

# PRESENTATION PAIR OF NORTH PISTOLS FOR CAPTAIN ISAAC HULL

By Ken Thomsen



During his annual address to Congress on December 3, 1793, George Washington warned of, “the necessity of being ready for war in order to secure peace.” On January 2, 1794 the House of Representatives resolved that a Naval force to protect American shipping should be created.

On March 27, 1794 George Washington signed ‘an Act’ to provide Naval armament. The Act provided for six frigates to be purchased or constructed within the next three years, one of the six was the frigate USS Constitution, which was launched on October 21, 1797 and named by George Washington.

Although impressment of American sailors by the British was one of the sparks that ignited the war of 1812, New England with its lucrative ports was not in favor of going to war. On June 1, 1812 President James Madison sent a list of grievances to Congress. It included American sailor impressment, irregular blockades, violation of territorial waters and illegal restrictions on neutral trade. Over all objections, Congress declared war June 18, 1812 on Great Britain.

Isaac Hull had assumed command of the Constitution June of 1810. In January of 1812, after spending the better part of the year on a diplomatic mission to Europe, the Constitution returned to

the Chesapeake for a much-needed bottom cleaning and a general overhaul. While this work was being accomplished, Hull made many improvements that he felt would increase the ship’s speed and handling ability. These improvements would prove their value in the months to come. On July 5, 1812 the newly outfitted and armed Constitution left Alexandria, Virginia for New York to join Commodore John Roger’s squadron. On July 15, off the coast of Egg Harbor, N.J., Hull encountered a British squadron under the command of Captain Philip Vere Broke. The squadron consisted of Vere Broke’s flagship frigate *HMS Shannon* (38 guns), third rate ship of the line, *HMS Africa* (64 guns), and frigates *HMS Belvedera* (36 guns), *HMS Guerriere* (38 guns), and *HMS Aeolus* (32 guns).

Hull had been cautioned not to engage a hostile ship unless there was a reasonable prospect of success. This situation most certainly did not apply. The British fleet pursued the Constitution relentlessly in light air for three days trying to get within cannon range. Hull brought his skill and experience to bear using to his

advantage every technique he could think of including wetting sails and jettisoning provisions, water, and supplies to lighten the ship. He lowered boats to be manned by oars to tow the ship and when they reached water shallow enough, he employed kedging anchors. Although these anchors were smaller than the ship's main anchors, they still weighed four to seven hundred pounds apiece. One was hauled forward in a small boat to be dropped to the bottom. The windlass was then employed to pull the ship forward. As the first one was being retrieved, a second would be rowed forward and dropped, so the motion became continuous. This was no small feat, not only was handling the anchors cumbersome, but the weight of their heavy chain added to the difficulty. As a squall approached on the third day, Hull ordered his sails furled. The British observing this, thought it was being done in response to his local weather knowledge and they followed suit. To Hull's delight, as soon as the enemy's vision was reduced in the squall, he ordered all sails set and sailed off free of the pursuing squadron. Although cannon shots had been exchanged during the chase, range was never close enough to do any damage.



Figure 1. Captain Isaac Hull (1773-1843) by Orlando S. Lagman. US Navy, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

Following this chance encounter and fearing a blockade of New York, Hull made the decision to alter his course and sail to Boston to reprovision. He arrived on July 27. On August 1, without formal orders and believing a frigate in port served no use to his country, Hull weighed anchor and sailed for the Gulf of St. Lawrence with the hope of interrupting British shipping. As a result of her refit, Constitution now carried 55 guns and performed well. Constitution sailed eastward and on August 19, 1812, off the banks of Newfoundland, the lone British frigate HMS Guerriere, which had been part of their Vere Broke's squadron, was spotted. The Guerriere was under the command of Captain James Richard Dacres. As the Guerriere got within a mile of the Constitution, she hoisted her colors and a fire fight ensued. The following quote was taken from the personal papers of Isaac Hull<sup>1</sup>

*"...after a period of maneuvering during which the English ship kept up an active, though ineffective fire, the Constitution delivered her first broadside at about 6:00 in the afternoon, within pistol-shot. Fifteen minutes later the Guerriere's mizzen-mast went over the side, in another quarter of an hour the main mast went by the board, and about the same time the foremast also fell. The British frigate then surrendered, a complete wreck."*

The engagement was a testament to Hull's maneuvering skills.



