

## **Time Line and Annotated Bibliography of “The *Constellation* Question” 1948 - 2003**

By Dana Wegner

**1855.** Time line. U.S. Sloop-of-War *Constellation* is commissioned near Norfolk, VA.

**1909.** Time line. For unknown reasons the official Navy Register, which since 1854 has been listing *Constellation* as a sloop-of-war built or rebuilt at Norfolk in 1854, begins listing ship as a frigate built in Baltimore in 1797.

**1948.** Time line. World War II has ended and the Navy is strapped for funds. Navy decides to scrap several historic ships in their inventory, including *Constellation*. A federal law is enacted to enable the Navy to preserve *Constellation* if 75% of the money comes from public donations. Three days after passage of the bill, the *Washington Star* reports that naval architect and maritime historian, Howard Chapelle (1901-1975), says the ship is not the frigate built in Baltimore in 1797. Less than \$100 eventually will be raised to save the ship.

**1949.** Book. Howard Chapelle, *History of the American Sailing Navy* (W.W. Norton, 1949).

Monumental pioneering work is Chapelle's fifth book on maritime subjects including yacht design, boat building, and histories of the Baltimore clipper-type and American sailing ships. Born in 1901, Chapelle is a naval architect and had been in charge of the northeast region of Federal Historic American Merchant Marine Survey in the 1930s. As a colonel in the Army Transportation Corps, he had been assigned to vessel design and research. Later he will be a consultant for the United Nations regarding historical and ethnic water craft. Chapelle specializes in the history of hull design and will become Curator of Water Transportation at the Smithsonian Institution. The publication of *Sailing Navy* is coincidental with Maryland's effort to save the *Constellation* from disposal by the Navy. Public attention is drawn to the three pages in the 558-page book which state that the frigate *Constellation* was destroyed in 1853 and the sloop was a new and different ship. Drawing the wrath of those who believe the ship was built in Baltimore in 1797, the “*Constellation* Question” is launched in print.

**1955.** Time line. *Constellation* arrives in Baltimore cradled in a floating dry dock.

The ship is donated conditionally by the Navy to a committee of citizens organized under the Flag House Association. Without a firm commitment from the National Park Service, the committee expects to moor the ship at Fort McHenry and begin immediate display, with the maintenance costs to be principally borne by the Park Service. The Park Service refuses to commit to the proposal and another berth must be secured. The committee splits into factions. One group favors displaying the ship as-is (as a sloop-of-war) and the other group wants to convert the sloop into a 1797 frigate. The frigate faction predominates but fund-raising efforts always fall short. The committee blames Howard Chapelle and his statements for the ship's financial troubles. The scholarly debate about the age of the ship which follows will not be fought on level ground because the committee will refuse to let anyone see much of the documentation they cite to support the 1797 origin of the vessel. The committee will remain in charge of the ship until about 1995.

**1961.** Article. Charles Scarlett, Jr., Leon Polland, John Schneid, and Donald Stewart, "Yankee Racehorse: The USS *Constellation*," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 56, #1 (Mar 1961): 15-38.

At the time of publication, all four authors are associated with management of the ship in displayed Baltimore. First public exposition of the idea that the frigate was almost a sloop when she entered the Gosport Yard in 1853 and the sloop is only a "modification" of her former configuration. Geoffrey Footner's *Frigate to Sloop* (2002) will repeat the same concept. Generally attempting to silence Howard Chapelle, this article predominantly is based upon forged documents unrecognized by three of the authors. The forger is the fourth author. Leon Polland (1917-1987) is the ship's naval architect and until about 1980 will be the most avid and prolific of the pro-1797 writers. He is not the forger. By 1970 Polland openly will repudiate most of the documentation used in this article.

**1966.** Book. Leon Polland, *Frigate "Constellation:" An Outline of the Present Restoration* (The Author, 1966).

Basically a compilation of his work notes, future plans, and thoughts, Polland is in charge of changing the Baltimore sloop into a resemblance of the frigate of 1797. He introduces here the so-called "1840 Mizzen Mast Survey" drawing he used to reconstruct the stern of the sloop. The drawing will appear again in the book *Constellation Question* (1970) and will be used in *Frigate to Sloop* (2002) as key evidence to prove the sloop is the frigate modified. It will later be exposed as a forgery in "Exhuming *Constellation*" (2003). This volume is privately printed and distributed by the author and is difficult to find outside large maritime libraries.

