

Call her “U. S. Frigate” or “U. S. Ship”? Naming Warships from the War of 1812

Robert Malcomson

Depuis un siècle et demi l'on a pu utiliser le terme “USS” pour identifier un navire de guerre américain, mais ce n'était pas le cas à l'époque de la Guerre de 1812. En fait, les variations dans les titres des différents frégates, vaisseaux, chaloupes et brigs pendant cette période donnent un exemple de la jeunesse de la marine nationale américaine. Cet article analyse en détail la nomenclature utilisée de 1811-16.

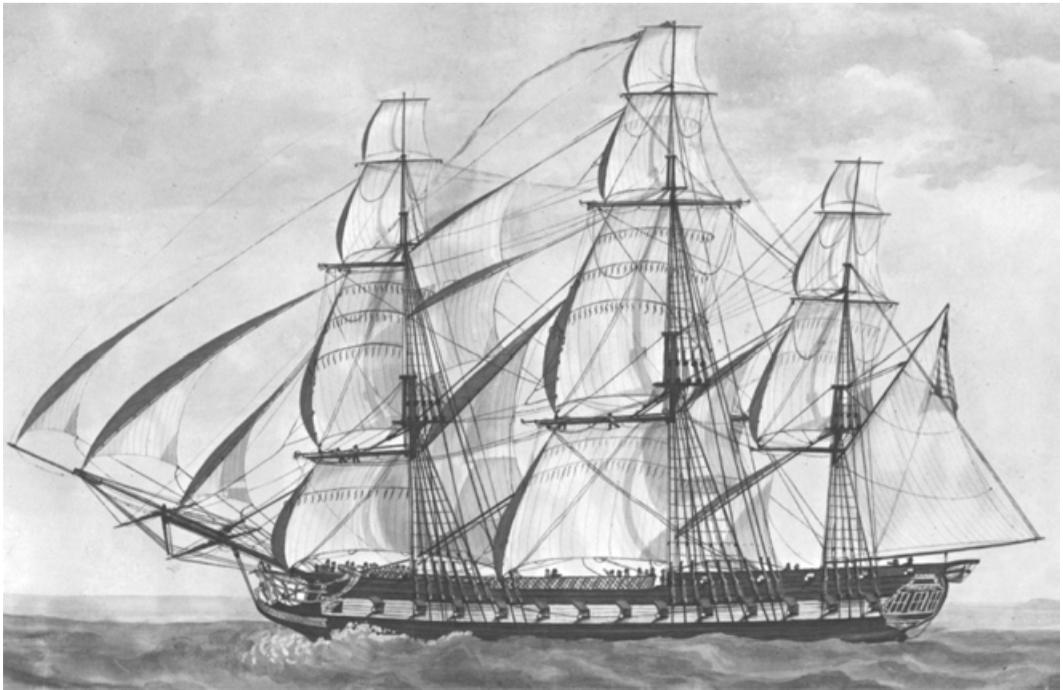
It might have been perfectly normal in the past century and a half to use “the USS” to identify an American warship but not at the time of the War of 1812. In fact, the variations in the titles of frigates, ships, sloops and brigs during this period present an example of how U. S. Navy practices were still in the early stage of development. It is an area where “the historian walks on marshy ground,” as Christopher McKee noted in his classic, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*.¹

The issue of warship titles arose as a surprise to me while I was acting as a manuscript advisor with one of the leading War of 1812 authorities, Donald R. Hickey of Wayne State College in Nebraska. Pursuing our mutual interest in each other’s writing projects, we passed numerous emails back and forth in regards to his popular, new book *Don’t Give Up The Ship: Myths of the War of 1812* published in the USA and Canada in 2006. One of the issues of debate was to use the term “the US Frigate” to identify the *Constitution* and warships like it rather than “the USS *Constitution*” which I was using as I wrote my *Historical Dictionary of the War of 1812* published that same year. We agreed to have differing approaches, but the matter remained with me since it raised the question of what *was* the proper terminology for the U. S. Navy in the age of sail.²

¹ Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U. S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794-1815* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 170. Here McKee was discussing the sets of rules and regulations and the uncertainty about how effective the 1802 set was compared to the 1798 set. Within his study of the development of officers he points out the absence of examinations to select officers for promotion, 275-80 and the impact that Royal Navy practices and literature had, 210-15.