Figure 2. Chase of the Constitution July 1812, painting by Anton Otto Fischer, Courtesy of the US Navy Art Collection, Washington, D.C. Gift of Katrins S. Fischer. U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command Photograph. Catalog number NH 85542-KN

The Constitution's thick hull consisted of white oak planking over live oak frames. This construction proved resistant to the enemy's 18 lb. cannon balls. During the engagement, an astonished sailor was heard exclaiming? "...Huzza! her sides are made of iron! See where the shots fell out!" Following this engagement, the ship would be forever known as "old ironsides."



Figure 3. USS Constitution vs. HMS Guerriere, by Michele Felice Corne' (1752-1845), Wikimedia.org, public domain

The significance of this event was profound. Tyrone Martin, the author of *A Most Fortunate Ship*<sup>2</sup>, clearly defines the importance:

*"...the declaration of war was unpopular in several regions of the country, but particularly in New England. It was thought that nothing good could come of it. Trade would be interrupted, insurance rates rise, and ships lost through destruction or capture. At sea, the Royal Navy had been well-nigh invincible in nearly two decades against the might of Napoleon."*



Figure 4. The top jaw screw is broken and the top jaw missing

*The miniscule United States Navy (seventeen units) would be swallowed whole – almost without notice. The nautical negativism was reinforced on land. On 16 August, after some indecisive maneuvering, the American forces at Detroit had been surrendered without a fight to an inferior force of British and Indian allies. This news had only recently become known in Boston, just long enough to depress morale further. Ironically, the American general involved was William Hull, Isaac’s uncle.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the stage was set and the nation ready – craving for good news. The Constitution’s victory over the Guerriere was all that. The fight had been short and decisive. Guerriere had been destroyed with expedition and with minimal human loss and ship damage. The mighty Royal Navy had been humbled by an upstart. A Son of Liberty had again tweaked George’s royal nose. For Hull and his crew, the weeks to follow would be filled with adulation and celebration. Newspapers and magazines published reams on the subject from every angle imaginable. Plays would be written and songs sung. Congress would give Hull a gold medal and his officers silver ones. For a brief time New England and the nation would be united in the war effort.”*

When news of Guerriere’s capture and sinking reached England, the London Times reported this interesting historical perspective to the event<sup>4</sup>:

*“...It is not merely that an English frigate has been taken after, what we are free to confess, may be called a brave resistance, but that it is taken by a new enemy, an enemy unaccustomed to such triumphs, and likely to be rendered insolent and confident by them. He must be a weak politician who does not see how important the first triumph is in giving a tone and character to the war. Never before in the history of the world did an English frigate strike to an American.”*

It was with this knowledge and adoration that the state of Connecticut chose to honor Hull, one of its native sons for his service to the state and nation.

In 1817 the General Assembly of Connecticut passed a resolution authorizing then Governor Oliver Wolcott to procure the manufacture of “...an elegant sword and a pair of pistols, both mounted with gold and suitable inscriptions and manufactured in the state...”<sup>5</sup> These were to be presented to Commodore Isaac

Hull in recognition of “his virtues, gallantry and naval skill”. Governor Wolcott informed by letter Eli Whitney, Nathan Starr and Simeon North of the wishes of the General Assembly. The letter concludes:

*“the resolve of the Assembly requires that the articles to be presented should be manufactured in this state, I am therefore very anxious that they should be so fabricated, as in point of grace, beauty, and utility, not to be inferior, and if possible, superior to any similar articles that have been presented in any part of our country. This object which will be credible to our Artist, will I trust, be obtained by the cooperation that I now respectfully solicit.”*<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, North would be chosen to make the pistols and Starr the sword. Although much has been written on the subject of Simeon North, the understanding of how these pistols came about gives new insight into the man, his sense of pride, and patriotism to his country.

