WHO BUILT THE FIRST UNITED STATES NAVY?

BY COLONEL HENRY H. HUMPHREYS, U. S. A., RETIRED.

(Great-Grandson of Joshua Humphreys.)

[In this sketch of Joshua Humphreys, the designer and builder of the first navy of the United States, are incorporated copies of original letters and documents which will set at rest for all time, the claims of others for that distinguished honor. The principles of the construction of the frigate "Old Ironsides" and her five sister ships, in spite of the derisive term applied to them of "fir built frigates," victorious in combat, caused other nations to conform to them, and are not obsolete in our navy to-day. We are indebted to the courtesy of The Journal of American History, for the privilege of reprinting Col. Humphreys's article, which it illustrated with photographic copies of original letters and documents.]

Daniel, the grandfather of Joshua Humphreys, Welsh by birth, in religion a Quaker, came to the Province of Pennsylvania in the year 1682, settling near Philadelphia. He married Hannah Wynne, daughter of Doctor Thomas Wynne, first Speaker of the Provincial Assembly of that Province.

Among the many papers in possession of the family, is one yellow with age, but the writing legible, dated the 27th day of the fifth month of the year 1683, and issued from the Quarterly Meeting of the Society of Friends at Merionethshire, Wales, signed by sixteen members,
who vouch for the orderly walkings of one Elizabeth Humphreys, widow of Samuel Humphreys, and her four children, who intend to remove to Pennsylvania in America and join her son, Daniel. That paper describes the widow in this manner: "As to herself, the said Elizabeth is a woman worthy of our recommendation, for an honest faithful woman, that has been serviceable in her place, and praiseworthy in her conversations among us." The children, Benjamin, Lydia, Amy and Gobitha, are mentioned as being educated, and as "children of honest parents and whom we have known as tender Plants, growing in that work, the knowledge of which is the truth and grace of God." Her son, Daniel, is mentioned as "already gone into Penn., about twelve months since." Daniel had by his wife sons and daughters, one of whom, Joshua, married Sarah, daughter of Edward and Eleanor Williams of Blockley, September 11, 1742, and had among other children, one named Joshua, the designer of "Old Ironsides" and her five sister ships.

Joshua Humphreys was born June 17, 1751, in the township of Merion, now Haverford, in the County of Delaware, Pennsylvania. At fourteen years of age his parents moved to Philadelphia, where he was apprenticed to a shipbuilder, Jonathan Penrose, "a gentleman of the highest respectability." Mr. Penrose dying before the apprenticeship had expired, Mrs. Penrose gave him his time. A vessel was then on the stocks. The owner requested the "young apprentice" to finish her which was done to his satisfaction.

Before reaching twenty-one years he entered into business with a cousin, John Wharton of Philadelphia, building several ships. Soon afterwards he received an appointment "at the Continental shipyard," to build a frigate of certain dimensions, the Randolph, but according to his views of what would be correct.

He was also commissioned by "the Committee of
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Safety of "Philadelphia" to build a galley, the first armed vessel built in the Revolution; and he was employed by the "Marine Committee" to fit out a fleet of war vessels, which sailed in 1776, under Commodore Ezek Hopkins.

Joshua, who had married Mary David, of Welsh parentage, was disowned by Friends because of giving aid in the Revolution to the Colonies against Great Britain. While Congress was debating whether a national navy should be built or not, a letter, dated January 6, 1793, addressed to Robert Morris, was written by Joshua Humphreys, then an experienced shipbuilder, wherein he set forth the provisions which should govern the construction of a class of vessels not hitherto in existence.

Southwark, Jany 6. 1793

Robert Morris Esq.

Sir

From the present appearance of affairs, I believe it is time this country was possessed of a Navy; but as that is yet to be raised, I have ventured a few ideas on that subject.

Ships that compose the European navys are generally distinguished by their rates; but as the situations & depth of Water of our coasts & Harbours are different in some degree from those in Europe, & as our Navy must for a considerable time be inferior in number we are to consider what size Ships will be most formidable and be an over match for those of an enemy, such Frigates as in blowing weather as would be an over match for double deck Ships, & in light winds, to evade coming to action, or double deck Ships as would be an over-match for common double deck Ships, and in blowing weather superior to Ships of three Decks, or in calm weather or light winds to out-sail them. Ships built on these principles will render those of an Enemy in a degree useless, or require a greater number before they dare attack our Ships.

Frigates I suppose will be the first object and none ought to be built less than 150 feet keel to carry 28, 32 pounders or 30, 24 pounders on the main gun deck & 12 pounders on the quarter deck. Those ships should have scantling equal to 74" and I believe may be built of Red cedar & Live Oak for about twenty four pounds & Ton Carpenters tonnage including Carpenters bill, smith, including Anchors, Joyners, Boat-builders, Painters, Plumbers, Carvers, Coopers, Block makers,
Mast makers, Riggers & Rigging, sail makers & sail cloth, two suits, & chandlers bill.

As such Ships will cost a large sum of money they should be built of the best materials that could possibly be procured, the beams for their decks should be of the best Carolina pine & the lower Futtocks & Knees if possible of Live Oak. The greatest care should be taken in the construction of such Ships, and particularly all the timbers should be Framed and bolted together before they are raised.

