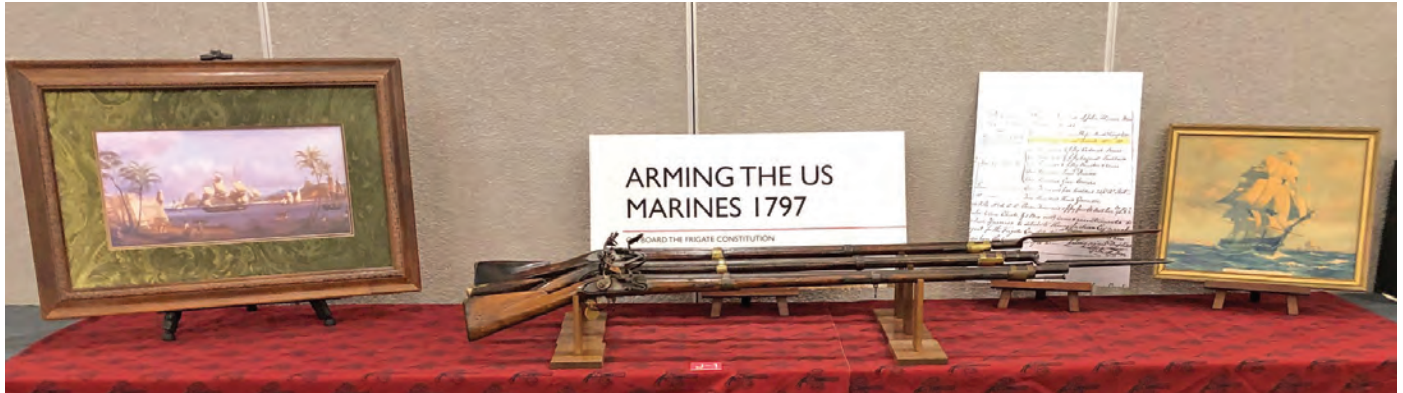


# ARMING THE U.S. MARINES 1797

by: Mark Rentschler and Peter A. Schmidt



This article and recent display of muskets will provide new research and original documentation on the first muskets issued to the United States Marines on board the new Frigate *Constitution* in 1797 and 1798. The muskets displayed by the authors in Mobile, Alabama represent the first known issue of muskets to the Marines after the nation had adopted the new constitution.



It is common knowledge that brass mounted French Marine muskets were included with the iron mounted land pattern infantry muskets shipped to the Colonies from France during the American Revolution. It may be safe to assume that some of these muskets were issued out during the war as U.S. marked specimens are known to exist. It is believed that 15,500 were provided to the colonies between 1779 and 1783.<sup>1</sup> One of the rarest of these brass mounted muskets encountered today is the French Model 1766 Marine Musket (Figure 1). This model was short lived, as it was replaced quickly by the improved Model 1777 Marine Musket starting in mid-1778.<sup>1</sup> This made the earlier model obsolete and therefore ideal to send to the colonies to further the support of France's new ally in North America. Surviving specimens of the Model 1766 Marine Musket indicate that it was produced primarily at St. Etienne and Maubeuge. There are a number of distinguishing characteristics of this model which we will review here.

It is similar in appearance and configuration to the French 1766 infantry musket except brass replaces the iron furniture with the exception of the middle band (Figure 2). The butt plate, side plate, trigger guard and front and rear bands are all made of brass. Each of these components is also marked with a clear inspection mark, a crown over B, from the French armory. The screws are iron as are the band springs and sling swivels. Obviously, brass is more suited to withstand the corrosive forces while the Marines were at sea on board ships but the strength needed for the sling swivels caused those to remain iron. Specimens have a 44.5" barrel length. Another difference is the location of the bayonet stud, which is

two inches from the muzzle on the top of the barrel. This is different from the infantry version which is normally only one inch, muzzle to stud. Both are located on top of the barrel. The lock is a typical French Musket flintlock with the curled toe frizzen, though one of the frizzens was relined. The authors three examples were produced at Maubeuge.

