



***Research Information on the Stern Decorations of the Six Original Frigates  
of the New United States Navy***

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According to a letter from Joshua Humphreys (principle designer of the six frigates) to Timothy Pickering (Secretary of War), 14 May 1795 the frigates' sterns were to be decorated similarly (as opposed to the six different figureheads that were intended to project the idea of each of the frigates' name). Humphreys wrote:

*"The sterns I conceive should be all alike, to show that they belong to one family, and represented by an Eagle in the Center with the constellation around him supported on each quarter by the figures of Liberty & Justice."*

**USS *United States* (launched 10 May 1797)**

- A) A description of USS *United States*' stern can be found in: *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War Between the United States and France, Naval Operations*, Volume 5, p. 406
- B) Matthew Brenckle's USS Constitution Museum blog post, "Federal Frigate: Early Views of the *United States*?" discusses the ship's stern area - <https://ussconstitutionmuseum.org/2016/06/14/federal-frigate-early-views-united-states/>
- C) Brenckle notes that a "round house" was built on the after part of *United States*' spar deck – one of the blog illustrations shows the galleried rail on top of the round house
- D) Josiah Fox worked with Joshua Humphreys on the original six frigates. In a 3 May 1806 letter to Washington Navy Yard Commandant Thomas Tingey he mentioned *United States*' "round house":

*"Having ripped off the plank from the wales to the quarter rail on the Starboard side of the 'United States' and finding it necessary to shift a few timbers, beg to be informed if the Round House is to be ultimately taken away, that we may run our timbers accordingly..."*<sup>2</sup>

**USS *Constellation* (launched 7 September 1797)**

USS *Constellation*'s stern is described in: *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War Between the United States and France, Naval Operations*, Volume 2, p. 146.

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<sup>1</sup> Papers of the War Department, 1784-1800. <http://wardepartmentpapers.org>

<sup>2</sup> Josiah Fox (1763-1847) Papers, MH 11, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass. Letter Book Volume 3, page 340.

**USS *Constitution* (launched 21 October 1797)**

The best documentary source of USS *Constitution*'s stern decorations, at least in the War of 1812 period, is the c.1812 *Constitution* model made by the ship's crew for Captain Isaac Hull. The model is in the collections of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA. See photograph of the model's stern below:



Photograph by Naval History & Heritage Command Detachment Boston, courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA.

**USS *Congress* (launched 15 August 1799)**

USS *Congress* did have carvings on her stern, as noted in: *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War Between the United States and France, Naval Operations*, Volume 4, p. 77, but there is no extant description of the designs

**USS *Chesapeake* (launched 2 December 1799)**

Pieces from USS *Chesapeake*'s stern decorations were removed, sometime after the frigate was captured by Capt. Philip Broke of the HMS *Shannon*. Photographs of the *Chesapeake* decorations are illustrated in the exhibition catalogue: *The Naval War of 1812, 'America's Second War of Independence': Collections of William I. Koch and the U.S. Naval Academy Museum*, by Dr. William S. Dudley and Dr. J. Scott Harmon, (Virginia Beach, VA: The Donning Company Publishers, 2013).

**USS *President* (launched 10 April 1800)**

- A) USS *President*'s stern is described in: *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War Between the United States and France, Naval Operations*, Volume 5, p. 405
- B) A watercolor by Antoine Roux can be found in the New York Public Library collection - <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-7b45-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99> - note the carved figure projecting on the stern, starboard