Frigates built to carry 12 or 18 pounders in my opinion will not answer the expectations contemplated from them, for if we should be obliged to take a part in the present European War, or at a future day we should be dragged into a War with any powers of the old continent, especially great Britain, they having such a number of Ships of that Size, that it would be an equal chance by equal combat that we loose our Ships and more particularly from the Algeriens, who have Ships & some of much greater force. Several questions will arise, whether will one large or two small Frigates contribute most to the protection of our trade or which will cost the least sum of money, or whether two small ones are as able to engage a double deck ship as one large one. For my part I am decidedly of opinion, the large ones will answer best.

I am very Respectfully
Joshua Humphreys.

It is needless to say, those views, being sound, were accepted by the Government. Drafts and moulds of the proposed frigates were directed to be prepared and sent to selected cities for their building.

General Knox’s compliments to Mr Humphreys—and will be happy to have a conference with him at the War-office any time before three o’clock this day, if it will be convenient to Mr Humphreys—
Thursday
Feb. 3d 1794

Joshua Humphreys, accepting the foregoing invitation of General Knox, relates the subjects under discussion. “I attended; the subject under consideration was the construction of a navy, whereat I set forth the principles on which I recommended frigates should be built, as expressed in a letter which I had addressed to Hon. Robert Morris. The act of March 27th, 1794,
was discussed." Resuming, he says: "Shortly after the passage of this act I received a letter of which the following is a copy."

War Department  
April 12 1794

Sir
I request that you would please immediately to prepare the models for the frame of the frigates proposed by you in your letter of this date and also that you would please to prepare an accurate draft, and models of the same, the latter to have the frame accurately described—
I am
Sir
Your obed* Servant

Mr Joshua Humphreys  
H. Knox.

Resuming, he states: "I have mislaid the copy of my letter to Genl. Knox of the 12th April, 1794, to which the preceding letter from him to me of same date replies. This must account for its omission immediately preceding his. It in effect propounds to construct the frigates on the same principles as set forth in my letter to Hon. Robert Morris of the 6. of January 1793, & propounds models for the construction of the frigates in conformity thereto, which were adopted; & the frigates with the exception of the Chesapeake, built thereon. On the 21st and 28th of June, 1794, I received instructions as follows:'

War Department  
June 21st 1794.

Sir,
The building for making the moulds being so essential no time should be lost in putting it in a train of instant execution. It ought to be framed so that if no further use should be required for it that it may be sold to the best advantage. I request that you would after negotiating with several of the most eminent carpenters for the erection of this building engage with the cheapest and also contract for the materials and I will arrange payment in the course of a few days—
I am
Sir
Your humble Servant

Mr Joshua Humphreys—  
H. Knox.
War Department, June 28 1794

Sir,

You are appointed the Constructor or Master Builder of a Forty-four Gun Ship, to be built in the port of Philadelphia at the rate of compensation of Two thousand dollars per annum.

This compensation is to be considered as commencing on the first of May last, in consideration of your incessant application to the public interests in adjusting the principles of the Ships, drawing of drafts and making models &c—

I am Sir,

with esteem

Your obed' Serv'.

H. Knox.

Mr Joshua Humphreys

Humphreys writes: "The frigate then built by me, the United States, was frequently visited during the progress of her building by President Washington, who expressed deep interest in all that related to her, & the intended navy."

Arlington House Nov* 18th 1844

My Dr Col* Humphreys—

Your letter of the 31st ult* has been too long unanswered. —I have been badgered as a witness at Court in a great Will-Case for most of last week, & my agent here being sick, I have been unable till now to attend to my correspondence.

I have a perfect recollection of the events attending the origin, or first organization of our present Naval Establishment, that has grown so great & glorious, from very small beginnings.—When the three Frigates viz, United States, Constitution, & Constellation were first ordered to be built, we had neither Secretary of the Navy, or Naval Bureau of any sort. The matter was entrusted to General Knox, then Secretary of War. Knox being bred rather in the medical than maritime line, sought the best advice touching the construction & armament of the Vessells, that was within his reach. Joshua Humphreys having acquired distinction as a Naval Architect from his having built the Randolph Frigate, and other Men of War during the Revolution, & residing at the then seat of Government (Philadelphia) was at once consulted ere the size & armament of the Frigates was determined upon.—With wonderful sagacity Humphreys at once declared, that inasmuch as we could have but few vessels for many years to come to cope with the maritime powers of Europe, it behooved us to have those few of a superior order, both as to
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their size, construction, & weight of metal, & thus started for the first time in the world, the idea that the armament of the two larger frigates should be 24 pounders.—The idea of 24" to a single deck man of war was unheard of till this moment, & created no little surprise & opposition. Humphreys persisted, & gave such excellent & forcible reasons for his plan, that the same was adopted by the Government in all its extent. Let Victory tell the rest!

I well remember visiting with Washington the United States Frigate at Southwark, when her Keel was laid, & stem & stern-post only up. The Chief expressed his admiration at the great size of the Vessell that was to be. Commodore Barry was present, & Mr Humphreys explained to the President, several of his cabinet, and other persons who were present, the great principle which he had originated & was now by consent of the authorities putting into successful practice, all of which met with Washington's approbation, & he expressed himself on his return in his coach, much gratified with all he had seen & heard in this, his First visit to an American Navy Yard.—Surely my DeSir, the grandson of a Patriot of the Days of Trial, & one who has "done the State great service," cannot be an unsuccessful applicant for the bounty of Government, for so long as the ensign of victory continues to float o'er the famed "Old Wagon" will the worth & services of Joshua Humphreys be "freshly remembered."—

With many recollections of the happy days of Juvenility, & with great regard & esteem.

