

Constitution Sailors in the Battle of Lake Erie

By Marc Collins*

Background on the Battle

American Squadron

- Brig *Lawrence*: 20 guns
- Brig *Niagara*: 20 guns
- Brig *Caledonia*: 4 guns
- Schooner *Ariel*: 3 guns
- Schooner *Scorpion*: 2 guns
- Schooner *Somers*: 2 guns
- Sloop *Trippe*: 1 gun
- Schooner *Porcupine*: 1 gun
- Schooner *Tigress*: 1 gun
- Schooner *Ohio*

British Squadron

- *Detroit*: 19 guns
- *Queen Charlotte*: 17 guns
- *Lady Prevost*: 13 guns
- *Brig Hunter*: 10 guns
- *Little Belt*: 3 guns
- *Chippeway*: 1 gun¹

On the morning of September 10, 1813, after a lookout had spotted the British fleet in the distance on Lake Erie, Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry made the decision to finally engage the British after months of preparations. The British had no choice but to launch an attack, having lost their supply route from Fort Malden to Port Dover; it was either fight or continue to go hungry. With only carronades against the British long guns, Perry needed the wind behind his fleet to rectify this disadvantage. If not, the British fleet would be out of the range of American guns. It would take around three hours until Perry finally had the wind behind the American fleet.

With the wind in his favor, Perry adjusted his tactics, placing the Schooners *Ariel* and *Scorpion* off the flagship *Lawrence's* bow to prevent the British from raking the fleet. The plan was for *Lawrence* to engage the British flagship *Detroit* while the second-largest American ship, *Niagara*, would engage *Queen Charlotte*, the second-largest British ship. At 11:45 a.m. *Detroit* fired the first shot of the Battle of Lake Erie, narrowly missing *Lawrence*. Still out of range, *Lawrence* was forced to cross almost the entire line of British ships, receiving heavy damage in the process. During this period, *Niagara*, instead of engaging with *Queen Charlotte*, was stationary and doing very little. After a short while, the commander of *Niagara*, Master Commandant Jesse Elliott, decided to move, but instead of advancing toward the enemy line, angled *Niagara* away from the action. *Lawrence* was outnumbered and attacked by several different ships while *Niagara* was a spectator. (Elliott's questionable actions during this battle would blight the remainder of his naval career, and still to this day some of his tactical decisions provoke debate.) By 2:30 p.m., *Lawrence* was a floating wreck. With most of the guns disabled, and with huge casualties, Perry made the decision to take four unwounded men with him and row to the nearby *Niagara* while coming under heavy fire. He assumed command of the ship and sent Elliott to hurry along the lagging gunboats.

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With the American fleet reorganized and ready to engage once again, the British had to act; however, with the captain and first lieutenant in every British ship incapacitated and Commander Robert Barclay injured, it was up to the junior officers to take charge and lead the fleet. Their inexperience became apparent when *Detroit* and *Queen Charlotte* collided and became entangled during a tactical maneuver. Seeing an opportunity, Perry steered *Niagara* through the British line and unleashed *Niagara's* carronades, incapacitating the remainder of the British fleet. At around 3 p.m., the British fleet accepted they were beaten and finally surrendered. Perry sent a message to General William Henry Harrison, "we have met the enemy and they are ours." Lake Erie had been secured for the American fleet, and the victory would shift the momentum to the United States for future engagements.²

Constitution's Men Report for Lake Duty

To fully understand the circumstances that led to a landmark victory for an inexperienced United States naval fleet on Lake Erie in 1813, one has to look further afield than the lakes theater. In fact, events in Boston, Massachusetts, would play a major role in the American Navy's triumph in the Battle of Lake Erie in September 1813. The recent victories of U.S. frigate *Constitution* had made "England turn pale," while "young America, it flushed with the glow of a new power."³ These victories brought the nation facing severe setbacks in the war on land a morale boost and more. Many veterans from *Constitution* would be transferred from Boston, going on to fight in the Battle of Lake Erie the following year and bringing much needed experience to a youthful United States Navy. This paper will look at the reasons for transferring members of *Constitution's* crew to a remote outpost on the Canadian frontier, the route they took, and the difficulties they faced traveling roughly seven hundred miles. Then, the latter half will introduce the men themselves—"Constitutions"—and describe their individual contributions during one of the pivotal battles in the War of 1812.

