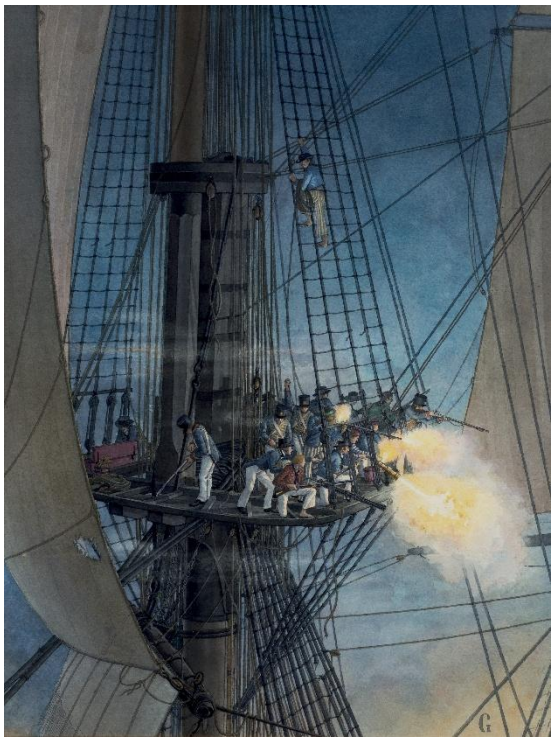
Marine Corps Size Rolls



Watercolor painting of Marines on the fighting top, by William Gilkerson, 1991-1993. USS Constitution Museum Collection.

Like the United States Army, the U.S. Marine Corps kept detailed records of the men who enlisted in the service in the early nineteenth century. Bound in a ledger book in the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C., the Marine Corps Size Rolls are a valuable source of demographic and biographical information about the 109 non-commissioned officers, musicians, and enlisted men who fought on board USS *Constitution* during the War of 1812.

The typical size roll entry records the name and rank of the individual, his place of birth, date of enlistment, length of enlistment, and the officer who enlisted him. To aid in the recovery and identification of deserters, the size rolls also listed the man's age at time of enlistment, his height in feet and inches, the color of his eyes and hair, his complexion, and previous occupation. Finally, the documents were usually updated with remarks detailing the Marine's career in the Corps. Taken together, the documents provide a rich source of information about the lives of the men who participated in some of the most consequential engagements of the War of 1812.

Places of Birth

In terms of birthplace, *Constitution*'s Marines were surprisingly homogenous. Of the 109 Marines who served on the ship, just over 70% (77) were born in the United States.[1] Eighteen men, nearly 17%, hailed from Ireland. Three men were from Holland (2.8%), while one sailor each came from Scotland, England, Canada, and France (See Table 1).

[1] It was common practice for men from Great Britain to lie about their birthplace when enlisting in the U.S. military. This trend probably was exacerbated by the war. It was not that the U.S. forces refused to accept British citizens, but rather that the individuals risked being convicted of treason if captured. On the other hand, many of *Constitution*'s Marines enlisted before the beginning of hostilities and so may have had less reason for dissimulation.

Country	No. Serving	% of Total Serving
Canada	1	2.8%
England	1	2.8%
France	1	2.8%
Holland	3	2.8%
Ireland	18	17%
Scotland	1	2.8%
United States	77	70%

Table 1: USS *Constitution*'s Marines' Country of Birth

Of the Marines born in the United States, nearly 30% (22) were born in Massachusetts. If we include those from Maine (part of Massachusetts until 1820), the total rises to about 36%. Of the other New England states, Vermont provided only one man (1.3%), Connecticut two (2.6%), and New Hampshire four (5.2%). After New England, Pennsylvania provided the most recruits, at about 17% (13). New York also had its fair share at 12% (9). Men from New Jersey comprised about 4% (3). About 9% (7) of the detachment came from Maryland, while Delaware and Virginia both provided about 4% (3) each (See Table 2).