Believe me my DeSir

Faithfully yrs

George W P Custis.

Colº Humphreys.—

Further instructions were received July 24, 1794.

War department
July 24th 1794

Sir,

I request that you would have the moulds for the frigates prepared with all possible dispatch for the purpose of being transported to the following places—to wit

Norfolk ...............44 GunShip..to be addressed to William Pennock Agent
Baltimore ...............36 ..................dº.....
New York ...............44 ..................dº.....John Blagge
Boston ..................44 ..................dº.....Henry Jackson
Portsmouth, New Hampshire. .... }

36 ..................dº.....Jacob Mead
Mr. Fox who is under your direction
will also apply himself closely to
this business——

I am
Sir
Your obed′ Servant

H. Knox.

Mr. Joshua Humphreys
Constructor of the Navy
of the United States

Phil′ July 25, 1797

Sir

I rec′d your letter of yesterday purporting the Sec′ of War,
"being very desirous that the frigate Constellation should be
"launched in the Safest manner and with as little expense to
"the United States as possible and judging that your advice
"may be necessary to assist Mr Stoddard in performing that
"service, desires me &′"

I have waited on him. It is with pleasure & with alacrity
I shall always receive and obey while in the service of the
United States any orders of the Secretary of War, but, Sir,
I cannot receive hereafter or attend to any directions from
you, altho directed by the Sec′ of War—while you style your-
self Naval Constructor, you must know, that my station in the
service of the United States require no directions from a Naval
Constructor, you also know that I am at the head of that De-
partment—and when you direct a letter to me let it be done in
Style as Clerk of the Marine Department." Whenever the Sec-
retary deems my services no longer necessary, you may then
to other persons assume such title as your Vanity may
suggest——

I am &c

J. H—

Mr Josiah Fox
Clerk in the Marine Department
War Office

As to the title, " Constructor of the Navy of the
United States," the correspondence does not show it
was withdrawn during the continuance in office of
Joshua Humphreys as such. From the instructions
contained in the letter of July 24, 1794, Mr. Fox was
not independent of his chief. From him, he received
general or special directions to carry out. Possibly
Mr. Fox offered suggestions in the building of the
frigates which, being considered feasible, were accepted
by his chief and carried out, but that Mr. Fox did build
the frigates is rejected in toto. In all business estab-
lishments one head is responsible for the success or failure of the work, not the subordinate. Blame for this or that failure cannot be shifted from the shoulders of the chief, unless the subordinate did not carry out the orders received from the head.

Our frigates of forty-four and thirty-six guns in single combat were always victorious with the exception of one, the *Chesapeake*. Why was that? It is believed her loss is attributable to the following reasons.

First, there was violation of the Act of Congress of March 27, 1794, which prescribed the number of frigates, four to carry each forty-four guns, and two frigates each to carry thirty-six guns. Consequently there were three of each class. Secondly, there was radical departure in the *Chesapeake*’s construction upon a new plan, differing from the one sent, which failure will be explained further on. Third, there was the loss of eight guns, quite an important factor in combat. Why should not Mr. Fox be held responsible for her loss?

Humphreys, resuming, states: “I had also to provide rough moulds & instructions to Mr. Morgan, who was sent to Georgia to cut timber for the frigates. After the drafts, moulds & instructions were completed & forwarded to the different agents as directed in Genl. Knox’s letter, it was found there was not any person at Norfolk supposed to be capable of building a frigate. Mr. Fox was appointed to build her. Before he arrived at Norfolk, the keel had been spliced & laid for the 44 gun ship to be built there. The keel was afterwards cut to that of a 36 gun ship, on a new draft drawn by Mr. Fox, differing from the one I had forwarded. By what authority the alteration was made I never could ascertain. The ship so built was the *Chesapeake*. The duties of naval constructor were performed by me, & I was in correspondence with several secretaries of the department, from my appointment
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in May 1794, throughout the Washington Administration, the whole period of the elder Mr. Adams’ term, & for a short time under that of Mr. Jefferson. On the 29th of January, 1800, I received an order from the secretary of the navy to examine the ports of New London, Newport, Boston, Portsmouth, N. H., Portland & Wicasset in Casco Bay, for the purpose of selecting the most suitable place for a dockyard. This I performed, & duly reported upon. I was also directed the purchase the navy yard at Philadelphia & to lay out one at Washington. These things were ordered as I understood, because the elder Mr. Adams, the President of the United States, was aware of Mr. Jefferson’s hostility to an efficient navy, & was resolved to secure all these points before he went out of office. On the 13th of August, 1801, I received a letter from the secretary of the navy, from which I insert the following:"

Navy dept
13th Aug* 1801

Sir

I have received your letters of the 10th & 11th inst—I consider the employment of a Clerk to the Navy yard as very proper, Be pleased therefore to continue that employment—And you may continue to employ a Master workman on the repairs of the Constellation as long as you find the same necessary—

With respect to providing the articles for the repairs of the Constellation, you certainly must be the best judge not only of what may be wanting but of the fitness of the articles offered—You will therefore continue to purchase them, giving orders on Mr. Harrison for payment—

The Frigate Constitution has been examined & found to be considerably decayed particularly the ends of her Beams—She is now under orders for a thorough repair—

Thanking you for your suggestion on this & other subjects which will receive due attention, and soliciting a continuance of your observations on whatever points you may deem proper or conducive to the improvement of our Navy

I am Sir

Very respectfully

Yr Mo. ob* Sr*

Joshua Humphreys Esq*

R* Smith
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Humphreys, continuing, states: "A short time afterwards brought me the following letter dated October 24th, 1801:"

Navy Dep  
26th Oct 1801

Sir

As it is not intended that either of the 74's shall be commenced until all the timber is duly prepared & properly seasoned, the station which you hold, as Navy Constructor, has become unnecessary, and I am under the necessity, though very reluctantly, of informing you that your services will be dispensed with after the 1st of November next up to which period you will be pleased to make out your account and transmit it to the Accountant for settlement.