Within such a small and inexperienced navy, sailors with battle experience were in demand. The majority of the crew Perry had at his disposal on Lake Erie was far from matching the professional sailors of the British Navy. Perry described them as "a motley set, blacks, Soldiers and boys."⁴ Although his superior officer in the theater, Commodore Isaac Chauncey, bridled at the implication that blacks made inferior sailors, stating that they constituted some of his best men, both the quality and quantity of the crew of the Lake Erie squadron were disappointing for a man with big ambitions. Despite the possibility of Lake Erie being used as an invasion route by the British,⁵ Erie was seen as being of less importance than the larger Lake Ontario to the east, where Chauncey presided. Lake duty was unpopular with sailors, and to be stationed at Presque Isle, the American station on Lake Erie, even more so. Even Perry was unhappy at being assigned to Erie; he would have preferred a command on the Atlantic seaboard.⁶

However, in the spring and summer of 1813, events in Boston meant Perry would finally get the experienced sailors he desired. *Constitution* had been blockaded in Boston Harbor and would remain there for almost a year from February 23 to New Year's Eve, 1813.⁷ With *Constitution* out of the war, the men could be better used elsewhere and many would find themselves transferred to Lake Erie or Lake Ontario as an alternative to recruiting men for the unpopular lake stations.⁸ In fact, in March 1813, only one man in Boston would enlist for lake duty out of free choice.⁹ Out of the 147 men from the *Constitution* that were initially sent to Lake Ontario to serve under Commodore Isaac Chauncey, dozens would eventually be sent to Presque Isle on Lake Erie, part of the 410 or so men Chauncey transferred to Perry.¹⁰ Incomplete records prevent knowing the exact number, yet it would be the men's experience and winning mentality, not the number of men, that would tip the balance in favor of the American fleet in the Battle of Lake Erie. Quite simply the *Constitution*

veterans were the very best the United States Navy had and they would show why on September 10, 1813.

In an age when railways and air travel are fast and easily accessible, it is easy to forget just how difficult it was to transfer hundreds of men from Boston Harbor to the Great Lakes. Covering a distance of more than seven hundred miles, the *Constitution* crew had to rely on their feet and occasionally rivers and lakes to deliver themselves for duty on Lake Erie or Lake Ontario. As the route the men took was not officially recorded, researchers have used a variety of methods to try to identify how the Constitutions got from Boston to Sackets Harbor, the naval base for operations on Lake Ontario, and finally to Presque Isle, on Lake Erie. This paper will outline the most likely path the men took while also discussing other possible routes (and also the reasons these are less likely). Maps of each route appear in the appendix.

Setting out for New York

The first stage of the voyage involved getting from Boston Harbor, where *Constitution* was docked and being repaired, to New York, a major transportation center.

Historian Tyrone G. Martin states it is likely the crew would have been taken by coaster, a shallow-bottom ship used for short voyages along the coast. The risk of men deserting en route meant going by sea was the best option, as there was no escape.¹¹ However, considering *Constitution* was blockaded in Boston Harbor, it seems improbable that an American coaster, carrying sailors destined for war, would be able to leave Boston Harbor or anywhere nearby without being harassed.¹² What is more, one newspaper reported that it was only on May 20, 1813, that New York Port's blockade was lifted,¹³ almost a month later than the first batch of 120 sailors was sent from *Constitution* on April 18.¹⁴ During the blockade British ships chased any American ship in range and also stopped any ships arriving in New York.¹⁵ Therefore, Martin's theory seems unlikely. It would be a far too risky and dangerous route to take just to avoid the possibility of desertion.

