

■ Frank Evina

Preserved in the Library of Congress Rare Book and Special Collections Division are the copyright record books maintained by the clerks of the U.S. District Courts prior to 1870. These historic handwritten volumes include close to 150,000 registrations made in 44 separate judicial districts before the copyright registration and deposit system was centralized in the Library of Congress in 1870.

One of the most unusual District Court copyright entries appears on page 23 of volume 132 from the state of New York. On Dec. 22, 1813, Charles Clinton, District Court clerk for the Southern District of New York, entered a copyright claim in the name of marine artist and calligrapher George Godsell Thresher (1780–1857) for etchings of a famous naval battle fought during the War of 1812.

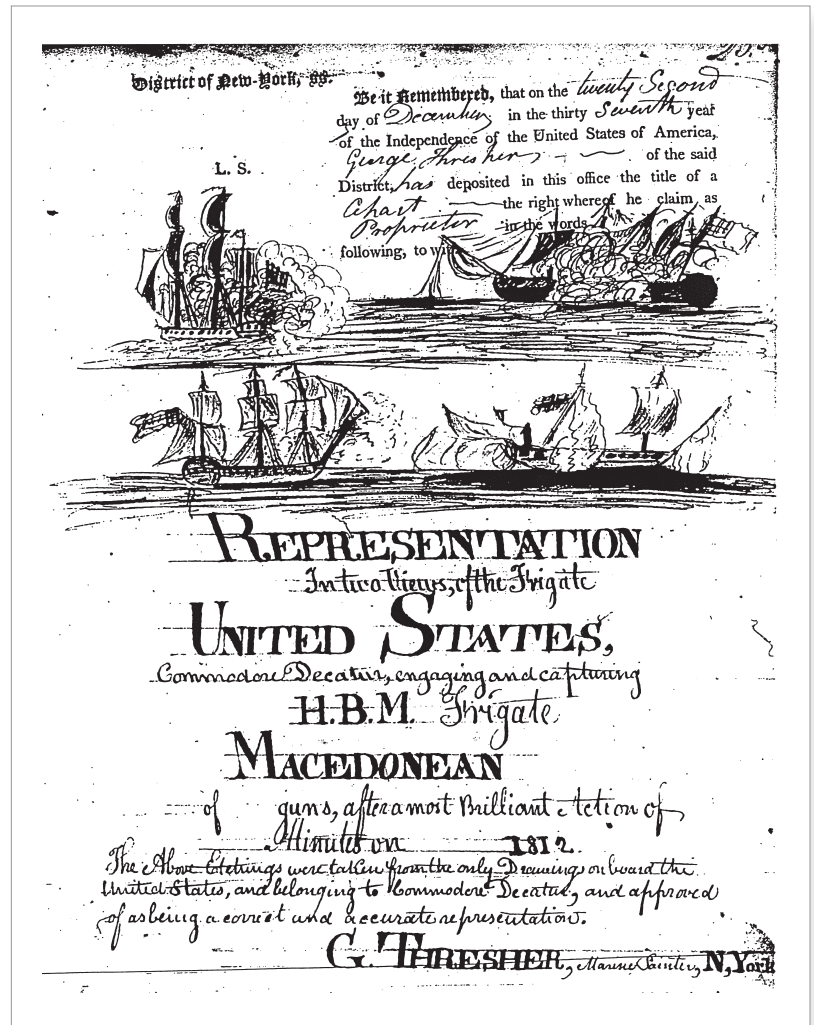
What makes this entry unique is that, in addition to the basic registration information, freehand drawings depict the copyright deposit, a work of art recording the engagement between the two great battle ships *USS United States* and *HMS Macedonian*. A notation at the bottom of the entry states that the “Above Etchings were taken from the only Drawings on board the *United States*, and belonging to Commodore Decatur, and approved of as being a correct and accurate representation.”

The *USS United States* was a 44-gun frigate built in Philadelphia in 1797. It defeated the 38-gun frigate *HMS Macedonian* on Oct. 25, 1812, 500 miles south of the Azores. The captured British vessel was refitted and employed as the *USS Macedonian* until it was broken up in 1828. The *United States* served the U.S. Navy until 1849, when her hulk was left at Norfolk, Va.

When Virginia seceded from the union in 1861, Confederate troops took the Norfolk Navy Yard, and the historic vessel, renamed the *CSS Confederate States*, served as a receiving ship and floating battery for the Confederate navy. Later sunk as an obstruction in the Elizabeth River in May 1862 when the Confederates abandoned Norfolk, it was raised and broken up in December 1865.

It may be difficult to imagine that a district court clerk would have had the time or talent to create such an extraordinary record for a copyright deposit. However, based on many other en-

tries made by Charles Clinton during this period, it is evident that he possessed an artistic flair and an appreciation for calligraphy.



An undated watercolor by Thresher depicting the battle between the *United States* and the *Macedonian* is preserved in the United States Naval Academy Museum in Annapolis, Md. It is not certain how closely it is derived from the sketches that are preserved in the 1813 copyright record book.

The author thanks the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Va., for historical background on the *United States* and the *Macedonian*. ©