**1970.** Book. Howard Chapelle and Leon Polland, *The Constellation Question* (Smithsonian Institution, 1970).

Now a Senior Curator of the Smithsonian's National Museum of History and Technology, Chapelle's contribution occupies about 1/3 of the book and Polland's portion is the remainder. For the reader, the book is an editorial disaster. Although the article does not appear in the book, Chapelle attacks "Yankee Racehorse" (1961), exposes one forgery, and questions a number of other "1797" documents. Polland responds curiously by disowning "Yankee Racehorse" and attacking Chapelle. The book's editor affords Polland space to reprint his irrelevant "*Frigate Constellation: An Outline of the Present Restoration*" (1966) but Chapelle is not invited to respond. The plethora of

irrelevant footnotes and pages makes Polland's case appear to have an edge. Reviews of the book amply show that no one except a few specialists understand the two sides - a problem which will be perpetual. The notorious "1840 Mizzen Mast Survey" was first widely published in this book and it will be used as key evidence by Footner's *Frigate to Sloop* (2002). The drawing is a fake.

**1972.** Book review. John Lyman, review of "Constellation *Question*," *American Neptune* 32, #1 (Jan 1972): 71-72.

An esteemed West Coast maritime historian born in 1915, Lyman has a PhD in oceanography. Annoyed that other reviewers fail to see the significance of forgeries in the 1797 case, Lyman sides with Chapelle and questions the veracity of a number of documents used by Polland in his portion of "Constellation *Question*" (1970).

**1975.** Article. John Lyman, "Constellation and Her Rebuilding," *Sea History* 3 (July 1975): 23-28.

A masterful and well-reasoned piece based on the best genuine evidence available at the time. This article introduces the Gosport Navy Yard store and labor records from 1853-55 which will become a standard feature of the argument.

**1975.** Time line. Howard I. Chapelle dies.

**1977.** Time line. John Lyman dies.

**1979.** Article. Evan Randolph, "U.S.S. *Constellation*, 1797 to 1979," *American Neptune* 39, #4 (Oct 1979): 235-55.

Randolph is the central figure in the Society of the Descendants of Commodore Truxtun. Truxtun was the first commanding officer of the frigate *Constellation* and the author is a strong proponent of the 1797 origin of the present ship. This article introduces into the argument the 1853 hull survey drawings and the 1840 hold plan, both will be employed in Footner's *Frigate to Sloop* (2002). Like Footner later, Randolph attempts to pre-date the 1853 survey drawings in order to claim the frigate had a continuous physical existence. Randolph dates them 1829 and Footner will date them 1839. "Exhuming *Constellation*" (2003) will show that the drawings could not have been made before 1851 and the 1853 date is correct. Randolph tries to cipher financially how much of the frigate timber allegedly was transferred to the sloop and arrives at 37%. Footner (2002) will estimate 26%. Neither estimation is based on accurate facts or assumptions.

**1987.** Time line. Leon Polland dies.

**1989.** Article. William M. P. Dunne, "An Inquiry into H.I. Chapelle's Research in Naval

History,” *American Neptune* 49 #1 (Winter 1989): 39-55.

After lying dormant for over a decade, part of this article resurrects the old “*Constellation* Question” and repeats the 1797 position, standard since “Yankee Racehorse” in 1961. Chapelle had died in 1975 followed by Pollard in 1987. The article stridently calls into question Chapelle’s honesty and his research methods. In equally strident terms, Footner’s *Frigate to Sloop* (2002) will repeat most of Dunne’s accusations. Neither Dunne nor Footner indicate any understanding of the relatively unsophisticated state of American maritime history and related archival resources when Chapelle pioneered the field. This article triggers the Navy historical investigation which will result in *Fouled Anchors* (1991).

**1991.** Report. Dana Wegner, *Fouled Anchors: The Constellation Question Answered*, With Appendices by Colan Ratliff and Kevin Lynaugh, Report DTRC 91/CT06, David Taylor Research Center, Bethesda, MD, 1991. Available free on-line at the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Curator of Navy Ship Models web site [http://www.dt.navy.mil/cnsm/faq\\_13.html](http://www.dt.navy.mil/cnsm/faq_13.html) Hard copies may be purchased at the *Constellation* gift shop or through the U.S. National Technical Information Service at (800) 553-6847.