State	No. Born	% of Total Enlisted	% Persisting in Birth State	Total No. Recruited
Connecticut	2	2.6%	0%	0
Delaware	3	4%	0%	0
Maryland	7	9%	28.6%	2
Massachusetts (except Maine)	22	30%	100%	22
Maine	5	7%	0%	0

New Hampshire	4	5.2%	0%	0
New Jersey	3	4%	0%	0
New York	9	12%	22.2%	2
Pennsylvania	13	17%	92.3%	12
Vermont	1	1.3%	0%	0
Virginia	3	4%	33.3%	1
Totals	77		50.6%	39

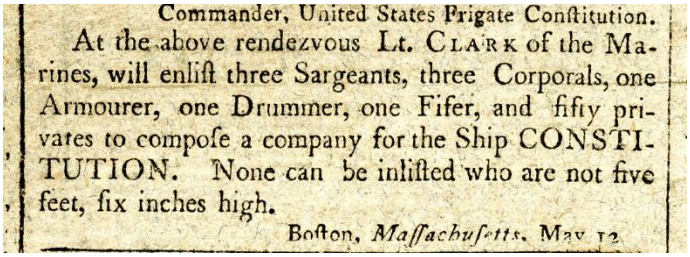
Table 2: USS *Constitution's* American-born Marines

This tabulation can be broken down even further. Of the 23 men from Massachusetts, we know that the majority, about 65% (15), were born in Essex County. The other counties represented are Norfolk (2), Barnstable (1), Hancock (1), Middlesex (1), Plymouth (1), and Suffolk (1).

Comparing the men's birthplaces with places of enlistment tells us not only about the location of successful rendezvous, but also about the geographic mobility of these men. *Constitution's* home port was Boston, Massachusetts, and it was here that the majority of the ship's Marines enlisted. The Marine Barracks at the Charlestown Navy Yard no doubt proved a great draw for the nearly 38% of Marines who enlisted there. Philadelphia was a close second, where Captain Anthony Gale successfully enticed 32 Marines, or about 29%, into the service. New York, swiftly becoming the largest seaport in America, accounted for another 10% (11). Surprisingly, Major Daniel Carmick in New Orleans enlisted another six Marines (5.5%) who eventually transferred to Boston. Colonel Franklin Wharton at Marine Headquarters in Washington, D.C. kept an open station, where five (4.6%) enlisted. During the summer of 1811, Lieutenant William Sharp Bush set up a rendezvous in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he enlisted three (2.8%) Marines. He would later fight alongside these same men in USS *Constitution*'s battle with HMS *Guerriere*. During that battle, however, Bush became the first U.S. Marine killed in action. Two men (1.8%) entered at Frederick, Maryland, and two at Frederickton, Pennsylvania.

If we compare places of birth and enlistment for American-born recruits, we learn that many of them moved about before enlisting in the Corps (See Table 2). Only about 50% of recruits were still living in the state in which they were born at the time of enlistment. Both Pennsylvania and Massachusetts seem to have had powerful enough social or economic attractions to keep native-born men at home. Perhaps more significant is the fact that, along with New York and Virginia, Pennsylvania and Massachusetts were both locations of major seaport cities and navy yards. If we look at the entire sample of

American- and foreign-born recruits, we find that well over half of recruits (84) enlisted in one of three urban areas: Boston (38%), Philadelphia (29%), and New York City (10%). The data is skewed towards Boston because *Constitution* used that port as its home base for the duration of the War of 1812.


Commander, United States Frigate Conſtitution.
At the above rendezvous Lt. CLARK of the Marines, will enliſt three Sargeants, three Corporals, one Armourer, one Drummer, one Fifer, and fifty privates to compoſe a company for the Ship CONSTITUTION. None can be inliſted who are not five feet, ſix inches high.
Boſton, *Maſſachuſetts*, May 12

Newspaper advertisement for Marines, *Columbian Centinel*, May 12, 1798. USS Constitution Museum Collection.

