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Geoffrey M. Footner, ***USS CONSTELLATION – From Frigate to Sloop of War,***  
Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 2002, 380 pp, illustrations, plans, notes,  
bibliography, index: cloth.

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If hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, little wonder the emotions stirred among supporters when her very identity is impugned, and more especially when the lady in question is a warship of national historic interest. Such has been the case with the *Constellation Controversy*, a half-century protracted debate concerning whether the USS Constellation in Baltimore Harbour is the original frigate built in 1793 (and later rebuilt as a razee-sloop), or whether it is a distinctly new ship, built in 1853 at the same time and place as the breaking up of the former.

This new contribution to the debate, by Geoffrey M. Footner, aims to favourably close the case of the ship *Constellation*'s provenance and establish her significance as America's oldest surviving warship. The book addresses the technical and operational history of the ship at a number of different levels, both in her own right and placed in the context of the development of the constructive, administrative and operational practices of the day. The story is replete with details of the timber management and accounting practices of the early naval shipyards; of the detailed design approval and amendment practices; and of the development of Congressional Acts governing the appropriation of funds for shipbuilding and repair. The ship's operational history is covered in some considerable detail as well, providing many fascinating insights into the gradual development of a professional navy ethos, both administratively and operationally. In the description of the impact of commanding officers' personalities and personal ambitions

on the variable fortunes of *Constellation*, it is clear the freebooting privateer spirit persisted well into the post-revolutionary navy; unapproved transport of specie for personal profit seems to have been a common command pre-occupation. All of this depicts a rich and complex tableau against which to attempt to fathom the continuity of the thread of ship identity through her first 60 years.

What is clear is that the ship that left the yard after the purported ‘rebuild’ of 1853 was different in form from the one launched in 1797, being some 12 feet longer, and beamier with different section shapes. The transformation from one to the other, traced through successive rebuilds and modifications of 1812, 1829, 1839 and (ostensibly) 1853, is a intricate tale of the interaction between naval procurement policies, development of operational and design requirements, and the perennial struggle to stay ahead of the damage and decay that the environment wreaks on a ship’s fabric (be it wooden or otherwise). This by itself would have been a sufficiently interesting and worthy subject without the associated controversy.

The constant brooding presence of the controversy, like the spectre at the feast, somewhat distracts from the story, and begs the question – what constitutes the essential value of a ‘historic’ artifact: absolute age; epitome of a significant design development; association with pivotal historic events and or persons? Furthermore, in the case of a wooden warship subjected to numerous significant rebuilds and modifications, how much change can be accepted while still asserting the continuity of identity? The trail in this case is sufficiently involved to question the very notion of uniqueness of a ship’s identity. Is a ship’s identity recognized as distinct from another by virtue of exceeding some degree of form change and proportion of new material? Or, all that being the same, is she only a different ship by virtue of formal appropriations documentation recognizing her as such?

Ultimately, the controversy has the overtones of a theological dispute between rival heresies; indeed the author refers to the principal opposing views as the ‘Chapelle’s rogue program’ (fn 44, p292) and the ‘two-*Constellation* dogma’ (fn 18, p329), with the implication of willful, if not malicious opposition and victimization. In his acknowledgements, Footner concedes that this controversy has mortally wounded better

maritime writers than he, and he has gone to great lengths to reference his sources and amplify his arguments: the book's 345 pages of text includes 74 pages of notes, many of which are detailed but somewhat convoluted rebuttals of the opposition's points. As with many rival theologies, the balance of conviction on this one may inevitably be reduced to a matter of individual belief: for those who believe, no further explanation will be necessary; for those who disbelieve, none will be sufficient. For those others who are agnostic on the issue, Footner's book serves as persuasive indication that procurement of wooden warships 150 years ago was, relatively speaking, no less complex and political than that of steel ones today. As a read, the book would have benefited from a more rigorous editing to more effectively encapsulate and objectively evaluate the opposing arguments on the controversy itself.



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