Investigation uses historical, architectural, and artifactual evidence to study the question of identity. Scholars are finally able to examine first-hand the total body of the ship’s former on-board historical files. Navy report exposes wide-spread prior use of forgeries to support 1797 origin of vessel and introduces the 1853 designer’s half model of the sloop as an important part of the puzzle. Cautions scholars against using documents found in specific collections tainted with forgeries. Concludes today’s *Constellation* is a new ship, built to a new design near Norfolk, Virginia between 1853 and 1855. Footner’s *Frigate to Sloop* (2002) will disregard several of the most important contributions in this report. Navy prints and distributes only 200 free hard copies.

**1992.** Article. Evan Randolph, “Fouled Anchors? Foul Blow,” *American Neptune* 52, #2, (Spring 1992): 94-101.

A rebuttal to *Fouled Anchors* (1991). Repeats some of the author’s conjecture previously published in his 1979 article but makes no valid contribution to the discussion. Introduces, but does not show, the mysteriously crude hull section drawing supposedly made by Francis Grice on January 11, 1839. Says the drawing must pre-date 1839 in order to sustain the 1797 origins of today’s sloop. Facing the same problem, Footner’s *Frigate to Sloop* (2002) will employ the drawing and re-date it 1829. The Navy team is skeptical about the authenticity of the drawing in 1992 and continues to doubt. See Wegner, “Query and Response” (1992) and “Exhuming the *Constellation* (2003).

**1992.** Article. Dana Wegner, “An Apple and an Orange: Two *Constellations* at Gosport, 1853-55,” *American Neptune* 52, #2 (Spring 1992): 77-93. Available on-line, courtesy of *The American Neptune*, at the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Curator of Navy Ship Models web site [http://www.dt.navy.mil/cnsm/faq\\_13.html](http://www.dt.navy.mil/cnsm/faq_13.html)

Summarizes *Fouled Anchors* (1991) and adds additional details. Establishes that the frigate did not fully leave the water during her 1812 and 1829 repairs, and underwater lines could not be altered - a fact which will be overlooked in Footner’s *Frigate to Sloop* (2002). Article receives award from National Park Service foundation as best article in American history published in a scholarly journal in 1992.

**1992.** Letter to editor. Dana Wegner, "Query and Response," *American Neptune* 52, #4 (Fall 1992): 262-63. Available on-line, courtesy of *The American Neptune*, at the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Curator of Navy Ship Models web site  
[http://www.dt.navy.mil/cnsm/faq\\_13.html](http://www.dt.navy.mil/cnsm/faq_13.html)

Letter response to Randolph's "Fouled Anchors? Foul Blow" (1992). Questions authenticity of the alleged Grice drawing January 11, 1839.

**1993.** Article. William M. P. Dunne, "Frigate *Constellation* Clearly No More: Or Was She?" *American Neptune* 53, #2 (Spring 1993): 77-97.

Dr. Dunne was hired by the then custodians of the ship to prepare a rebuttal to *Fouled Anchors* (1991). Although Wegner's "Apple and Orange" (1992) has already appeared in the same journal, Dunne attacks *Fouled Anchors* (1991) again. See also, Randolph, "Fouled Anchors? Foul Blow" (1992). *Fouled Anchors* never appeared in *American Neptune* and both Randolph's and Dunne's articles rebut material the reader has never seen. Although lengthy, Dunne's rebuttal to *Fouled Anchors* is largely tangential and makes few advances except to introduce a contemporaneous newspaper article which states the frigate has been destroyed but the sloop contains 8 or 16 timbers from the old ship. Dunne uses various deck dimensions to attempt to show how *Constellation*'s hull changed from frigate to sloop in the years before 1853. Footner's *Frigate to Sloop* (2002) will try the same approach and will likewise fail because the dimensions are not adequately specific, reliable, or consistent.