Nevertheless, Marine recruiting officers clearly preferred to open houses of rendezvous in urban centers. The sparsely settled countryside, especially in less improved areas in the western parts of almost every state, frequently failed to reward them for their trouble. The numbers indicate that recruits were drawn to these urban areas as well. The question is: had they gone there with the purpose of enlisting, or had they moved there prior to joining the service?

Previous Occupations

One way of answering this question is to consider the occupations of the Marines prior to enlistment. If these men were in fact urban dwellers, it should come as no surprise that nearly 40% (43) of the recruits worked as artisans or craftsmen prior to joining the Corps. These jobs ranged in skill and complexity from butchers, bakers, and plasterers, to shoemakers, silver platers, and coachmakers. Most of these trades would have been practiced in urban centers or other areas of population concentration, and most of these men did in fact enlist in Boston, New York, or Philadelphia.

After skilled artisans and craftsmen, laborers made up another large part of the recruits' occupational profile. About 28% (30) of the men worked as such, but the rolls do not specify whether these men were urban or rural workers. The fact that most self-proclaimed laborers enlisted in Boston supports the assumption that they were urban laborers: men who worked on the docks, in the warehouses, and as the backbone of the city's industrial enterprises.

Farmers also comprised a sizable proportion of the new recruits at about 17% (18). A total of 12 of these men enlisted in Philadelphia, a not altogether surprising fact considering the rich agricultural hinterland surrounding Pennsylvania's metropolis. However, of the 12 men, only one was born in Pennsylvania.

Besides these three major occupational groups, seven men (about 6%) considered themselves "soldiers," while another three (3%) had worked as seamen. Interestingly,

three of the seven soldiers were foreign-born (two from Ireland, one from Holland), and may have had prior experience in foreign military units.

An examination of prior occupations also helps us answer the most persistent question when it comes to the early Marine Corps: why would anyone join? A private Marine made only $6.00 per month. It is true that soldiers in the regular army received only $5.00 per month, but they were also offered sizable enlistment bounties, and three months extra pay and 160 acres of land when discharged.[2] Rural laborers in Pennsylvania could expect to make between $0.67 and $1.00 per day, and in many locations a rural laborer could make up to $20.00 per month at harvest time.[3] A boy, the lowest rank in the navy, also received between $6.00 and $8.00 dollars depending on age and experience. Able seamen made $12.00, while petty officers made $18.00; a Marine non-commissioned officer made only $9.00.

These pay rates reflect the social standing of Marines in the early nineteenth century. The Marine Corps lacked the social cachet enjoyed by the navy, or even the army. The published regulation that Marine non-commissioned officers were not "to be struck on any account, by any of the officers, petty officers, or seamen" reflects their low standing and lack of respect among the other crew.[4]

Yet when we look at the former occupations of the recruits, some of their motivations become clear. The urban artisans and craftsmen made up the largest segment of the Marine detachment; these men would have been the most likely to suffer economic hardship because of the failing economies of America's coastal cities between 1807 and 1815. As foreign trade stagnated after the Embargo Act of 1807, many of these men likely found it increasingly difficult to make ends meet. The onset of war did not help. During the same period, real wages declined and the gap between rich and poor widened.[5]

Nearly 16% of the men worked in the textile or clothing trades, including weavers, dyers, tailors, hatters, clothiers, buskmakers, and shoemakers. These were some of the trades most affected by the economic changes of the early nineteenth century. To capture and develop larger markets, manufacturers were in the process of restructuring labor to increase output. Unfortunately, most of these trades were still based on apprenticeships. While master craftsmen in the clothing and shoemaking business could prosper by

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[2] J.C.A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 170.

[3] Ibid., 173, 337.

[4] *Rules, Regulations and Instructions for the Naval Service of the United States* (Washington City: Edward De Krafft, 1818), 114-115.