You will I trust be duly sensible how very painful it is to me to make to you this unpleasant communication—and be persuaded Sir my sensibility is increased by considerations resulting from a knowledge of your worth—and the uniformly good & useful character you have sustained since you have been in the employ of this Department—But it is hoped that should your services be hereafter required, that you will not withhold them.

I have the Honor to be with great respect

Sir, your mo ob Ser.

Joshua Humphreys Esq

Phila.

Rt Smith

P.S. You will be pleased to deliver to Mr. George Harrison all the public property of what nature soever pertaining to the Navy in your possession or under your control, of which you will render to him a complete inventory, and transmit a duplicate inventory, with Mr. Harrison's receipt for the same to this department.

Rt Smith

In the year 1836 a letter addressed by Joshua Humphreys to Josiah Barker, naval constructor at Charlestown Navy Yard, Boston, Massachusetts, thanks him for a cane made from some timber taken from the Constitution when first repaired there.

"Harve township, Delaware county, Pa.:

"Dear Sir—

"On my son Samuel's return from Boston, he presented me with a very handsome walking cane, made
out of a part of the frigate Constitution (Old Ironsides), which was taken out of her while under your repairs. This cane is of double value to me on account of its having been taken from one of the frigates I constructed in the year 1794, forty-two years ago, under the administration of the ever memorable Washington, and General Knox, his then Secretary of War. The five frigates, the United States, the President and Constitution, forty-fours; the Constellation and Congress, thirty-sixes, were all built by the drafts and molds sent on by me to the different posts where they were to be built.

"The molds and drafts for the Chesapeake were also sent on by me to Mr. Pennock, navy agent at Norfolk, for a forty-four, the same size as the large frigates, and the keel laid. But as there was no person there who understood the drafts and molds, a Josiah Fox, an Englishman, who was in the mold loft with me, who copied some of the drafts that were sent out from here to these different builders, was sent to build her, but instead of conforming to the drafts and instructions from me, he curtailed the dimensions of that ship from a forty-four to a thirty-six; but by whose authority the alterations were made I was never able to find out. This ship always spoke for herself as well as the others did. Old fellows like myself like to tell what they did in their younger days, and I will say to you that I built the first frigate (Randolph), and fitted out the first fleet under Commodore Hopkins, that sailed under the United States, in the year 1776. The great mark of attention you have shown me in sending me so beautiful a present has made me proud, although in my eighty-sixth year of age, a time of life when I ought to be more humble. The cane I shall leave as a talisman to my grandson and namesake, son of my son Samuel, that, should he ever come into action he will recollect the bravery of the officers of Old Ironsides. Should you
ever come this way I should be most glad to see you, and spend some time with us. I live in Haverford township, Delaware county, Pa., seven miles west of Schuylkill bridge.

I am with very great respect, yours, etc.,

Joshua Humphreys"

These ships, commanded by gallant captains, manned by good crews, their fine sailing qualities, magnificent fighting, the universal successes which attended them in all their encounters with English and French vessels of war caused the United States to be respected abroad. Their peculiar lines and build created a revolution in all naval vessels which were subsequently built by foreign nations. Whether this Government has in its possession a model of the ships is a matter of which the writer has no positive knowledge, but the family had at its country place, Pont Reading, Pennsylvania, a model of some size of a ship in wood, fashioned by the hands of Joshua Humphreys. This model hung in the mould-loft of the navy yard in Philadelphia, before its abandonment. It was sent to the family by the then chief naval constructor of the United States, Mr. John Lenthall. The model was subsequently presented to Independence Hall at Philadelphia, where it is displayed. On the back of the board to which the model is attached will be found this: "J. H. fecit 1777."

The construction of the frigate United States, built by Joshua Humphreys, is typical of her five sister ships with the exception of the Chesapeake.

The drafts and moulds for the six frigates were closely modeled after the best French practice of that time and resembled a razeed 74 gun-ship of the line, following closely that curious feature called the "tumble home," an inward curving of the sides above the water line, which secured the much desired load line beam without corresponding bulk above board.
Below their water line, their lines were sharp, clean and clear, cutting the water like a rapier, which in the hands of a skillful fencer glides without effort into the body of the opponent.

Of the six frigates but two remain: the Constitution at the Boston Navy Yard, and the Constellation at Newport, Rhode Island, used as a receiving ship. The President, under command of John Rodgers, had the honor of firing the first shot in the war with England. When under Decatur, in the spring of 1814, near New York, she encountered four English frigates which attacked her and after a terrific contest she was captured and taken to London, England, where she is to this day exhibited as a trophy. The United States won renown in action, being classed with the Constitution and Constellation. Long ago she was condemned and broken up. The Congress, bearing an honorable part in the war of 1812, was blown up in Hampton Roads, Virginia, in the engagement with the Confederate ram Merrimac, March, 1862. The Chesapeake under Lawrence in the encounter with the Shannon was captured.