**1995.** Article. Dana Wegner, "Frigate Strikes Her Colors," *American Neptune* 55, #3 (Summer 1995): 243-58. Available on-line, courtesy of *The American Neptune*, at the Naval Surface Warfare Center, Curator of Navy Ship Models web site  
[http://www.dt.navy.mil/cnsm/faq\\_13.html](http://www.dt.navy.mil/cnsm/faq_13.html)

Response to Dunne's "Frigate *Constellation* Clearly No More" (1993). Wegner cautions against using deck measurements to determine hull shape. Reaffirms that the frigate did not fully leave the water during the 1812 and 1829 repairs, and underwater lines could not be altered. This finding will be overlooked in Footner's *Frigate to Sloop* (2002). While admitting they are unreliable, *Frigate to Sloop* will depend heavily upon deck measurements to make its case.

**1995.** Time line. William M. P. Dunne dies.

**1999.** Article. John D. Barnard, "Last of the Sailing Corvettes," *Naval History* 13, #4 (July/Aug 1999): 22-26

Commendable article about the later years of *Constellation*. Takes the point of view that the present sloop is not physically associated with the frigate. Relates the background of the effort to preserve the ship.

**1999.** Letter to editor. Dana Wegner, *Naval History* 13, #6 (Dec 1999): 6.

Supports Barnard's "Last of the Sailing Corvettes" (1999) and adds supplementary information about the role *Fouled Anchors* (1991) played in preserving the ship. Footner's later depiction in *Frigate to Sloop* (2002) of Navy's role in the reorganization and restoration of the ship beginning in 1995 will disregard this letter.

**2002.** Book. Geoffrey Footner, *USS Constellation: From Frigate to Sloop of War* (Naval Institute, 2002.)

Regarding the origins of the present sloop, the book largely "begs the question" and re-introduces the ideas and evidence used by several authors (above) in previous decades. Lengthy, convoluted, and illogical presentation makes the hypothesis difficult to follow and evaluate. Frequently phrases conjecture as fact. Finds best evidence necessary to build the book's argument is "missing" or "stolen." As an example of historiography or naval architecture, the book is well below par. Adds nothing but confusion to the technical aspects of subject.

**2003.** Article. John D. Barnard, "USS *Constellation*'s Civil War," *American Neptune* 61 #3 (Summer 2001):283-298.

Much-welcomed and refreshing contribution to the Civil War operational history of the sloop *Constellation*. Embraces *Fouled Anchors* (1991) finding that the sloop did not exist before 1853.

**2003.** Article. Dana Wegner, "Exhuming the *Constellation*," *Naval History* 17, #3 (June 2003): 24-30. Also may be found on the Naval Institute web site <http://www.usni.org/NavalHistory/Articles03/NHwegner06.htm>

Critical review of Footner's, *Frigate to Sloop* (2002). Article sketches the book's unwitting use of several forgeries and repeated and inappropriate attempts to re-date several pieces of crucial evidence in order to reach the book's predetermined conclusion. Reaffirms the simple evidence introduced in *Fouled Anchors* (1991) which show that the sloop of 1853 is a new design, independent of the frigate, made of essentially new materials.

**2003.** Electronic article. Dana Wegner, "Commentary on *Frigate to Sloop: The Dog Ate My Documents*," Naval Surface Warfare Center Carderock Division, Curator of Ship Models web site [http://www.dt.navy.mil/cnsm/faq\\_13.html](http://www.dt.navy.mil/cnsm/faq_13.html) (To be posted about May 15, 2003.)

An expanded and more inclusive version of "Exhuming the *Constellation*" (2003). Examines *Frigate to Sloop*'s inappropriate use of a logical fallacy called "circular reasoning" to make its case. Reveals how the book "adjusts" the evidence and the illustrations used show that *Constellation*'s hull lines were altered before 1853, and more.

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The subject of this chronological bibliography is the history of the question surrounding the age of the present sloop *Constellation*. Many other articles and books have been published about the general history of the two ships, but they have not been included here.

- The author welcomes e-mail or correspondence regarding the *Constellation* controversy and the historical evidence establishing the age of the present ship. Please send correspondence to the letterhead address or forward e-mail messages to [WegnerDM@nswccd.navy.mil](mailto:WegnerDM@nswccd.navy.mil).
- The views expressed in this document are the author's and not necessarily those of the Naval Surface Warfare Center or Department of the Navy.

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