[5] Donald R. Adams, Jr., "Wage Rates in the Early National Period: Philadelphia, 1785-1830," *Journal of Economic History,* XXVIII (1968), 415-425.

recruiting and exploiting cheaper labor (such as women and enslaved people), the journeymen, or rising masters, found themselves steadily losing out. Many were forced to work as mere wage laborers, with little hope of advancement in their chosen field.[6] For young men without prospects and with no other trade, enlistment in the Marine Corps might have seemed a reasonable option. Prior to the outbreak of war, enlistment would have meant being stationed at the barracks at the local navy yard, close to friends and relations. The pay was not the best, especially when compared to what they might have been able to earn a decade earlier, but they were provided with a new suit of clothes every year, hearty rations, fuel, and a bed, all at government expense.

Laborers, too, would have felt the pinch of straitened pre-war economic conditions. Agricultural work was largely seasonal, and men would move long distances to find a position. This transience is reflected in the fact that only 42% of the men who described themselves as laborers enlisted in the state in which they were born. The remainder (58%) enlisted in a state different from the one in which they were born (These figures are somewhat skewed because of the Boston bias inherent in the sample. Most of the laborers were born in Massachusetts and enlisted in Boston).

The contrast is even more striking when one examines farmers. Only 15% of farmer recruits had remained in their state of birth, while 85% had migrated to other regions to better their lot. Indeed, the term farmer is probably misleading when used to describe the realities of life for these men. Far from being wedded to a certain plot of land, these men were obviously more peripatetic than their occupational title suggests. In the north, especially in New England, land shortages were already beginning to disenfranchise the younger sons of landowners. Fathers were unable to provide viable plots of land to these men, forcing them to search for other work beyond the confines of the family fields and the local village. Many farmers working marginal lands in the north would also have supplemented their earnings with part-time trades. Participating in regional market economies would frequently bring them to urban centers, thus helping to explain why so many of the recruits entered the service in cities.[7]

Desertions

While statistics will never really recover all the motivations for enlisting, they do say a great deal about a recruit's experience in the Marine Corps. A certain portion of the men were clearly dissatisfied by their decision to enlist or became daunted by the prospect of living and working under military discipline for five years, the normal length of

[6] J.C.A. Stagg, "Enlisted Men in the United States Army, 1812-1815: A Preliminary Survey," *The William and Mary Quarterly,* 3rd ser., vol. 43, no. 4 (Oct., 1986), 640-641.

[7] Ibid., 636-639.

enlistment. Of the 109 men who served on board *Constitution* during the war, 30 (28%) deserted at least once. Of those who deserted, 21 (19%) were eventually taken. Three men even deserted a second time.

The men's discontentment with their situations may be further judged by examining the length of time they actually served before deserting. Two men absconded after only one week; perhaps they enlisted only to secure the bounty. Two more men ran after only two months. The majority of deserters, however, stuck it out for six months (6) or one year (9), before disappearing. Four men even deserted after the end of the war, when the monotony of daily life must have become unbearable. Two men committed suicide. In yet another indication of the unfavorable conditions in the Corps, only one man in the sample reenlisted at the end of his first term of service.

