

Sailor's Story
William Cooper

Before Joining USS *Constitution*

I was born in New York around 1784. I was a chief of the Unkechaug, a tribe that called Long Island home. I was living in Brookhaven, New York in 1806 when I met my wife, Dorothea Smith. Dorothea worked as a household servant for the Robert family. We were married at Poospatuck, an Indian settlement a few miles from the Robert house. We had two daughters, Charlotte and Frances—the last one we nicknamed Fanny.

After the wedding, I stayed and worked on the Robert farm for two or three years. I also worked for General John Smith, a local landowner. Though I was full of activity and industry, I soon found myself in debt to

Smith. To pay off my debt, I went to sea on a merchant vessel as a seaman. On March 14, 1810, a British warship stopped my ship and forced me to join the Royal Navy.

I got a friend to write a letter to my wife, and I asked her to send papers to the American Consul in London to secure my release. Before the papers arrived, Dorothea heard news that I had been put aboard the British ship *HMS Defence*. But that ship was lost at sea in December 1811, and my wife thought I had drowned too.

Happily, it was untrue. In the spring of 1812, Dorothea received remarkable news that I was alive and serving on *USS Constitution*, currently at Washington D.C. I had deserted from the *Defence* in February 1811, before she

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sailed on her fatal voyage, and I enlisted on board USS *Essex* and then on *Constitution*, on August 4, 1811 as an ordinary seaman.

While *Constitution* was in harbor in Washington D.C. and Boston, I had another shipmate write letters to Dorothea. I needed my family to know I was safe, so in my letters I told her how I narrowly escaped injury in the battle against HMS *Guerriere* and that *Constitution* would be sailing soon.

Sadly, my luck ran out. I was killed in action during the battle with HMS *Java* on December 29, 1812. I served as a sponger for no. 9 carronade, and was killed in the same broadside that destroyed *Constitution's* wheel and wounded Commodore William Bainbridge.

After Constitution

After my death, Dorothea applied for a widow's pension to support her and our young daughters. The pension application required a marriage certificate, but the state of New York didn't issue such documents at that time. Signed depositions served as proof of marriage instead. This was a problem because most of the people who attended our wedding were mostly illiterate, as claimed by Dorothea's representative to the pension board.

Eventually, Dorothea produced some acceptable form of proof or deposition, and the government granted her a pension of \$6 a month for ten years, which was later extended for additional years. Dorothea remarried twice after, but both these men also died at sea.