The following points should be noted in the construction of the frigates. Of the Constitution—"Her model & armament were copied by England, & before the naval war of 1812 had closed, as it was imperative to build something that could overtake her." (See pages 2 and 3, chap. I, "The Frigate Constitution.") It was important in constructing the frigates to have their decks as far as practicable from eight to nine feet above the water line with a steady platform, and in that respect our frigates were superior to the English, ship for ship. Our sailors were handy in all kinds of work; quick to repair any damage to the ship; apt in gunnery, and improvising sights for guns. The frigates were heavily sparred. The hardness of the timber and weight, with the planking, was an advantage. The frigates could go into action in weather which rolled
the gun ports of the ordinary frigate and line of battle-
ship under water. It is said that Nelson remarked on
Commodore Dale’s squadron, then in the Mediter-
ranean, “There is in the handling of those trans-
avlantic ships a nucleus of trouble for the Navy of
Great Britain.” (See page 23, chapter I, “The Con-
stitution.”)

Can the advocates for other claimants to the build-
ing of the first American Navy produce a letter with
this address, “Constructor of the Navy of the United
States”? Can they produce any letter showing the
plans of their clients for the construction of our navy
were approved and ordered built by the authorities
then in power in preference to those of Joshua Hum-
phreys? Can they show, if their clients had plans, why
those of Joshua Humphreys were accepted, and not
their's? Can they show that the duties as related in this
article were not performed by Joshua Humphreys,
but by them? Why were the plans of Joshua Hum-
phreys accepted and no notice made of other plans?
If their clients designed, moulded, built the first navy
of the United States, why do not writers on that sub-
ject mention their names? Excepting the name of
Joshua Humphreys, as the designer and builder of the
navy, no other names are mentioned. Such could not
have come from design.

The advocate for one claimant states: “he intro-
duced into the service the improved mode of drafting
the ships of war & likewise the manner of making the
moulds & taking bevellings of the timber, & he has
reason to believe he was the first person who ever di-
rected putting togeather a stern frame from moulds of
war before it was raised in the United States.” The
party states he arrived at Dumfries, Virginia, October
9, 1793.

In connection with the above claim re-read the letter
of January 6th, 1793, wherein is stated: “The greatest
care should be taken in the construction of such ships and particularly all her timbers should be framed and boulted togeather before they raised.” The views just called to the reader’s attention antedate the arrival of that claimant in this country over nine months.

Attention is invited to two letters from Mr. Timothy Pickering, Secretary of War, to Mr. Fox, dated May 12, 1795; also to one from Ben Stoddard, likewise Secretary of that department, of August 1, 1798, which letters are printed on page 106, of The Journal of American History, First Quarter of the year 1908; also to photographic copies of letters from Humphreys’ correspondence, dated August 20th, 1827; also to the letter of Humphreys to Secretary Pickering, on learning from Mr. Fox of that letter.

At this time Col1 Pickering acted as Secretary at War & appointed Fox to build the 44 gun Frigate at that place, & stated in his appointment that he Fox had a principal share in constructing the other Frigates. On Fox shewing me his appointment I asked him how he could receive such Instructions with out informing the secretary that they were not correct as to his having anything to do with the construction of those Ships. In consequence I wrote Col1 Pickering 5. June 1795 informing him that Fox had nothing to do with planing or constructing the Drafts or Models of the Frigates but the Copying of them &c.

The three Ships being built by the safe draft and instructions by me—while he was performing that business I was preparing the Drafts for the 36 gun Frigates.

All the Builders were improperly called Naval Constructors, altho none of them had anything to do with drafting or constructing the Frigates, but myself—

After the moulds in the Mould loft was finished for the Six Frigates, I set M’r Fox to make four copies of the four large Frigates one to be sent to each yard where the Frigates were to be built, I examined & compared them with the original drafts drawn by myself, & certified them to be correct, before they were sent on; whether he or M’r Doughty copied the drafts of the 36 gun Frigates, I have now forgotten. After all the Drafts were compleated, I recommended Fox to General Knox for a clerk in his office, as he would be more capable of explain- ing any matters on naval matters or Architect, than any person he could employ, accordingly he was taken into office.
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Exactly at what time Fox was taken into the service I do not know but it must have been soon after I received the letter from Gen' Knox to prepare the drafts and Models. Fox was considered a first-rate draftsman and his being late from one of the Kings yards in England, he was considered a great acquisition to us, I gave him directions to prepare a draft for the 44 gun Ships, with Instructions in what manner to draw it; but instead of conforming to the instructions I gave him, he drew a draft according to his own opinion, which was so foreign from my Ideas that I set it aside and drew another myself, by which the U. States, the President & Constitution, were built. I then set Fox to lay down the Ships in the Mould Loft, making moulds for cutting timber by, & other setts for the master builders in the different yards.