² Donald R. Hickey made use of “U. S. Frigate” in *Don’t Give Up the Ship: Myths of the War of 1812* (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio; University of Illinois Press, 2006), 100-119, etc.,

The answer is not to be found in past or current literature. In general, historians and general writers refer to warships of the period by their names only most of the time, which is the stylistically sensible way of mentioning the vessels repeatedly. Terms such as “the U. S. Frigate *Chesapeake*,” however, are sometimes found.³ More frequently used is the term “USS” in such examples as “HMS *Leopard* fired on USS *Chesapeake*” and “USS *Constitution* - ‘Old Ironsides’ - looking much as she did during her glory



The United States Frigate Essex from a watercolour attributed to Joseph Howard (1780-1857). This is believed to be the only contemporary painting of the ship, built at Salem, MA, 1799.

days.”⁴ As well, and fairly often, there is a mangling of categories and terms as in “the

while “USS,” “U. S. Sloop,” “U. S. Brig” etc. appear in Robert Malcomson, *Historical Dictionary of the War of 1812* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 116, 210, 285.

³ Ira Dye, *The Fatal Cruise of the Argus: Two Captains in the War of 1812* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1994), 56. See also Hickey, *Don't Give Up the Ship*, 100-119. Paul Silverstone, *The Sailing Navy: 1775-1854* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2001), uses “U. S. Frigate *President*” and “U. S. Frigate *Constitution* on p. 28, but “USS *Macedonian* on the same page and “USS *Philadelphia*” on 31. Every one of the books listed here use the names of vessels most of the time.

⁴ The first reference to the use of USS is from Donald L. Canney, *Sailing Warships of the US Navy* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 35; the same term is on 41. The second is from David Curtis Skaggs, *Oliver Hazard Perry: Honor, Courage, and Patriotism in the Early U. S. Navy* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 16. The “USS” form is also found in: Bryan Perrett, *The Real Hornblower: The Life and Times of Admiral Sir James Gordon, GCB* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 97 and 126; Robert Malcomson, *Lords of the Lake: The Naval War on Lake Ontario, 1812-1814*

frigate USS *Essex*” and “the eighteen-gun brig-of-war HMS *Mosquito*.”⁵ So there is no set pattern in the literature for naming the warships, but did patterns exist at the time of the War of 1812?

One way to determine what terms were used is to examine the correspondence sent to and from the U. S. Department of the Navy during the period. These documents, held in a number of series in Record Group 45, the Naval Records Collections, are available on microfilm in the National Archives on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D. C., in libraries and for private purchase.⁶ Many of them are letters with inside and mailing addresses including the basic information such as Isaac Chauncey and his clerks used: “U. S. Ship *General Pike*, Sackets Harbor” and the date.

During the perusal of thousands of documents in the Naval Records, it became obvious that how the warships were ranked at the time influenced their identification. The basic categories, shown in reports published in Volume One of *Naval Affairs* in the *American State Papers*, appear in Table One and show that the 1816 list differed from those of 1811 and 1814, but that the navy department did indicate which vessels it considered frigates, ships, sloops, brigs and schooners.⁷

The question of whether the term “USS” was frequently used during the War of 1812 was clearly answered by the review of the naval correspondence. As Table Two shows, “U. S. S.” was used only 5.3 percent of the time in reference to vessel names of frigates or ships, 13.87 percent for ships or sloops, 14.28 percent for brig-sloops and 3.22 percent for schooners. In other words, it was not a common term.

(Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 1998), 39, 41, 42; Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

⁵ The first reference is from Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America* (London: Belnap Press, 2007), 99. The second is from Claude Berube and John Rodgaard, *A Call to the Sea: Captain Charles Stewart of the USS Constitution* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 77. This is in a chapter entitled “USS Constitution” with numerous applications of “USS.”

⁶ The holdings of the National Archives of the United States used here are: Record Group (hereafter “RG”) 45, Naval Records Collections of the Office of Naval Records and Library, Microform (hereafter “M”) 125, Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Captains, 1805-1861; M147, Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Commanders, 1804-1886; M148, Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Commissioned Officers below the rank of Commander and from Warrant Officers, 1802-1868; M149, Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy to Officers, 1798-1868. The numbers of captains’ letters far exceeded those sent by the other officers, and nearly matched the number of Secretary letters. More than a thousand letters were examined from the categories for each of 1812, 1813, 1814 and 1815. The material reviewed for this article include the captains letters in M125 from 1812 through 1815, held on microfilm at the Gibson Library at Brock University in St. Catharines. Microfilms for those years from M147, M148 and M149 are the personal belongings of the author, purchased at the USNA.