Because of the blockade, the crew would have been forced instead to travel to New York by land on a stage route, the most obvious being the Boston Post Road which later became one of the first American highways, U.S. Route 1. A report in the *Newburyport Herald* on 23 April 1813 confirms that the men "were taken on in stagecoaches employed for the occasion."¹⁶ The men were taken in 15 four-horse stagecoaches.¹⁷ As a result of the blockade, the road would have been extremely busy, with one Worcester resident remembering 400 wagons a day passing along the road.¹⁸ In addition, the condition of the road would make the journey dangerous, with deep "ruts and gutters" in the road making the journey to New York by stagecoach long and dangerous.¹⁹ In fact two men from the second detachment that left on April 27, 1813, would die on the road, Sailing Master John Nichols at Lorraine, New York, and Seaman John Harvey, 15 miles south of Sackets Harbor. By using newspaper accounts and receipts from officers, Matthew Brenckle of the *Constitution* Museum has been able to outline the stops on this route: from Boston the men traveled in stagecoaches to Framingham, where they changed stages, and did so again at Worcester, Belchertown, Northampton, and Pittsfield, cutting inland across Massachusetts.²⁰

Voyaging on toward Sackets Harbor

The next stage of the route has also been debated by various *Constitution* historians. Martin, for instance, sees it as likely the crew from *Constitution* would there have switched from stagecoach to water transport and taken a sloop up the Hudson River to Albany, New York. This was a popular route for American Navy personnel being transferred up to the Great Lakes. In Ned Myer's account of his War of 1812 service on Lake Ontario, he describes getting a sloop along the same stretch.²¹

Regardless of whether the destination was Lake Ontario or Lake Erie, this part of the voyage was essential because of the amount of time it saved. Yet, the Hudson River was far from safe and the time of year the men traveled was particularly dangerous. Spring brought flooding and a swollen river, while in summer the river's water level would be dangerously low. This was in addition to the unpredictable rapids.²²

However, Brenckle disagrees. He thinks the Constitutions would have carried on in their stagecoaches, bypassing New York altogether and heading straight for Albany on the stage route from Pittsfield.²³ This route would pass through New Lebanon, a "pleasant town" 25 miles from Albany, which had a fresh spring water source and bathing houses. If the men were allowed to stop here, they could refill their water barrels and perhaps wash in the bath houses.²⁴ Brenckle records the date of arrival in Albany as April 19, 1813.²⁵ If the men continued their journey by stagecoach, they would next head for Utica by way of Amsterdam. But in 1810, only three stagecoaches made the trip from Albany to Utica a week²⁶—even in 1813 facilities along the route were significantly poorer than along the extremely busy Boston to New York road.

The next portion of Martin's route rests on the supposition that having reached Albany, the Constitutions would then have to march 16 miles along what is known as "The King's Highway" to Schenectady, New York.²⁷ The King's Highway, while scenic, lined with trees on both sides, was not an easy road to navigate with heavy equipment. The shade from the trees meant the road was rarely dry; instead it was muddy and so incredibly flat with all the heavy wagons passing over it that horses and wagons struggled to keep from slipping.²⁸ One can only imagine the struggles of these men trying to keep their footing while carrying a significant amount of equipment. According to one traveler, who was on the road only a few years after the War of 1812, even if the road was dry, the dust kicked up by heavy traffic made it very unpleasant walking.²⁹ The crew of *Constitution*, having trudged along the King's Highway, would undoubtedly have found the Mohawk River a relief. It provided "relatively easy access to the frontier"³⁰ and it would take them about one hundred miles toward the Great Lakes. The river did, however, pass through Native American territory and to some this was a worrying issue, especially at a time when Native Americans and the British were forming alliances around the lakes.

One point on which proposed routes from Albany to Sackets Harbor agree is that at Utica the crew would walk, as the river turned north and would only take them farther away from the direction of the lakes.³¹ From soldiers' accounts, it would seem Utica was the common stopping off point for travel into the Canadian frontier. Some argue the first detachment of Constitutions made the ten-day stagecoach journey by road from Albany to Sackets Harbor via Utica to reach Sackets Harbor on April 29, 1813.

Martin, on the other hand, thinks the men would have marched forty miles from Utica to reach Lake Oneida, where the men would once again resort to water transport.³² The lake lay in the heart of Oneida tribe territory; however, this particular tribe had pledged allegiance to the United States, in fact providing around one hundred soldiers in the War of 1812,³³ and therefore posed no threat to the Constitutions. A soldier who recalled passing through the territory remembers how the Oneida tribe would line the side of the route and salute the passing soldiers either coming or going to Lake Erie and Lake Ontario.³⁴ At its far side, Lake Oneida meets the Oswego River, which would take the *Constitution* crew out onto Lake Ontario where a ship would take them to Sackets Harbor.