Simeon North had received his first military pistol contract in 1799 and together with his brother-in-law, Elisha Cheney, successfully executed the new nation’s first military contract for 500

pistols. North went on to successfully obtain and complete pistol contracts in 1800, 1808, 1810, 1813, 1816, 1819 and 1826. North built a new factory in Middletown, Conn. after he received the 1813 contract. It had become a centerpiece of modern manufacturing. The factory had been visited by politicians and dignitaries from around the world. North received accolades for the equipment and procedures he designed.

Simeon North had established himself as a patriot, machinist, inventor, businessman and a man of an even temperament and character whose word was his bond. He believed anything he devised, developed or produced should be available for the good of the country, therefore no patents were ever taken out under Simeon North’s name. Many years ago, while reading Catharine North’s book *The History of Berlin Connecticut*<sup>6</sup>, I happened across a passage regarding the North family. She stated that at the close of the War of 1812 Simeon North was commissioned by the state of Connecticut to make a two pairs of gold mounted pistols to be presented as a testimonial to Captain Isaac Hull of the frigate *Constitution* and Commodore Mc Donough who captured, on Lake Champlain, the English squadron under Commodore Downie.



Figure 5. The engraving on the gold side plate depicts the USS Constitution’s escape from the British squadron off New Jersey.



Figure 6. Voted by the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut to their fellow citizen Captain Isaac Hull



Figure 7. The detail of the gold castings is evidence of superior craftsmanship.



Figure 8. The stock is burl black walnut.

*“Mr. North had so much pride in the making of those pistols that he sent to England and brought over Peter Ashton, a skilled artisan, to superintend the work.”*

Possessing more than a passing knowledge of materials and machine operation myself, the question occurred to me why in 1818 would a gunsmith, as accomplished and well respected as North was, feel the need to send to England for someone to supervise the work on two pairs of pistols? This started a two-and -a-half year quest to find and photograph them. After having the opportunity to examine the pistols myself, the answer to this question became obvious.

When Peter Ashton arrived in the United States he was accompanied by his wife, Elizabeth, his sons Peter H. and William and his daughter Mary. Peter was 35 years old. When he entered the United States, he declared his destination was Middletown, Conn. Peter was born in England July 22, 1785. He moved to London and worked there as a gunsmith before emigrating to the United States. In 1821 he renounced his allegiance to the crown. We know Peter Ashton lived and died in Middletown, Conn. There is a monument to Ashton and the family in the New Farms Cemetery in Middletown.

When professor Trowbridge wrote his paper on the manufacture of interchangeable parts in 1880<sup>7</sup>, he credited Peter Ashton with using a method of straightening gun barrels at North’s plant in the 1830’s by shade, a method that Ashton had learned in England. Therefore, we know he was still in North’s employ at that time. This is important to our understanding how the so-called North dueling pistols which were to follow, came to be made in the likeness of the Hull and McDonough pistols.

Simeon North had a right to be flattered by the commission given to him by the legislature. He obviously understood the importance of the pistols he was about to create. Not only was this a chance to honor a man who had become a national hero, but the state of Connecticut was prepared to pay \$1,000.00 for the pistols at a time when North’s military pistols were selling for \$8.00 each. The pair of pistols for Hull were completed and paid for in 1820. A reporter for ‘The New Haven Herald’ made the following observation on June 6, 1820:

*“We have seen the sword and pistols, which, agreeably to a resolve of the Legislature of this state, are to be presented to our gallant countryman Commodore Isaac Hull, as testimonial*

*of the high respect which the citizens of his native State entertain for his valor and accomplishments as a Naval officer. The workmanship of these weapons reflect credit not only on the ingenious artist who made them, but on the country in which they were produced. They are the most elegant specimen of domestic manufacture that we ever saw.”<sup>8</sup>*