(Signed.) Jos* Humphreys
Hon. Secy at War

Sir

Permit me to observe, on seeing your instructions to M'r Fox, that soon after the commence ment of building, I was directed to prepare a Draught and Model for them, the Model was presented to the late Sec'y at War and is now in your office, in order to make them the most perfect ships the best Shipwrights of this port were called in to give their opinion on the Model, which they did candidly, I was then directed to make such alterations in the formation of the Frigates body as was conformable to the General Ideas Mr' Fox appointed under me to carry the Same into effect; accordingly I directed him to prepare a draught agreeably to the direction I had rec'd but I conceived he did not strictly conform to those directions in the drawing of the draught, which induced me immediately to set about drawing myself, & I produced those the Frigates are to be built by without M'r Fox's advice or assistance, but conformable to the directions I had rec'd. While I was drawing the draught of the 36 gun Frigate and making out the dimensions and Size of Scantling and Mode of putting the timber together & fastening it M'r Fox was laying down the 44 Gun Ships in the mould loft—when that was finished M'r Fox and M'r Doughty went to copying the Draughts to be sent to the different builders for the 44 Gun ships & while they were about that business I was laying down the 36 Gun Ships in the Mould loft. These are facts I conceive had not come to your knowledge and I hope you will not consider it improper in me to State them to you at this time, and altho' it is so, yet I do not wish to take from M'r Fox or lessen his merit, or even give the most distant hint of his want of capability in this business, on the other hand I
think there are few men in this country equally qualified & he is well informed and his judgment

Hon. Secy. at War I am Sir with much esteem & respect

(Signed.) Jos* Humphreys

Sir

With deference I would submit the propriety of Mr. Fox calling at Baltimore with a letter of introduction in case they should want information on any point respecting the moulds or putting the frames together

The Hon Secy. I am respectfully

(Signed.) Jos* Humphreys

Attention is directed to the same Number of The Journal of American History, where, on page 108, third paragraph from the top, it is said that the "State Department applied to Fox by permission of the Secretary of war to draft and direct the building of a frigate to carry 36 guns for the Dey of Algiers.'"

In connection with the above, there are herewith submitted copies of letters dated July 19, August 11, September 1, 2 and 25; and November 6 and 10, of the year 1797. These letters pertain to the drafts, building, and equipment of a frigate, brig, and schooner for the Dey of Algiers.

July 19, 1797

Dimensions of a Brig to carry 18 Guns—on the main gun deck for the Dey of Algiers.

75 Keel
27 feet Beam
12 feet hold
5 feet tight Waist fitted with a gang way—with a long warter deck and forecastle—to have a tight quarter deck and forecastle, to have a light sparr or orlope deck to be laid by the Carpenter to be fitted with a head and foot, other decorations as may be hereafter directed, to be launched and finished to cleats including Coppering Reoms, Chipping Watering Pitch Tarr, Turpentine Rosin Tallow for Launching, and all chandlery, stores for the Hull and Launching dinner, to be fitted in a complete manner as a Vessell of War and to be built agreeable to the directions of such superintendant as may be hereafter appointed
Who Built the First United States Navy?

— and to be launched—on or before the 15th of November next—
or the shortest possible time—

Dimensions of a schooner to carry 14 Guns on the Main gun deck for the Dey of Algiers—

62 feet Keel
23 feet Beam
11 feet Hold

4 feet 3 In solid waist—to have a quarter deck—or round house as may be hereafter directed—& completed as above described—

Form of a Letter for the Secretary of State for the different builders in Philadelphia—dated July 19th 1797.

“Enclosed I send you the dimensions of two Vessels with the number of guns each are to carry you will please to consider these dimensions, the proportions with each other and how these dimensions are calculated to carry the number of guns annexed to each as well as how their sizes are adopted to the class of shipping mentioned. If those dimensions should not accord with your Ideas, you will please to state such as will with your reasons why they do not—you will please to enclose sealed, your terms as soon as possible for building these Vessels agreeable to the dimensions including—the articles mentioned and also your terms for any Sized Vessels you may think better to be adopted, including all after bills as before mentioned”—

Navy Yard, Aug 11, 1797

Sir

I have considered the purport of your letter of yesterday. In Colo Hacket's proposals for building a Frigate for the Use of the Dey of Algiers, he enclosed his terms with the number of tons the ship would contain—or he was willing to take the N° of Tons the ship would produce by the Philadelphia or Boston mode of measurement; The Secretary accepted of the proposals, he was satisfied with the number of Tons set forth in the proposals, because it was agreeably to the mode now in practice in this Port. After maturely considering those matters I am clearly of opinion Colo Hacket intended & would have Contracted for the N° of Tons set forth in his proposals or the mode now in practice in this port, which amounts to the same thing. I am therefore Clearly of opinion Mr Hacket should not charge more tons than are mentioned in his proposals—

With respect to the Head & Galleries, he was to be allowed a reasonable compensation, but the price he has charged appears to me to be too high, and in order to ascertain the amount thereof I have stated the account in detail—
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 piece for Cutwater end &amp; Chock</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Rim of Galley</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 piece for Lacing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Stock</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 d° for Chock</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Keel for secy Galley</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Main head Rails</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Freey work</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Middle Rails</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 timber</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After Knee</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Workmanship</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Gross piece</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pointers &amp; Brackets</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grating</td>
<td>10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports &amp; trailboards</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total am° of Head &amp; Galleys</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Workmanship</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Am° of head</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>$232</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Oliver Wolcot Esquire

Dimensions of Masts & Spars for a schooner of 62 feet length
23 feet Beam 10½ feet hold & 40 feet waist——

Main Mast...76 feet head...7 feet topmast...34 head...11 feet
Fore Mast...70 feet....8 d°...........37 d°...13 d°
Fore Cross jack yard...35 feet Arm...12 inches
d° topl. yard ...........24 d°...........12 d°
d° Top G yard ..........17 d°........... 9 d°
Cross jack yard ..........32 d°...........12 d°
Main topl. yard ..........22 d°........... 9 d°
M T. G ......d° ..........15 d°........... 6 d°
Fore Gaff 24 feet. Main Gaff 20 feet.
Bowsprit 21 feet outboard
Jibb boom 23 feet——
Main Boom 10 feet over the stern
Steerage & Booms & yards as is usual according to the General rule.—

The dimensions of the Masts & Spars I wish you to shew to Cap° O'Brien that he may be satisfied therewith or that he may have an opportunity of making such alterations as he may think will best suit the Business they are intended for.