Whatever their route, newspaper accounts point to the entire journey of the first batch of Constitutions taking from 18 to 20 days from Boston to Sackets Harbor.³⁵

Arriving at Presque Isle

Some writers think that the *Constitutions* could have gone via Philadelphia, over parts of the Appalachian Mountains to Pittsburgh, and then directly north down the Allegheny River to Presque Isle, located on the southern shore of Lake Erie. While this route may look more direct, it simply was not realistic. With so much equipment, crossing the Appalachians would have been nearly impossible. Also *Constitution's* men would not have been able to live off the land, or even acquire enough food in Pittsburgh. There was simply not enough food being produced on the frontier to make this route a realistic option.³⁶ More likely was that the route north from Pittsburgh was just a supply route, as opposed to a route to transfer men;³⁷ it would have been too grueling in an already mammoth voyage from the Atlantic to the Canadian frontier.

Despite Martin's proposed route seeming the most efficient and least grueling for the men, the evidence is simply not there to support it. Brenckle's route, consisting of stage routes all the way to Sackets Harbor and then by ship to Presque Isle, is supported by receipts and newspaper accounts, and therefore should be considered as the route the *Constitution* men took to Lake Erie.

It is in this final leg of the journey to Lake Erie that it becomes extremely tough to determine who was an original member of *Constitution* that would later serve in the Battle of Lake Erie. By May 15, Chauncey had around 310 of his own crew sent to join Perry's inexperienced and small crew. The last detachment of 60 sailors under Midshipman Dulaney Forrest was sent on July 10, 1813, and arrived at Presque Isle on either the 23rd or 28th of July.³⁸ They were transferred by either the *Lady of the Lake* or *Pert*³⁹ to the Niagara River, which conveniently joins Lake Erie to Lake Ontario. Their final destination was Presque Isle, where they would now report to Perry and serve under him in the Battle of Lake Erie in September 1813.

Preparing for Battle

The *Constitutions* did not all arrive simultaneously; instead it was a staggered process with two main detachments. The first detachment of around 120 of *Constitution's* crew left their former ship in Boston Harbor on Sunday April 18, 1813. They arrived in Sackets Harbor on April 29, 1813, where they awaited further instruction. Two days earlier, a further 50 *Constitutions* set off from Boston and around April 14, 1813, reached Sackets Harbor. With all the members of the *Constitution* crew assembled at Sackets Harbor, Chauncey judged he could spare 60 of them, along with more than 300 other members of his crew. On July 10, 1813, Forrest was ordered to transfer these 60 men to Presque Isle. The men would not arrive until either the July 23 or July 28, depending on which source is used. This meant the *Constitution's* crew would have from 40 to 50 days to settle in and prepare for the imminent battle.⁴⁰

During these few weeks, the *Constitution's* crew would be assigned new identification numbers for their respective ships; they would be added to the muster rolls and other administrative business would be taken care of. Living quarters whether in their ships or on land were far from comfortable. The prevalence of diseases, including smallpox, indicates that sleeping and communal areas were very crowded and uncomfortable.⁴¹ There was however enough food for the men despite the isolation of the station on Lake Erie. They had cheese, bread, and meat; quantity was never an issue, but quality could vary.⁴² With the Pittsburgh supply route, food could be transported from major cities all the way to Presque Isle. The British on the other hand were isolated, and having lost Fort George, a fort situated between Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, struggled to find enough food.⁴³

The skills of some members of *Constitution's* crew would be put to use straight away. For example, Boatswain Mate James Campbell would apply his years as a sail maker to assisting in building the remainder of Perry's squadron. Others probably would have been involved in the

mammoth effort of getting *Niagara* and other ships over a sandbar that was preventing them from entering Lake Erie. This involved stripping the ship of its masts to lighten it and using the weight of shifting water to move the ship over the bar.⁴⁴ The *Constitutions* would have been just a few of the hundreds of men helping with final preparations of building and readying the fleet for war.

The *Constitutions* Experience the War

With the most likely route the crew from *Constitution* took detailed, it is now time to look at the men themselves, their background, their role on *Constitution*, and later their contributions in the Battle of Lake Erie. (The Crew ID is the number assigned to a crew member when he joins a ship. It is used for recording purposes, compiling muster rolls, and keeping accurate records of crew.)