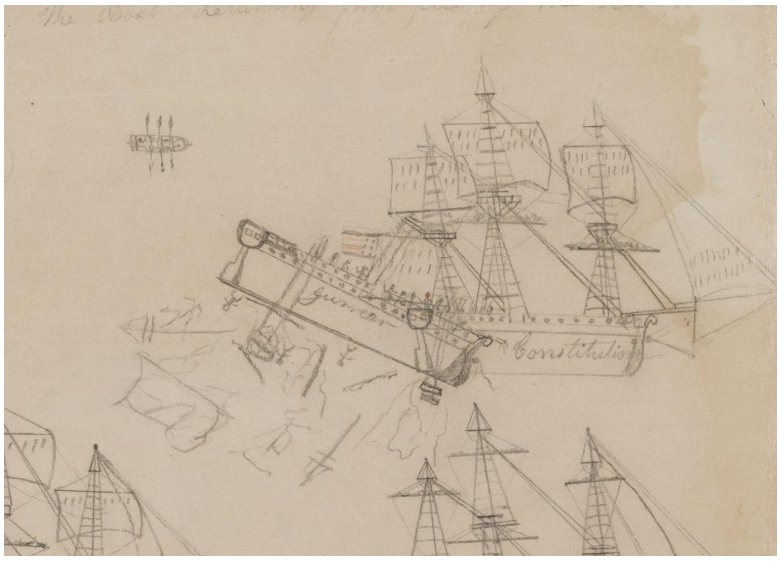
Promotions

What were a man's prospects for promotion within the Marine Corps? Among *Constitution's* Marines, there were frequent opportunities: eventually 26 men (24%) were promoted to corporal or sergeant. Interestingly, nearly 67% (16) of those promoted had worked as artisans or craftsmen before the war. These men were more likely to have had some managerial experience and would have been used to working together with groups of people.

By comparison, only 13% (3) of farmers and 21% (5) of laborers received promotions. At the same time, some of the men who received promotions were not fit to hold their new rank: seven (29%) of those promoted were eventually reduced in rank.

War-Time Costs

Most Americans in the first decade of the nineteenth century believed that war with Great Britain was not far off. Anyone enlisting in any branch of the military must have realized that the possibility of fighting and dying in combat were real possibilities. At the commencement of hostilities, all recruits would have expected to encounter the enemy at some point; some may have relished the opportunity. A successful engagement normally meant prize money and popular acclaim.



Sketch of the battle between USS *Constitution* and HMS *Guerriere*, from Marine Fifer Thomas C. Byron's "Narrative of the Cruises of the U.S. Frigate *Constitution*," 1861. USS Constitution Museum Collection.

Statistically, the odds of dying in combat on *Constitution* were quite low. During the entire war, only three Marines (2.6%) were killed in combat. Chances of being wounded were slightly greater, but even then, only five men (4.6%) suffered bodily harm in battle. Sadly, the real killer of Marines, as in any early military establishment, was disease. Fourteen (13%) of the detachment died, though not all while on *Constitution*, from non-combat related causes. Combined with combat related deaths, about 16% of *Constitution*'s Marines died while in the service.

When compared to early national period death rates, this figure seems remarkable. Although there are no definitive statistics from the first decades of the nineteenth century, historical demographers have estimated the death rate among the American population as a whole at 20 deaths per 1,000, or 2% per year.[8] Then again, if the Marines deaths are divided by five to account for the five year enlistment period, the death rate drops to 3.1% per year, which is much closer to the population at large. Yet no matter how you look at it, the chance of dying was still greater in the Marine Corps than in civilian life.[9]

A Typical Marine in 1812

Taking all this data together, we can create a composite picture of the "typical" Marine serving aboard USS *Constitution*. Chances are, he would have been born in Essex County, Massachusetts, around the year 1786. Growing up on a diet of meat and corn, he would have grown to the height of 5 feet, 7 ¼ inches by time he was of enlistment age. He would have blue eyes, brown hair, and a fair complexion.

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[8] Michael Haines, "Fertility and Mortality in the United States," *Economic History Association*, accessed May 12, 2020, https://eh.net/encyclopedia/fertility-and-mortality-in-the-united-states/.

[9] The War of 1812 *Constitution* Marine death rate was approximately 170 per 1,000.

Before joining the Corps, he worked as an apprentice to some artisan or tradesman, perhaps a shoemaker or blacksmith. One day, while walking by the waterfront in Boston, his attention was arrested by a brave looking recruiting sergeant who inspired him to enlist.

He might at some point have become dissatisfied with his lot as a Marine and attempted to desert the service. Despite seeing combat on three occasions, he probably never suffered so much as a scratch. After returning to Boston at the close of hostilities, he served out the remainder of his five-year term, and then went home to his friends and relations, fading back again into the civilian population, but forever remembering the days when he sailed on "Old Ironsides."

Watercolor sketch of *1997 & 1797 Marines aboard USS* Constitution, by William Gilkerson, 1997. USS Constitution Museum Collection.