⁷ U. S. Congress, *American State Papers: Naval Affairs* (Washington DC: Gales and Seaton, 1834), vol. 1: 1811, 265; 1814, 307-9; 1816, 379-80.

U. S. Navy Department Categories										
Vessel	Rate	Dec. 1811	Mar. 1814	Jan. 1816	No. of Docs	Name - Titles Used in %				
Frigates, Ships						Frig.	Ship	USS	Only	Other
<i>Constitution</i>	44	frigate	frigate	ship	122	90.1	6.5	2.4	0.8	–
<i>President</i>	44	frigate	frigate	ship	203	88.6	8.3	1.4	1.4	–
<i>United States</i>	44	frigate	frigate	ship	71	47.8	33	18.3	–	–
<i>Guerriere</i>	44	–	frigate	ship	33	57.5	30.3	12.1	–	–
<i>Superior</i>	44	–	–	ship	145	1.3	98	0.6	–	–
<i>Chesapeake</i>	36	frigate	–	–	67	85	1.4	–	13.4	–
<i>Congress</i>	36	frigate	frigate	ship	63	76.1	23.8	–	–	–
<i>Constellation</i>	36	frigate	frigate	ship	97	72.2	7.2	5.1	11.3	–
<i>Adams</i>	36	frigate	corvette	–	47	74.4	10.6	12.7	2	–
<i>Macedonian</i>	36	–	frigate	ship	27	85.1	7.4	–	7.4	–
<i>Java</i>	36	–	frigate	ship	7	14.2	87.8	–	–	–
<i>Essex</i>	32	frigate	frigate	–	81	83.9	9.9	–	6.1	–
<i>Mohawk</i>	32	–	–	ship	1	100	–	–	–	–
Ships, Sloops						Ship	Sloop	USS	Only	Other
<i>John Adams</i>	20	ship	corvette	ship	81	3.7	48.1	27.1	1.2	19.7 corvette
<i>General Pike</i>	24	–	ship	ship	90	98.8	1	–	–	–
<i>Saratoga</i>	24	–	–	ship	31	28	90.3	6.4	3.2	–
<i>Madison</i>	20	–	ship	ship	31	61.2	29	–	9.6	–
<i>Hornet</i>	18	ship	sloop	ship	112	46.4	15.1	35.7	2.6	–
<i>Wasp</i>	18	ship	sloop	ship	20	50	5	45	–	–
<i>Alert</i>	18	–	sloop	ship	47	89.3	4.2	–	6.3	–
<i>Argus</i>	18	–	sloop	–	22	31.8	59.9	4.5	4.5	–
<i>Erie</i>	18	–	sloop	ship	29	58.2	37.9	–	3.4	–
<i>Frolic</i>	18	–	sloop	–	9	55.5	22.2	11.1	11.1	–
<i>Ontario</i>	18	–	sloop	ship	31	61.2	29	–	9.6	–
<i>Peacock</i>	18	–	sloop	ship	54	37	59.2	3.7	–	–
<i>Louisiana</i>	16	–	sloop	ship	7	71.4	–	28.7	–	–
Brigs, Sloops						Sloop	USS	Brig	Only	Other
<i>Eagle</i>	18	–	–	brig	15	–	–	100	–	–
<i>Epervier</i>	18	–	–	brig	3	–	–	100	–	–
<i>Jefferson</i>	18	–	–	brig	6	66	–	33	–	–
<i>Jones</i>	18	–	–	brig	3	–	–	100	–	–
<i>Lawrence</i>	18	–	brig	brig	32	25	50	25	–	–