James Bennett

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 1227

Served with *Lawrence*

Role: Ordinary Seaman⁴⁵

James Bennett was born in Duck Creek Crossroads in Delaware around 1782. He was born a free man; in 1810 he applied for a seamen's protection certificate in Philadelphia, which acted as written proof of his citizenship. Little is known about his background, but it is clear he endured a harsh upbringing—perhaps because of his African-American heritage—for he had several noticeable scars and deformities. Joining *Constitution's* crew in April 1811, he made around \$10 a month as an ordinary seaman. He could perform the basics, reefing and steering, but the complicated maneuvers were left to those above him in *Constitution's* hierarchy. Bennett was on board when *Constitution* took diplomatic voyages to France and Holland, and also served in both the defeats of HMS *Guerriere* and HMS *Java*.⁴⁶ During these battles, Bennett helped in plugging holes in the ship's hold due to enemy fire. Such heroics would result in his receiving prize money for the defeats. Bennett was transferred to the lakes in January 1813, where he served under Perry. He would be one of many African-American sailors who convinced Perry of their worth and led to Perry's speaking "highly of the bravery and good conduct of the Negroes."⁴⁷ He would receive a fatal wound during the battle, most probably plugging the holes in *Lawrence's* hold. He would be one of 83 casualties on board *Lawrence*, a loss rate of 55 percent. Splinters, contusions, and fractures all contributed to this significant loss rate.⁴⁸ Bennett's widow, Sarah, would spend decades fighting to receive part of the prize money or pension for his service during the Battle of Lake Erie; however the Senate would reject her appeal.⁴⁹

Dulaney Forest

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 4541

Served with *Lawrence*

Role: Midshipman/Acting Lieutenant

Dulaney Forrest, a native of the District of Columbia, was on board *Constitution* for the victory over HMS *Java*, the frigate he would board to be lieutenant of on December 9, 1814. He also fought on board *Constitution* against HMS *Guerriere*. In July 1813, he would be selected by Chauncey as the man to lead 60 sailors, many former *Constitution* men, from Sackets Harbor to Lake Erie.⁵⁰ His role as midshipman on board *Constitution* and *Lawrence* was usually reserved for young men who had ambitions to be naval officers. (In fact, David Farragut, famed naval officer in the Civil War, was a

midshipman at the age of 12 during the War of 1812.⁵¹ Perry also performed the role in his youth.) Forrest would be promoted from midshipman in the midst of the battle to acting lieutenant.⁵² He showed tremendous courage and resilience. He was reported to have been stunned by a grape canister when standing near Perry. However he insisted he was still fit for duty and carried on.⁵³ His performance in battle was rewarded with \$2,295 in prize money after the battle.⁵⁴ He would even return to the District of Columbia to present the captured British flags to a delighted Congress.⁵⁵

John H. Packet

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 10833

Served with *Ariel*

Role: Lieutenant Commandant

Serving as a midshipman with *Constitution*, John Packet had ambition to become an officer. He would achieve this when he was promoted to lieutenant commandant of the schooner *Ariel*. He was the only commander in the American squadron who actually had ship-to-ship battle experience, being involved in the victory over the frigate *Java*. Unfortunately, the role of smaller schooners such as *Ariel* has often been downplayed. *Ariel* would play a crucial role in preventing the British ships from crossing *Lawrence's* bow and inflicting huge damage on its side.⁵⁶ It is clear that Packet must have impressed Perry in his short time since arriving from Boston, as Perry gave Packet more freedom than other officers to change tactical plans mid-battle.⁵⁷ This is surprising as Perry was known for his authoritarian command style. Packet's role in the battle, protecting the flagship *Lawrence*, would result in \$2,295 in prize money after the Battle of Lake Erie.

John Smith

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 13141

Served with *Lawrence*

Role: Ordinary Seaman

John Smith is the perfect example of the danger and mortality on display during the Battle of Lake Erie. Far from being a famous commandant or hero, he represents the majority of the men, relatively unskilled yet working in an extremely dangerous environment. He had been an ordinary seaman with *Constitution*, responsible for sponging *Constitution's* #12 24-pounder gun. Several of his colleagues were killed right next to him, yet he had to continue firing to survive.⁵⁸ The role of sponger, while not particularly heroic, was still vital. A wet sponge had to swab the cannon to make sure no hot residue set off the next round prematurely, which would be disastrous.⁵⁹ In *Lawrence* he was gun captain and was struck by a 24-pound shot and killed. He would be one of the 22 men killed on board *Lawrence* owing to heavy damage inflicted by the British.⁶⁰ The bodies of Smith and the other *Constitution* men who died on board *Lawrence* were wrapped in their own hammocks, tied to a cannon ball, and dropped one by one into Lake Erie.⁶¹