One year later the state legislature ordered a second pair of pistols to be made in the same style but with different embellishments for Commodore McDonough who had defeated the British fleet in the Battle of Lake Champlain. These pistols were also accompanied by a gold hilted sword made by Starr. The present location of the McDonough pistols was relatively easy to identify. They are located in a storeroom of the nation’s attic, also known as the Smithsonian Museum (accession number: Pistols, 94639, 99-4493). The Hull pistols were considerably more difficult to find. When Commodore Hull passed away, his will provided that the pistol and sword be left to a specific museum in Washington. By the advent of his death, the museum detailed in the will had closed. The pistols and swords then became his wife’s property. Upon his wife’s death they passed to a named relative in a life estate and have continued to be held and maintained by the family. Since their creation they have only been in the public arena for brief periods of time. After two and a half years, which included many letters, phone calls and inquiries, I located the pistols, which were on loan to the Museum of the Constitution in Boston. After contacting the Museum and explaining my interest, the owner was contacted, my interest stated in writing and permission was granted by the owner for me to access the pistols.. These pistols proved not only to be magnificent works of art but truly the finest American flintlock pistols I have ever had the privilege of examining. They proved to be a gift befitting an American hero.

Following what might be called the most important single ship action of the War of 1812, Hull returned to Boston a hero.

*“Great was the rejoicing in Boston when the victorious frigate sailed up the harbor. On Monday morning August 31, the Constitution came up to town and was welcomed and honored by a federal salute from the Washington Artillery under Captain Harris and by the hearty, unanimous, and repeated cheers of the citizens on the wharves, the shipping and the housetops.”<sup>9</sup>*



Figure 9. The ramrod pipe



Figure 10. The trigger guard

A few days later a dinner was given in Hull's honor at Faneuil Hall. The streets and shipping were decorated with bunting and the Captain was escorted to the Hall by a procession of five hundred citizens.

The adulation he felt on arriving was tempered by learning his brother had passed away in his absence. Following a large celebratory dinner that had been planned for him, Hull requested a leave and a position ashore from Commodore Bainbridge. He explained to Commodore Bainbridge that he needed time to grieve, care for his brother's family and settle his brother's estate. Hull left the *Constitution* and a disappointed crew. Command of the ship was given over to Commodore Bainbridge who had been seeking a sea-going combat command. Hull took over command of the Boston Navy Yard and remained there until Bainbridge returned following a five-month tour of duty. Following the return of Bainbridge, Hull was given command of the Portsmouth Navy Yard in Maine for the remainder of the war. There he was charged with improving fortifications and supervising the fitting out of two vessels. He then served on the Board of Navy Commissioners, following which he commanded the Boston Navy Yard and Washington Navy Yard. In 1838 while under command of the *USS Ohio*, the flagship of the European squadron, Hull took responsibility for the Mediterranean station. He remained there until the *Ohio* sailed from Gibraltar Bay on June 5, 1841. After an uneventful passage, she dropped anchor in Boston on the 17th of July, 1841. On July 27 Hull's ship flag was hauled down from a mast for the last time. He took an extended leave and after six months his health began to deteriorate. A year and a half later, Hull passed away at age 69, a national hero.

These pistols embody a testament to Hull's service and the gratitude of his state and nation.

NOTE: This pair of pistols was selected to be presented with the fifth National Treasure Award by the Awards Committee of the NRA in 2020 at the Baltimore Antique Arms Show. Due to cancellation of the show, we believe the ceremony will take place at the 2022 show.



Figure 11. The contrast of the gold and black walnut is striking



Figure 12. The butt is a work of art, a highly detailed gold casting



Figure 13. Believed to depict the resulting explosion on the *HMS Guerriere* when the fires set after defeat reached the ship's magazine. Note the checkering.

## References:

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## End Notes:

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2. Martin, Tyrone G., *A Most Fortunate Ship*. Naval Institute Press, 2003
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4. *The London Times*, August 1812
5. North, S. N. D. and North, Ralph H. *Simeon North, First Official Maker of the Unites States*, Pp. 194. Rumford Press, 1913
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9. *Columbia Sentinel*, Sept 2, 1812