At the conclusion of the American Revolution, a small number of these muskets remained in stores after the fighting stopped. An inventory of the Philadelphia Depot of Class 7 stores dated June 1, 1795 shows there were 100 French Brass Mounted Muskets in store and 175 of the same with bayonets for a total of 275 French Brass Mounted Muskets.<sup>2</sup>

Generally speaking, when viewing early inventories of muskets at the Philadelphia Depot, it is known that there were two types of Brass Mounted Muskets in store. The group that we are concerned with are the French Model 1766 Brass banded muskets that had been in storage since the Revolutionary War and these must be separated from the larger quantities of British pinned fastened brass mounted muskets. It is known that the British pinned fastened muskets along with other large bore foreign muskets were sent to the states when requesting to buy arms.

The first recorded document relating to refurbishing these muskets is dated July 11, 1794, when John Nicholson Jr. submitted the following offer to clean, repair, harden the Locks and provide bayonets so they could be issued.<sup>3</sup> Since there is no mention of stamping US on the muskets, it is believed that the US markings were no longer being applied at this time.



Figure 1. French Model 1766 Marine Musket.

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Figure 2. The Maubeuge lock and the brass furniture of the musket except the middle band which remained iron. Note the crown over B French arsenal mark on the front and rear brass bands, butt plate, side plate and trigger guard. These marks are present on each of the three muskets.

*Proposals for cleaning and repairing the bras mounted Muskets & bayonets & putting them in Complete order Viz*

*Cleaning a musket – hardening the Lock with all other repairs----- “5.”*  
*New bayonets, the old ones are to be taken away----- “7.”*  
*New Steel Ramrods – hardening 7 Tempered in best manner----- “3.6”*  
*Fitting the new bayonet----- “1.3”*  
16. 9

*If my Proposals are the Lowest I would wish for a part of the Employ.*

*I am Sir, Your humble Servant*  
*John Nicholson Junior*

Further documentation of the work being done has not been located, however the work must have been completed and the arms placed into serviceable condition because the next correspondence implies the muskets were ready for issue when the following order was given.<sup>4</sup>

*War Office July 10, 1797*

*To Mr. John Harris,*

*Be pleased to deliver Mr. Rodgers, for transportation to Boston for the Frigate Constitution, Five Tons – Sheet Lead.*

*One hundred & fifty brass mounted Muskets with Bayonets, with accoutrements complete.*

*Two hundred Hand Grenades.*

*One Thousand 24 pound shot.*

*James McHenry*  
*Samuel Hodgdon*

Since the Navy Department was not yet established as its own Department until the Act of April 30, 1798; it was the duty of the War Department to supply all of the arms and equipment to the Frigate *Constitution* until at least that point in time. This may account for some of the confusion caused by the lack of detailed descriptions regarding these muskets.

In trying to clarify our understanding, one question remains: were the Marines issued different muskets than the Navy for use onboard the new frigates? The following letter is the first the authors have seen that is specific in calling these Brass Mounted Muskets of French origin (Figure 3).<sup>5</sup> The authors would like to thank fellow American Society of Arms Collectors (ASAC) member Fred Gaede for providing this vital letter to us from the Jim Hutchinson papers in his possession.

*Philada July 12, 1797. Received of John Harris, Store Keeper of Military Supplies (to wit)----*

*US*  
*6 Arms Chests No. 1-6*  
*Frigate Constitution.*

*One hundred new Ship Musks Complete.*  
*Fifty Brass Mount French “ “ .*

*Box No. 7 “ “*

*One hundred & fifty Cartouch Boxes.*  
*One hundred & fifty bayonet Scabbards.*  
*One hundred & fifty Brushes & Wires.*  
*One hundred & fifty Screw Drivers.*  
*One hundred & fifty Gun Worms.*

*Loose-----One Thousand five hundred 24 Pd Shot.*

*“ -----Two hundred Hand Grenades.*

*16 Rolls -----Eleven Thousand & fifty four Lbs. Sheet Lead C/98.2.2:*

*Also 6 Arms Chests & 1 Box Containing Arms & accoutrements & which I promise to deliver to Henry Jackson Esqr, naval agent for the Frigate Constitution at Boston and agreeable to an Order from the War Office of 10 Instant. Having signed Duplicates*