<i>Niagara</i>	18	–	brig	brig	55	43.6	23.6	32.7	–	–
<i>Oneida</i>	16	brig	brig	brig	32	–	–	96.8	3.1	–
<i>Siren</i>	16	brig	brig	–	13	–	–	92.3	7.7	–
<i>Sylph</i>	16	–	schooner	brig	8	–	–	100	–	–
<i>Rattlesnake</i>	14	–	brig	–	46	–	–	97.8	–	U.S.B., 2.1
<i>Vixen</i>	14	brig	–	–	18	5.5	–	88.8	5.5	–
<i>Nautilus</i>	14	brig	–	–	10	50	–	50	–	–
<i>Enterprise</i>	14	brig	brig	brig	13	–	–	92.3	7.7	–
<i>Viper</i>	10	brig	–	–	6	–	–	86.3	–	U.S.B., 16.7
Schooners						Brig	USS	Schooner	Only	Other
<i>Carolina</i>	14	–	schooner	–	32	–	5.9	91.2	2.9	–
<i>Ariel</i>	4	–	schooner	–	15	–	–	100	–	–
<i>Growler</i>	5	–	schooner	–	9	–	–	100	–	–
<i>Conquest</i>	3	–	schooner	–	2	–	–	100	–	–
<i>Hamilton</i>	6	–	–	–	1	–	–	100	–	–
<i>Governor Tompkins</i>	6	–	schooner	–	1	–	–	100	–	–
<i>Ferret</i>		–	–	–	1	–	–	100	–	–

Table One: Relevant data was only collected for the vessels listed here although there were numerous others in the U. S. Navy during the war. The blank spaces indicate that the vessel had not been launched yet or was captured, destroyed or lost at sea. Percentages were calculated by a comparison between the appearance of a title type and the total number of documents where the vessel’s name was found. For example, the *Carolina* was identified as “U. S. Schooner” 31 times, “U. S. S.” twice and by name only once.⁸

“U. S. Frigate” was the most frequently used term (Table Two - 42.4 percent) for the heavily armed vessels, with variations on “frigate” raising its appearance to nearly 65 percent in the documents. Some of the officers, however, referred to these vessels as “ships” and preferred “U. S. Ship.” Table One shows, for instance, that Chauncey, far exceeding anyone else in this matter, consistently referred to his 44-gun, 1814 flagship as the “U. S. Ship *Superior*.” Stephen Decatur’s preference for forms of “ship” was discovered in his letters written from the frigate *United States*, though less often than Chauncey (whose clerks produced scores of letters) and Oliver Perry tended to refer to the *Java* under construction in Baltimore as the “U. S. Ship.” The secretaries of the navy and their clerks named nearly all the large ships as frigates and introduced a new version (ie., “the U. S. Frigate, the *President*”) which they also applied to other ratings. In addition, certain officers only used the vessel’s name.

⁸ U. S. Congress. *American State Papers: Naval Affairs* (Washington D. C.: Gales and Seaton, 1834), vol. 1: 1811, 265; 1814, 307-9; 1816, 379-80.

Thirteen Frigates, Ships		(continued from previous columns)	
U. S. Frigate	42.40%	Sloop of War	0.62%
United States Frigate	4.47%	Sloop	2.27%
U. S. Frigate, the . . .	4.47%	Name only	3.10%
U. S. F	3.38%	Fourteen Brigs, Sloops	
U. States Frigate	0.91%	U. S. Brig	50.00%
Frigate	9.23%	United States Brig	6.86%
U. S. S.	5.30%	U. States Brig	3.84%
U. S. Ship	23.40%	Brig	3.02%
United States Ship	0.99%	U. S. S.	14.28%
U. States Ship	0.36%	U. S. Sloop	7.41%
Ship	0.27%	United States Sloop	0.54%
Name only	4.84%	U. S. Sloop of War	6.31%
Thirteen Ships, Sloops		Sloop	0.54%
U. S. Ship	53.40%	U. S. Ship	3.29%
United States Ship	7.45%	U. S. Ship, the . . .	0.27%
U. States Ship	2.89%	Name only	3.57%
Ship	1.44%	Seven Schooners	
U. S. S.	13.87%	U. S. S.	3.22%
U. S. Sloop	9.93%	U. S. Schooner	7.14%
United States Sloop	3.10%	United States Schooner	90.32%
U. S. Sloop of War	1.86%		

Table Two: Individual terms used with the different categories of vessels. This table shows the variations in the main terms used to identify the warships. “U. S. S.” is highlighted in the first three groups since it might have applied to one form of the term or the other and to show its frequency.

After the frigates, some form of “U. S.” was the term most consistently used, as in “U. S. Ship *General Pike*” and “U. S. Brig *Rattlesnake*.” Noteworthy for these ratings is that there are considerably fewer documents listing them which is because the senior captains produced a great deal more correspondence than the junior officers did.