John C. Cummings

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 2614

Served with *Niagara*

Role: Midshipman

John C. Cummings was another of the *Constitution* men who had served in both the battle with *Java* and later *Guerriere*.⁶² He would serve under Elliott aboard *Niagara*, which would become the flagship after the sinking of *Lawrence*. Under Elliott, the ship failed to stay in battle formation,

causing confusion and accusations of incompetence against Elliott.⁶³ However, after *Lawrence* was abandoned and Perry transferred to the new flagship, Cummings was brought into the action. The closer contact with the British resulted in Cummings being wounded; however he would survive the wound and be awarded \$811 for his performance on board *Niagara*.

William Johnson

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 7027

Served with *Lawrence*

Role: Seaman

During the Battle of Lake Erie, Seaman William Johnson was responsible for manning the #2 carronade gun in *Lawrence*,⁶⁴ perhaps the most dangerous place to be during the Battle of Lake Erie. Enemy fire, splinters from the damaged ship, even malfunctioning cannons were just a few of the host of dangers the men were exposed to. On the gun deck Johnson was serving with five other men from *Constitution*, many of whom had fought on the same gun deck together against *Java*. During the heavy shelling Johnson was wounded ⁶⁵ and became one of many who had to report to surgeon Usher Parsons in *Lawrence* (who, completely overwhelmed, resorted to bandages and tourniquets and tended to avoid “quick fix” amputations).

Jesse Williams

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 15171

Served with *Lawrence*

Role: Seaman

Jesse Williams, a native of Pennsylvania, joined *Constitution's* crew in August 1812 in Boston, despite being 40 forty years of age. Although he was African-American, Williams felt part of the crew. Regardless of skin color, the men would eat, sleep and fight side by side against their common enemy, Great Britain. On board *Constitution*, Williams fought against *Guerriere* and *Java*, with the role of first sponger on the #3 long gun.⁶⁶ Soon after helping *Constitution* defeat *Guerriere*, Williams was transferred to Lake Erie, where he served under Perry in *Lawrence* with many other men from *Constitution*. He is reported as getting slightly wounded during the battle,⁶⁷ along with many of his old *Constitution* shipmates. However he would recover and claim \$214 in prize money.⁶⁸ The City of Philadelphia would later recognize him for his services in the Battle of Lake Erie and other engagements, with a silver medal in 1820.⁶⁹

James D. Hammond

Crew ID: *Constitution*-6065

Served with *Lawrence*

Role: Seaman

Despite being close to death while manning the #12 carronade on the gun deck of *Constitution* during the brutal fight against *Java*, a battle that would see six of Hammond's fellow gunners die,⁷⁰ James D. Hammond went on to fight again on Lake Erie. He again served on the gun deck, this time of *Lawrence*, with many of his former gun crew mates. Despite the extensive destruction and chaos in *Lawrence*, Hammond escaped the ship and battle with no injuries. He would go on to receive \$214 for his service on the gun deck.⁷¹

William Dawson

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 3270

Served with *Lawrence*
Role: Seaman

William Dawson was another of the *Constitution* crewmen who were transferred and found themselves on the gun deck of the flagship *Lawrence* under Perry's command during the Battle of Lake Erie. He is reported to have been seriously injured during the engagement.⁷² After the war he would receive \$214,⁷³ an amount that indicates while risking his life, he did not do anything exceptional except firing his cannon.