It is not necessary now to determine the length of heavy Booms or yards

I did not expect you to depend altogether on O'Brien as he knew in what Manner they will best suit, I thought it was best to have his Opinion if that cannot
Richard OBrien Esq.

Sir

I wish you to determine about the scaling and all other matters relative to the Algerien Vessels that I have stated to you. I will thank you to forward this business with all possible dispatch.

Yours &c

An Estimate of the Quanty & size of Copper, Nails, bolts, & Spikes for the Brig—

830 feet of one inch & eight bolts
283 feet of one inch & quarter
64 feet of inch bolts
125 feet of 7/8 inch
1100 d° of 1/2
72 d° Composition 1/2 But bolts to be cast with a head and point
1200 eight inch Spikes
400 seven inch d°
200 Six inch d°
1100 Sheets of copper 3-9 long by 14 inches wide of average thinner than the Frigates of the patent sheathing copper
115,000 Copper sheathing Nails of a size less than the Frigates

Dimenstions of Masts and Sparrs for a Brig of 75 feet Keel

27 feet Beam 11½ feet hold & 4½ between Waist

Fore Mast...56.8...head 8.3 yard 48 feet arm 2.3
Topmast ...36 ......... 5 topal. y° 36 d° ...... 2.3
Top gal° Mast 29 ......... 10 T.G. d° 25 d° ...... 1.
Royal 20 ........... 1

Main Mast ...73 feet head 8 ... yard 42 ......... 1.8
Topmast ...33 d° ... 4.9 ......... 33 ........ 2
Top G mast ...27 d° ... 9 ........ 22 ........ 1
Royal 17 ..........

Main Boom 12 feet over Stern
Gaff ——— 30 feet long
Bowsprit 27 feet Outside Bows
Jibb boom 29 feet

[torn] & yards & Booms as is usual according to the general rule
Sir

I was in hopes of soon returning to the city, and until yesterday was very sanguine of having both vessels completed to sail before the river closed this season, but the unfavorable report of the Contagion, and the number of deaths in the vicinity of the yard, will prevent for the present, my return there, the number is much greater than in the year 93 I know of no family that has escaped. The Clerk of the yard was taken sick in the Counting House and is now dead. Mr Hutton is driving on the small vessel very fast, she will be all completely timbered this week and will begin to put on the plank and wales, if he is fortunate enough to continue healthy she will be soon completed. The Stem & Stern of the Brig will be raised tomorrow, she will progress as fast as possible under the present calamity. I have engaged the stuff for the gun carriages, which will be cut immediately and piled up to season.

Mr Francis, nor myself, have a copy of Mr Hutton’s proposals; it will be necessary for one of us to be possessed of them, in order to know, at what time Mr Hutton is to receive payment, although I know very near the sum and time, yet I may be mistaken. I have drawn two orders, on Mr Francis for five hundred dollars each, on account of his first payment, the first was paid before I left the City, the last I am not advised of, but have no doubt of its being paid.

I received a letter from Cap’t O’Brien, dated Baltimore 11th inst: wherein he states his being extremely ill of a fever. Any commands you may please to give, will be immediately sent to me, if they should be left at the Buck Tavern kept by McAilley on the turnpike road near the eight mile stone.

I am with great respect

Yours &c

The Hble Joshua Humphreys
Timothy Pickering

Haverford, Humphreys Mills

Sep’t 25 1797

Sir

Finding by a letter from Mr O’Brien that he lays extremely ill at Baltimore, and not knowing whether you have received any instructions from him respecting the Anchors and Cables I enclose you a list of them that will in my opinion be necessary for the two vessels. I did intend to have gone to the yard today expecting from the reports of last week, I could have gone with safety but yesterday’s report being so unfavorable, I shall de-
Who Built the First United States Navy?

cline it; I have now given up all hopes of having the brig finished this fall. I shall inform the Secretary of it. I have engaged the gun carriage stuff. Gaskill who was to cut the plank for you is dead of the fever—but I expect the person who was with him will see it cut, perhaps it would be best to write about it—

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brgt for Algiers</th>
<th>75 feet keel for tonnage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 Anchors 15Ct</td>
<td>3 Cables 12 Inch 120 fathom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Stream d d 6 d</td>
<td>1 d 6 d d d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Kedge 3 d 1 d 4 d d</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 d 112 lb</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Grapple 28 lb</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schooner</th>
<th>J. H.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 Anchors 11Ct</td>
<td>3 Cables 10 Inch 120 fathom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 d 3/4 d 1 d 4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Kedge 1 d</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Grapple 21 lb</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tench Francis Esquire

Navy Yard Nov. 6 1797

Sir

The Beams of the schooner are all in & the upper work planked, I have had the Beams plained and beaded and shall have all under the deck made neat.

