



USS Constitution Figure/Billeheads & Trail Boards

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



“Hercules” on the bow of USS *Constitution*, cropped from Michele Felice Cornè 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

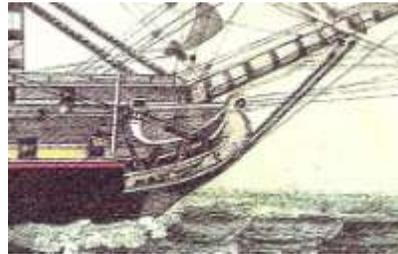
1804 USS *Constitution* collided with USS *President* in the Mediterranean Sea, with the loss of the Hercules figurehead; a temporary billethead is placed on *Constitution's* bow

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

¹ M.V. Brewington, *Shipcarvers of North America*. (Barre, Massachusetts: Barre Publishing Company, 1962), p. 121 and p. 144, note 4: ‘Humphreys Correspondence. The letter is printed in *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXXI, 239-240’.



W/1812 USSC billettead, displayed CNYd until c.1876 from 'The Pictorial Field-book of the War of 1812', Benson John Lossing, 1869



Billettead, c.1815, from 'The Naval Monument', by Abel Bowen

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

1813 "The United States Navy Department to John Fuller [excerpts]: 1813

June 1	To trucking 2 trail Boards from <i>Constitution</i> to Fowles Shop	\$.37
8	To trucking 8 'trale' boards fr[om] Fowle's to <i>Constitution</i> & tolls	6.62
21	To trucking 2 trail Boards from Fowles to <i>Constitution</i> & tolls	.62" ²

1834-1847 First Andrew Jackson figurehead, carved by Laban Beecher of Boston [Museum of the City of New York collections]



Early 20th C. photo, Beecher figurehead of A. Jackson

² 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



“Dragon” billethead carved for 1906-07 USS Constitution restoration. US Navy Photo.

³ “U.S.S. Constitution/July, 1906/October, 1906/August 1, 1907/Completed Jobs Carrying Estimates”. Elliot Snow Papers, USS Constitution Museum, Boston; 1876 billethead, US Navy loan to USS Constitution Museum, Boston.

⁴ Ibid.



1906/07 restoration bilgehead & 1876 trail boards, c. 1910 photo, Charlestown Navy Yard. US Navy Photo.

1927-1931 William A. Bates carved new scroll bilgehead, replacing “dragon” bilgehead ; replaced trail boards with identical, newly carved trail boards⁵



1927-31 restoration bilgehead & trail boards in 1931 photo, Dry Dock #1, Charlestown Navy Yard. US Navy Photo.

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

Naval History & Heritage Command Detachment Boston
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⁵ 1876 “dragon” bilgehead US Navy loan to USS Constitution Museum, Boston; William Bates donated 1876 trail boards to Peabody Museum (PEM) in 1951