James Campbell

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 1
Served with *Lawrence*
Role: Boatswain Mate

Born in Ireland, James Campbell moved to Baltimore with his parents in 1790. At the age of 14, he became an apprentice in sail making for ten years. Then in 1812, he joined the United States Navy and would be a gunner in *Constitution* against *Guerriere*.⁷⁴ Campbell was one of the first *Constitution* men to be transported to the lakes, as his sail-making skills were needed for building Perry's squadron on Presque Isle. However, during the Battle of Lake Erie in September 1813, he would be on the gun deck of *Lawrence*. In his memoirs, he says he was one of the men that personally rowed Perry to safety on *Niagara*. What makes Campbell's story fascinating is that he would be reassigned to *Constitution* after the Battle of Lake Erie and would have had to make the return trip all the way back to the Atlantic seaboard.⁷⁵

Ezekiel Hatch

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 6002
Served with *Caledonia*
Role: Boy

As the ship's boy or 'powder monkey,' Ezekiel Hatch was to constantly shuttle gunpowder from the magazine to the ship's guns.⁷⁶ However, if the situation got worse, these 'boys' could be put on a gun, as Hatch was in *Constitution* whilst manning a carronade.⁷⁷ The impact of *Caledonia*, the ship with which Hatch served, has been neglected in favor of the more celebrated *Lawrence* and *Niagara*. *Caledonia* actually was crucial in defeating the British, using its long-range guns to inflict damage while remaining out of range of the British guns. Its fire severely damaged *Queen Charlotte*, the second largest British ship.⁷⁸ Hatch would receive the standard \$214 for his duties as ship boy and gunner in the Battle of Lake Erie.⁷⁹

John Saunders

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 13193
Served with *Caledonia*
Role: Seaman

Having been a carronade crew member with *Constitution* in the battles with *Java* and *Guerriere*, John Saunders was transferred to Erie to serve on the gun deck on *Caledonia* with his former *Constitution* colleague Ezekiel Hatch. He avoided getting wounded and would receive \$214 for his contribution in *Caledonia*.

William D. Edwards

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 3943

Served with *Niagara*

Role: Able Seaman

Listed as an able seaman in *Constitution's*⁸⁰ and *Niagara's* records⁸¹, William D. Edwards clearly must have had naval experience before *Java* and *Guerriere*, and this is the kind of experience Perry's squadron so desperately needed. Serving in *Niagara* with a handful of other *Constitution* men, including John C. Cummings, Edwards must have been frustrated by Jesse Elliott's inaction. Having seen the triumph over *Java* and *Guerriere* (and perhaps other ships in the case of Edwards), the *Constitutions* had to watch as they lagged behind the other ships. Until Perry took over *Niagara*, the *Constitution* men's rare combat experience was being wasted.

Peter Dunn

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 3581

Served with *Trippe*

Role: Able Seaman

During the Battle of Lake Erie, Peter Dunn would serve with the sloop *Trippe*, which for a lot of the conflict was astern of *Niagara* in a supporting role.⁸² Toward the end of the battle, *Trippe* would lead the remaining four vessels under Lieutenant Thomas Holdup.⁸³ In fact, *Trippe* was readying itself to board *Detroit* to finish the battle; however they soon spotted Perry, now in *Niagara*, bearing down on *Detroit*, ready to end the engagement.⁸⁴ Dunn was serving under the charismatic Holdup, and as an able seaman his duties would involve being on the gun deck and most likely helping to fire the one long gun on board.⁸⁵ Only two men were wounded in *Trippe*; none of the *Constitution* crew,⁸⁶ including Dunn, was among the injured. Dunn would go on to collect \$214 for his contribution in the Battle of Lake Erie.⁸⁷

Samuel Dunn

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 3678

Served with *Trippe*

Role: Seaman

Also serving with *Trippe* was Samuel Dunn, quite possibly the brother of Peter Dunn. Having served with *Constitution*, they both were sent to Lake Erie and eventually ended up on board *Trippe*. Both Duns would also forward their prize money to the same attorney.⁸⁸ Samuel Dunn however, was only an ordinary seaman as opposed to an able seaman. He was still in the process of getting enough seagoing experience; the Battle of Lake Erie certainly would add to the experience he had already gained aboard *Constitution*.

Samuel Parsons

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 10698

Served with *Scorpion*

Role: Seaman

On board the schooner *Scorpion* was Samuel Parsons, a seaman who was another of the *Constitution* men transferred from the Atlantic seaboard. Parsons would have been working on the same gun deck that fired the first and last shot in the Battle of Lake Erie.⁸⁹ *Scorpion*, with one long gun and one carronade, performed admirably in the battle and in tandem with *Trippe* would chase and

capture the British vessels *Chippeway* and *Little Belt* while sustaining only two fatalities.⁹⁰ Samuel Parsons may have been only one member of *Scorpion's* crew, but with his *Constitution* experience, he would have been a huge asset to the less skilled members of the crew.