I will thank you to let me know as soon as possible how much I shall have the Orlope deck laid below the gun deck, and what accommodations will be necessary and in what manner will most accord with their Ideas in this I wish you to be very particular and plain as soon as I receive your instructions on this head I shall agree with the joiners as no time is to be lost if she is to be sent out this season.—If you will recollect I laid several matters before you relative to the fitting those Vessels, which I wished your Opinion on; if they were for our service I should not be at so great a Loss in fitting them.

I hope I shall here from you by the return of the post.

I am with Respect

Richard OBrien Esquire

Navy Yard Nov. 10 1797

Dear Sir

On very mature deliberations, and with the advise and assistance of Mr John Dowen, an old experienced sailman, as well as from comparative calculations; I am induced to differ with Capt OBrien with respect to the length of the schooner masts, as well as from a former dimention I sent you, and while the difference is not very great yet if I should conform to his dimensions and the masts prove too short, as I believe they
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...will it will be a difficult matter to remedy, but if they are made to my directions and prove too long they may be cut with little expense and a tho you have desired me to proceed, I cannot, without consulting you, having before received Cap't O'Brien's Opinion which differs from my own.

Main mast not less than 76 feet nor the fore mast less than 72 feet.

Enclosed you have Mr Dowen's bill for the sail cloth wanting for the schooner, as well as a statement of what cloth he has on hand some of which is difficult to be procured elsewhere. I have not made any agreement with him about the sails, he informs me there is a regulated price with the sail makers as to their charges.

Yesterday Mr De Costa and myself went on board a Armed Brig at Mr Willings wharf and found she was armed with English & French four pounders, four & half feet long, what length we have concluded would answer for the schooner of which size he is now preparing a draft. He observes if those guns are to be cast in sand, it will take four months to complete them, but if moulded in clay they may be done in two; he wishes you to require the founder immediately to procure a good moulder in Clay, he thinks there is one may be had from Hughes works. I wish you to take those matters seriously into consideration and let me here from you soon, I shall meet you at any time & place you may appoint.

Tench Francis Esquire

Tench Francis Esquire J. H.

Navy Yard Sep't 6 1797

Mr Tho Truxton

Sir

I received your favour of the 27th Augt this day. I hope before you receive this you will have the Frigate safe in the water—altho I know this must be a very busy time with you, I cannot help calling on you for an indent of the sizes length and number of cables & the w't of Anchors for two vessels of war for Algiers, one of 75 feet 27 feet Beam 11½ feet hold & 4½ feet tight waist to carry 18 Six pounders for a Brig', and one of 62 feet keel 23 feet Beam 10½ feet hold & 4 feet solid or tight waist to carry 16 Guns four pounders for a schooner. I will thank you to state what spare sail Riggin, what quantity of small arms and of all kind of stores, in fact I wish you to state everything necessary to aquipt them for vessels of war in the most complete manner, I should not have troubled you on this subject if I had been competent to the business, and knowing of no persons who have made it their study but yourself, I could not feel confidence in applying to any other person.

Wishing you health and success in Launching I remain &c.

J. H.
Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt, before a meeting of the Society of Naval Architects and Marine Engineers, held in New York, December 10 and 11, 1914, addressed that body on "Our First Frigates: Some Unpublished Facts About Their Construction." Accompanying the printed address are drawings, illustrating, first, the body plan of the frigates Constitution, United States, Constellation and Congress; elevation and one-half breadth of the Constellation; ditto for the Constitution and United States. These copied drawings are taken from the originals of Joshua Humphreys on file in the Navy Department of the United States.

This article treats of the Act of Congress, dated March 27, 1794, which created a navy for the United States of America and none other. It does not treat of the navy of the United Colonies, or its captains commanding their vessels of war.


From the last authority cited is taken the following: "The American Navy insignificant, yet as a whole was composed of large & heavy frigates. Describes a 44 gun frigate; for many years their actual force re-
mained a mystery & would probably have never been accurately determined but for praiseworthy patriotic research & inquisitiveness of the late Mr. James. The added four feet to the extreme breadth of the President (one of the six frigates built upon the plan of Joshua Humphreys), makes her a larger ship than the generality of British 74s, her yards are square, her masts as stout as theirs. Some idea may be formed of the size & formidable appearance of the American 44 gun frigate. In scantlings also, that which the American acknowledges to be the slightest built of the frigates (the President) is at least equal to a British 74 of the largest class.” Mr. James proceeds to prove his case and is successful, winding up with this conclusion: “In fact the American gun frigates were as they were aptly named by British Officers, line of battle ships in disguise.”

Mr. Upham, the biographer of Timothy Pickering, late Secretary of War, in Volume 3, page 154, quotes a letter from that Secretary, dated March 14, 1795, which is addressed to President Washington, and here condensed. The letter states, the carved work for the frigates should be relative to their names; but a single carver here competent (probably W. Bush, marine sculptor), for the work of the frigates building at Philadelphia, Baltimore and Norfolk; the captains with Mr. Humphreys (Joshua), represent the necessity for an early designation of the names of the frigates; submits to Washington twenty-one selected names in which those of the United States, Constitution, Constellation, President and Congress appear. In reports of the Secretary of War in January and June, 1797, the names of the first three frigates mentioned above are applied to them. (See American State Papers, Naval Affairs, Volume 1, pages 25 and 31.) In the Journals of the United States Senate and House of Representatives for those years those names are used in proceedings
relative to the Navy. From the above-mentioned letter, it is assumed President Washington approved the names of the first three frigates, and probably those for the other two.

Authority for the above is a letter in possession of the writer of the present article, received from the Congressional Library, Washington, D. C., dated February 23, 1915.