The one rating area where the choice of title varies greater than with frigates includes the ships and sloops. Here vessels such as the ship-rigged *Argus* (a replacement for the 1803 brig *Argus* captured in 1813), *Erie* and the *Peacock*, all ordered in 1813, were referred to as sloops almost as often as ships and often by the same officers. The old *John Adams* was called a sloop, the “U. S. S. *John Adams*” and a corvette much more frequently than a ship.

Obviously, although preference existed for certain terms, there was no regulation concerning their use, and officers were free to choose what they preferred. This was seen in Chauncey’s definite preference and in the naming of the brigs. Oliver Perry, Jesse Elliott and Arthur Sinclair varied in addressing the *Lawrence* and *Niagara* as “U. S. Brig”

sometimes, "U. S. Sloop" other times and "U. S. S. *Lawrence*" on occasion.

The critical factor in the use of "sloop" of course depended on the rank of the commanding officer. A brig became a sloop when under command of a master commandant but remained a brig if an officer of lower rank had it. Among the Masters Commandant Perry and Elliott and Captain Sinclair letters, however, brig rather than sloop was used on occasion, the possibility being that their clerks had made those choices.

The one rating for which the term was consistent was the schooner class (i.e., "United States Schooner *Carolina*"), although the frequency of their documents was slight.

An investigation was made to see how the American practice compared with what the British called their warships and the results showed a much great consistency for the latter. The material reviewed involved Royal Navy letters held in the Admiralty records available in Manuscript Group Series 12 at Library and Archives of Canada in Ottawa.⁹ They revealed that some form of the term "ship" was applied nearly 75 percent of the time to any vessel that ranged in rating from a 20-gun, sixth rate, to the largest of the 100+ gun, first rate. Typical of this was Commodore Sir James Yeo's reference to "His Majesty's Ship *Wolfe*" of 22 guns and later to "His Majesty's Ship *Saint Lawrence*" of 104 guns, the term being used on nearly all of his letters and about 50 percent of all letters in total. The name alone of the vessel was the next most common term to appear in addresses (and most often for flagships) while "His Britannic Majesty's Ship" was rarely used.

The work here did not reveal when "USS" became commonplace, but the answer is actually irrelevant for historians dealing with the War of 1812. Referring to influential army officers by the proper ranks and to their regiments and brigades by the names they were using is fully expected among their demanding readership. In the same way, writers need to take notice of the terms preferred by the officers whose warships are subject to their books and articles. Although it is stylistically correct to use warship names alone during the description of naval development and actions, when a vessel is introduced or reappears later at centre stage, the writer should defer to the contemporary practice and call it the "U. S. Frigate *President*" or the "U. S. Ship" *Superior*, taking into consideration what its commander preferred. The term will at least have an authentic ring to it. And authenticity has probably never reached a higher level of expectation in naval history writing.

⁹ The Yeo letters are found in Library and Archives of Canada, Ottawa, Manuscript Group ["MG"] 12, Adm. 1, Admiralty, Secretary's Department, In-Letters, Captain's Letters, Y, 1812-1816, vol. 2736-8. Admiralty documents were also investigated in MG 12, Adm. 1, Admiralty and Secretariat Papers, North America, Admiral Despatches, 1812-14, vol. 502-06. For a further review of such American and British trends, study the correspondence found in William S. Dudley, (vols. 1 and 2), and Michael J. Crawford (vol. 3), eds., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1985-2002).

Editor's Note:

The United States Navy's Naval History and Heritage Command provides the following information about the prefix "USS."

Into the early years of the 20th century there was no fixed form for Navy ship prefixes. Ships were rather haphazardly identified, in correspondence or documents, by their naval type (U.S. Frigate ____), their rig (United States Barque ____), or their function (United States Flag-Ship ____). They might also identify themselves as "the Frigate ____," or, simply, "Ship ____." The term "United States Ship," abbreviated "USS," is seen as early as the late 1790s; it was in frequent, but far from exclusive, use by the last half of the 19th century.

In 1907 President Theodore Roosevelt issued an executive order that established the present usage:

In order that there shall be uniformity in the matter of designating naval vessels, it is hereby directed that the official designation of vessels of war, and other vessels of the Navy of the United States, shall be the name of such vessel, preceded by the words, United States Ship, or the letters U.S.S., and by no other words or letters.

Executive Order 549, 8 January 1907.

The prefix "USS," meaning "United States Ship," is used in official documents to identify a commissioned ship of the Navy. It applies to a ship while she is in commission. Before commissioning, or after decommissioning, she is referred to by name, with no prefix.