*Peter Coffin*

The sentence in the letter above the “Fifty Brass Mounted French Musks complete” is detailed enough to understand there is a difference from the “One hundred new ship Muskets complete” on the line above. That leaves us a clue that there was some differ-

ence between ship’s muskets and the Marine muskets. The order for “One hundred & fifty Cartouch Boxes” however confirms that both Ship’s and Marine’s muskets were of the same caliber. This leaves out the British .75 caliber muskets. The difference could

Philad<sup>a</sup> July 12<sup>th</sup> 1797. Received of John Harris, Store  
 Keeper of Military Supplies (to wit) —

100 Allum Chests N <sup>o</sup> 1 & 6 Frigate Constitution	{ One hundred new Ships Muskets (Complete), Fifty Brass Mount French et. et.
2 Box N <sup>o</sup> 7. et. et.	{ One hundred & fifty Cartouch Boxes One hundred & fifty bayonet Scabbards One hundred & fifty Brushes & Wires One hundred Screw Drivers, One hundred Gun Wornes
Loose ————	One Thousand five hundred 24 <sup>lb</sup> R <sup>o</sup> Shot —
et ————	Two Hundred Hand Grenades,
16 Rolls N <sup>o</sup> 1 & 6 et. et.	Eleven Thousand & fifty four lb Shot Lead. 98. 2. 2.

also 40 Arm Chests, 1/2 Box cont<sup>g</sup> Arms & accoutrements &  
 which I promise to deliver to Henry Jackson Esq naval  
 agent for the Frigate Constitution, <sup>at Boston</sup> and agreeable to an  
 order from the War Office of 10<sup>th</sup> M<sup>o</sup> ———— having signed Duplicate  
Peter Coffin

Figure 3. The key evidence from a letter dated July 12, 1797 illustrating receipt of fifty Brass Mounted French Muskets complete as received for the Frigate Constitution.

just be in the word “new” because during this period, older arms were in store and had been cleaned and repaired. The authors believe that because the letter describes one set of 100 muskets as “New” ships muskets, this most likely indicates the ships were provided new French pattern muskets while the second assignment of 50 muskets for the Marines could indicate the Marines were issued repaired Brass Mounted Muskets. Considering the Navy Department was still months away from being established, likely contributes to the vagueness of the descriptions.

The Frigate USS Constitution was launched on October 21, 1797 and finally put to sea on July 22, 1798 fully armed and equipped.<sup>6</sup> Once on board the ship, the duties of the Marines consisted of standing guard as sentries at hatchways and doors. They drilled under arms twice per day and participated in running the ship but were never aloft to handle sails.<sup>6</sup> During battle, the Marines provided small arms fire support from the tops and the waist of the ship. They would also be part of the boarding parties and would guard prisoners after action. Marines often concentrated their fire from the fighting tops onto the enemy’s decks and at the chosen point for boarding.<sup>6</sup> It is obvious then that these muskets would have seen rigorous action at sea and their overall condition reflects this.

Since these muskets were issued to the U.S. Marines onboard the first of the frigates, the USS Constitution, based on the documentation presented here, they are very important to the history of the U.S. Marines. Surviving specimens of this musket are extremely rare and rarely encountered today. With the new documentation presented here, the survivors are wonderful examples of the first muskets issued to the U.S. Marines.

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## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Chartrand, Rene. *French Military Arms and Armor in America 1503-1783*. Andrew Mowbray Inc. Woonsocket, RI 2015
- <sup>2</sup> NARA RG 92, Entry 2117 SE 111, Volume III, page 20-21.
- <sup>3</sup> NARA RG 94 Entry 19 Box 3
- <sup>4</sup> Papers of the War Department Document # 1797071000255
- <sup>5</sup> NARA RG 45 Entry 377
- <sup>6</sup> USS *Constitution* Museum, March 2024, [www.usconstitutionmuseum.org](http://www.usconstitutionmuseum.org)

