



## JOSHUA HUMPHREY OF HAVERFORD AND HIS FRIGATES

By Dick Walker

During the twenty years from 1795 to 1815, the newborn United States came under attack by three different foreign powers: the Barbary States, France and England. The U.S. response to these attacks owed much of its ultimate success to the genius of a Philadelphia-area Quaker and naval architect named Joshua Humphrey, born in Haverford Township. Joshua, grandson of Daniel Humphrey, who emigrated from Wales in 1682 and settled in Haverford, was apprenticed to a Philadelphia shipbuilder named Penrose, and because of his talent he was placed in charge of the shipyard upon his master's death.

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, piracy and the white slave trade were the major industries of four Arab states on the north coast of Africa. Morocco, Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli, known as the Barbary States, were attacking merchant ships in the Mediterranean. These states acted independently, although they were supposedly part of the Turkish Empire. They held the "Christian Infidels" that they captured for ransom or sold them as slaves, and made them work in chain gangs. Women were put in harems. Great Britain and France paid huge sums of "protection money" to the pirates so that their merchant ships would not be seized. When the U.S. became independent from Britain, American ships became prime targets. In July, 1785 two American ships were seized and twenty-one Americans were forced into slave labor. John Jay in Philadelphia instructed John Adams in London to negotiate with the Barbary States. The treaty with Tripoli cost 30,000 Guineas plus £3,000 for the Sultan's Envoy. Still, the U.S. did not have a navy and in 1793, the Algerians captured eleven U.S. merchant ships and enslaved their crews.



*USS Constitution*

Because of these atrocities, President Washington asked Congress for money to build warships to protect U.S. shipping. Finally, in March, 1794 Congress passed a bill to provide funds for six frigates for a navy. (After the Revolution, the first U.S. Congress had been reluctant to provide a standing army or navy because it did not want to give power to the central government.) Secretary of War Henry Knox chose Joshua Humphrey and his partner, John Fox, to design the ships. Together these two Quakers designed the strongest and fastest warships of their time.

The six ships were each to be built at different ports: the USS Congress at Portsmouth, USS Constitution at Boston, USS President at New York, USS United States at Philadelphia, USS Constellation at Baltimore and the USS Chesapeake at Norfolk. These six frigates slid down the launch ramps in 1797 and soon proved to the world that Humphrey's designs for longer, wider vessels, rising low from the water, could out-run, out-maneuver and out-shoot any ship on the ocean. The new frigates defended merchant ships against the French in the West Indies and on Lakes Erie and Champlain in the War of 1812.

In May, 1801 President Jefferson refused to pay more tribute to the Barbary pirates and sent a squadron of ships to Tripoli. In 1805 U.S. Marines stormed the harbor and raised the U.S. flag over Tripoli. Over the next ten years, the U.S. alternately fought and made treaties with the pirates. Finally, in 1815 President Madison sent Stephen Decatur with a squadron of ten ships to the Mediterranean and forced a surrender, release of all prisoners and merchandise taken from U.S. ships, and payment of damages. The many victories that Humphrey's ships and their crews achieved gave the U.S. the freedom to trade worldwide without interference, to become a world power and to establish its economy.



*Joshua Humphrey's headstone –  
Old Haverford Friends Meeting Burial Ground*

Joshua Humphrey lived the last 30 years of his life at the Humphrey family's Pont Reading home in Haverford. [Today he is considered to be the first naval architect of the U.S. Navy. The USS Constitution, nicknamed "Old Ironsides" for its strength under cannon fire, remains rostered as the oldest U.S. Navy ship in active service and is based in Boston for crew training.]

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