John Barnes

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 1433

Served with *Lawrence*

Role: Seaman

With a relatively low *Constitution* ID number, it is safe to assume John Barnes was involved with the ship for a considerable amount of time. Like almost all the *Constitution* men, he would have been in the victories over *Java* and *Guerriere*. Following his transfer to the lakes, he was one of a large number of sailors from *Constitution* in the flagship *Lawrence*. Perhaps this shows Perry's attitude toward the men. With such a large concentration of the highly experienced sailors in his flagship *Lawrence*, it is clear he respected them, so much so that he wanted them in the most important ship in the fleet. Like most ordinary seamen, Barnes received \$214 for his service during the battle.⁹¹

James Garner

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 5195

Served with *Trippe*

Role: Seaman

James Gardner served with *Trippe* along with a handful of other *Constitution* men, including Peter and Samuel Dunn and Thomas Jones. He too would receive the standard amount of prize money for a seaman, \$214 for his service with *Trippe*.⁹²

Thomas Jones

Crew ID: *Constitution*- 6948

Served with *Trippe*

Role: Seaman

Thomas Jones was also with *Trippe* during the Battle of Lake Erie. With at least four *Constitution* men on the gun deck of the sloop, it is entirely possible it was one of these men who fired the first shot in the Battle of Lake Erie. Jones would receive the same amount as prize money as all the other *Constitution* men in *Trippe*.

Daniel Turner

Crew ID: *Constitution*-?

Served with *Caledonia*

Role: Lieutenant Commandant

While not being directly transferred from *Constitution* to Lake Erie, instead spending around ten months in Connecticut, Daniel Turner was also another fighter on Lake Erie with a background aboard *Constitution*. Although not on board in the victories against *Guerriere* and *Java*, he did serve with *Constitution* while she was part of the northern squadron under the command of Isaac Hull in 1810 and 1811.⁹³ In March 1813, he received his commission as lieutenant; two days later he was sent to Sackets Harbor and then Erie where he was put in command of *Niagara*. However, he gave up command to Jesse Elliott and instead took over *Caledonia*.⁹⁴ Turner and *Caledonia* would prove their worth when the brig's two long guns were the only ones available to return fire on the distant

British ships,⁹⁵ possibly preventing the complete destruction of *Lawrence* and crew. For commanding *Caledonia*, in accordance with his rank, Turner received \$2,295 prize money.⁹⁶ He would go on to serve in the Mediterranean on board the captured *Java* under Perry in 1815.⁹⁷

Crew Statistics

Constitutions per Ship (Sample of 20)

- *Lawrence*: 9
- *Niagara*: 2
- *Caledonia*: 3
- *Ariel*: 1
- *Scorpion*: 1
- *Somers*: 0
- *Trippe*: 4
- *Porcupine*: 0
- *Tigress*: 0
- *Ohio*: 0

Constitutions per Rating (Sample of 20)

- Lieutenant Commandant: 2
- Midshipman: 2
- Boatswain's Mate: 1
- Able Seaman: 2
- Ordinary Seaman: 12
- Boy: 1

Constitutions Killed

- 2 killed in battle
- 2 (at least) died on the way to Sackets Harbor

Constitutions Wounded

4 (20%)

Conclusion

Perhaps Perry said it best in describing the value of having the *Constitution* crew on the lake for the Battle of Lake Erie. Giving a rousing pre-battle speech, he addressed the Constitutions: "Well, boys are you ready?" he asked, "all ready, sir!" the men responded. Perry's concluding words to the men sum up why the *Constitution* men were so valuable and influential in the Battle of Lake Erie: "I need not say anything to you...you know how to beat those fellows."⁹⁸ Ultimately, *Constitution's* victories over *Java* and *Guerriere* were nothing but small setbacks for the powerful British Navy. Yet, *Constitution's* victories gave the inexperienced and young United States Navy belief that it could be victorious. This huge morale boost would lift the United States Navy to new heights, give the young force the confidence it needed to win epic battles such as the Battle of Lake Erie, and finally give the United States supremacy over its own shores.⁹⁹

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Appendix: Maps of Possible Routes of the Constitutions





