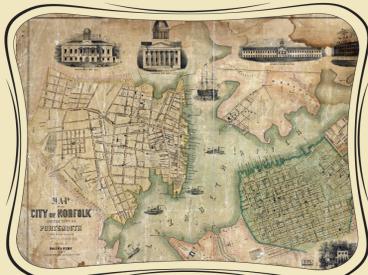


Our Flag Was Still There

United States – East Coast VIRGINIA NORFOLK HARBOR AND ELIZABETH RIVER



2012-2015
"Our Flag Was Still There"



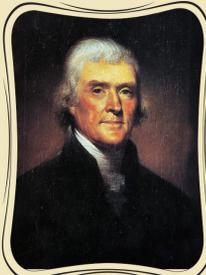
Map of the City of Norfolk and the Town of Portsmouth, published by Rolin and Leily, 1851. (Library of Congress)



USS President and HMS Little Belt clash off the Virginia capes on the night of May 16, 1811. (The Mariners' Museum, Newport News, VA)

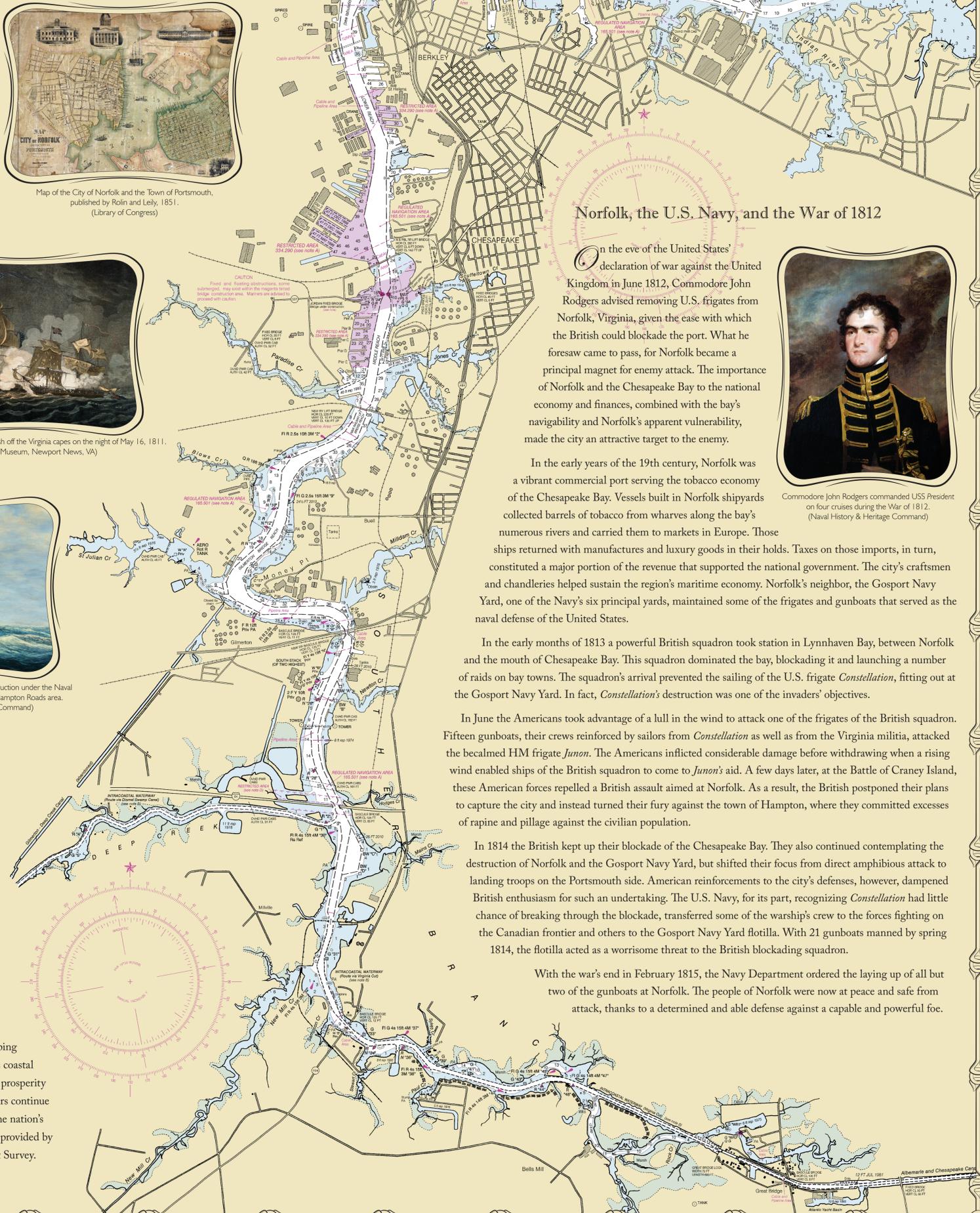


USS Constellation was one of six frigates authorized for construction under the Naval Act of 1794. In January 1813, she was dispatched to the Hampton Roads area. (Navy Art Collection, Naval History & Heritage Command)



President Thomas Jefferson. (Library of Congress)

President Thomas Jefferson signed legislation establishing the U.S. Coast Survey in 1807, tasking it with creating charts of the nation's coastal waters so America's young shipping industry could thrive. Today, America's coastal waters remain as central to the nation's prosperity as they were 200 years ago, and mariners continue to trust the accuracy and precision of the nation's navigational charts, still provided by NOAA's Office of Coast Survey.



Norfolk, the U.S. Navy, and the War of 1812

On the eve of the United States' declaration of war against the United Kingdom in June 1812, Commodore John Rodgers advised removing U.S. frigates from Norfolk, Virginia, given the ease with which the British could blockade the port. What he foresaw came to pass, for Norfolk became a principal magnet for enemy attack. The importance of Norfolk and the Chesapeake Bay to the national economy and finances, combined with the bay's navigability and Norfolk's apparent vulnerability, made the city an attractive target to the enemy.



Commodore John Rodgers commanded USS President on four cruises during the War of 1812. (Naval History & Heritage Command)

In the early years of the 19th century, Norfolk was a vibrant commercial port serving the tobacco economy of the Chesapeake Bay. Vessels built in Norfolk shipyards collected barrels of tobacco from wharves along the bay's numerous rivers and carried them to markets in Europe. Those ships returned with manufactures and luxury goods in their holds. Taxes on those imports, in turn, constituted a major portion of the revenue that supported the national government. The city's craftsmen and chandleries helped sustain the region's maritime economy. Norfolk's neighbor, the Gosport Navy Yard, one of the Navy's six principal yards, maintained some of the frigates and gunboats that served as the naval defense of the United States.

