USS Constitution Figure/Billetheads & Trail Boards

1797  “Hercules” figurehead, carved by the Skillin brothers of Boston

“Hercules” on the bow of USS Constitution, cropped from Michele Felice Corne painting, c. 1803. Navy Art Collection, Naval History & Heritage Command

“…William Rush of Philadelphia was asked to present ideas for the figurehead designs for each [frigate]. These he sent to [Joshua] Humphreys, the Chief Naval Constructor, on April 30, 1795. The portion [of the letter] referring to the figure for the Constitution was:

As the Constitution of the Empire is the result of the Union of the States and united begets Strength it aught to be represented by an Herculean figure standing on the firm rock of Independence resting one hand on the fasces, which was bound by the Genius of America and the other hand presenting a scroll of paper, supposed to be the Constitution of America with proper appendages, the foundation of Legislation.¹

1804  USS Constitution collided with USS President in the Mediterranean Sea, with the loss of the Hercules figurehead; a temporary billethead is placed on Constitution’s bow

1804-1833  Billethead(s) carried from collision in the Mediterranean through the War of 1812, up to the 1833-34 re-building at the Charlestown Navy Yard

According to the 1812 model of USS Constitution at the Peabody Essex Museum, the trail boards were carved with a dragon motif.

“The United States Navy Department to John Fuller [excerpts]: 1813 June 1
To trucking 2 trail Boards from Constitution to Fowles Shop $ .37
8 To trucking 8 ‘trale’ boards fr[om] Fowle’s to Constitution & tolls 6.62
21 To trucking 2 trail Boards from Fowles to Constitution & tolls .62”

First Andrew Jackson figurehead, carved by Laban Beecher of Boston

[RG217, 4th Auditor’s Settled Accounts, in the National Archives (Selected Survey by Tyrone G. Martin), Alphabetical Series, Box 38]
1847-1871  Second Andrew Jackson figurehead [United States Naval Academy collections]; trail boards with “floral” motif

2nd A. Jackson figurehead & “floral” trail boards c.1858 Portsmouth Navy Yard. US Navy Photos

1871-1877 c. 1876, Andrew Jackson figurehead replaced with deeply carved billethead; “floral” trail boards replaced with scrolling vine motif including red, white, & blue shield with four stars – possibly as patriotic themes for the American Centennial

1906-1907 1876 billethead replaced with “dragon” billethead – “Make new figurehead”\(^3\). 1876 trail boards re-furbished and re-painted – “…re-decorate bow.”\(^4\)


\(^4\) Ibid.
**1927-1931**  
William A. Bates carved new scroll billethead, replacing “dragon” billethead; replaced trail boards with identical, newly carved trail boards.

**Post 1931- Present**  
1927-designed billethead and trail boards possibly replicated at least once after the 1927-31 restoration, but documentation not certain.

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5 1876 “dragon” billethead US Navy loan to USS Constitution Museum, Boston; William Bates donated 1876 trail boards to Peabody Museum (PEM) in 1951