In the early months of 1813 a powerful British squadron took station in Lynnhaven Bay, between Norfolk and the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. This squadron dominated the bay, blockading it and launching a number of raids on bay towns. The squadron's arrival prevented the sailing of the U.S. frigate *Constellation*, fitting out at the Gosport Navy Yard. In fact, *Constellation's* destruction was one of the invaders' objectives.

In June the Americans took advantage of a lull in the wind to attack one of the frigates of the British squadron. Fifteen gunboats, their crews reinforced by sailors from *Constellation* as well as from the Virginia militia, attacked the becalmed HM frigate *Junon*. The Americans inflicted considerable damage before withdrawing when a rising wind enabled ships of the British squadron to come to *Junon's* aid. A few days later, at the Battle of Craney Island, these American forces repelled a British assault aimed at Norfolk. As a result, the British postponed their plans to capture the city and instead turned their fury against the town of Hampton, where they committed excesses of rapine and pillage against the civilian population.

In 1814 the British kept up their blockade of the Chesapeake Bay. They also continued contemplating the destruction of Norfolk and the Gosport Navy Yard, but shifted their focus from direct amphibious attack to landing troops on the Portsmouth side. American reinforcements to the city's defenses, however, dampened British enthusiasm for such an undertaking. The U.S. Navy, for its part, recognizing *Constellation* had little chance of breaking through the blockade, transferred some of the warship's crew to the forces fighting on the Canadian frontier and others to the Gosport Navy Yard flotilla. With 21 gunboats manned by spring 1814, the flotilla acted as a worrisome threat to the British blockading squadron.

With the war's end in February 1815, the Navy Department ordered the laying up of all but two of the gunboats at Norfolk. The people of Norfolk were now at peace and safe from attack, thanks to a determined and able defense against a capable and powerful foe.