

Pirates & Privateers

by Robert Bachand

Part IV Section 2 - Privateers & the American Revolution - "1776"

In this issue, contributing writer Robert Bachand continues his five-part series titled "Privateers and the American Revolution." In our March issue, we will continue our series with Part IV Section 3 which relates to Privateers and the War of 1812.



In 1776 British frigates and smaller vessels patrolled the entrance to Narragansett Bay, bottling up Rhode Island's ships for long periods of time. Newport remained under the control of the colony, but the British frequently anchored in its harbor. Though musket fire was sometimes exchanged, the frustrated area citizens were powerless except for the occasional show of defiance. On November 6, 1776, the *Newport Mercury* reported one man's contempt for the Crown.

... "Somewhat drunk or crazy" a patriot "went down on the Long wharf" and exposed his backside to a bomb-brig in the harbor, "using insulting words upon which the brig fired 2 four-pound shot at him." One of the projectiles went through the roof of a shoreline structure, but the unidentified man got away scot-free. "Mooning" apparently is not a 20th century innovation of our youth. In 1695, while commissioned as a privateer, Captain Kidd had done the same to a British Admiral as he was sailing out of London's Thames River. He almost lost command of his ship over the matter.

Commissioned on May 13, 1776, the 60-ton sloop *Montgomery* was Rhode Island's first privateer to venture far from her home port. The vessel was armed with 10 carriage guns (two and four-pounders) and 10 swivel guns. Under the command of Daniel Bucklin with a crew of 50 men, she sailed in mid-May.

For six long weeks there was no word of her. Had she a fatal encounter with a British man-of-war? Families were worried about their loved ones and investors were wringing their hands. Finally, in late June, news of the *Montgomery's* successful exploits began to trickle in. As reported by historian Sidney Morse, Captain Bucklin had sailed southward toward the West Indies when he crossed paths with the sloop *Revenge*, a privateer out of Salem. The captains agreed to combine their efforts and share equally in any prize. Sailing on the east side of Bermuda, the sloops waited for British merchantmen making their way from the West Indies to England. By the end of July, the *Montgomery* and

Revenge, joined by another privateer, had captured nine British vessels, "...all taken with the greatest of ease." The vessels had traveled in a convoy, but their escort, a man-of-war, had left them, believing that they would be out of danger in the vicinity of Bermuda.

The *Montgomery* returned to its homeport on July 29, bringing with it several captured ships. The prize cargoes consisted mainly of 400 hogsheads (barrels or casks holding from 63 to 140 gallons) of sugar, 300 hogsheads of rum, ginger, cotton, wool, shell wood, and wine, valued in excess of £14,000. The sloop's success was infectious. By the beginning of September, Rhode Island had commissioned an additional 18 privateers, and at the end of the year, New England had 150 private men-of-war (Massachusetts 85, Rhode Island 60, Connecticut 13, and New Hampshire 3). The majority of these vessels had been commissioned as privateers, while a few had received a "letter of marque."

The only reason that owners sought a commission for their vessels as privateers was to take prizes. During the Revolutionary War, a "letter of marque" was granted to merchant ships, allowing the vessels to arm themselves for protection. But in practice, there was very little difference between the two documents. Prizes were taken under either document when the opportunity availed itself.

During 1776 the American private men-of-war cruised the western Atlantic from as far north as Labrador to the southernmost West Indies; a few even ventured to European shores. Bermuda remained loyal to the Crown but continued to trade with America, especially for agricultural commodities. In return, Bermuda allowed the patriots to raid the royal magazine on the island and take away most of the gunpowder stored there. Around 1780, however, the British replaced the island's governor with an individual who was willing to take a more active part in the war against America. Within a short time, Bermudian and American privateers were raiding each other's shipping.

The 25-ton schooner *Hannah and Molly*, out of Frenchman's Bay, Maine, was armed with only eight swivel guns, but what the privateer lacked in size, its commander, Agreen Crabtree, provided in imagination and cunning. According to an account published in the November 4, 1776, *Boston Gazette*, Captain Crabtree had anchored his schooner in the harbor at Liverpool, Nova Scotia. After landing his crew, they made their way overland to a nearby bay where the captain hailed an ar-

mored British merchant ship, requesting a small boat. Possibly believing that the men wanted to sign up as crew, the merchantman willingly complied. But, after being welcomed aboard, Crabtree and his men revealed their true intentions; they quickly captured the unsuspecting British crew. Crabtree wasn't finished. He turned the guns of the captured prize on another British vessel, a brig which was anchored nearby, and also took possession of her. The brig was filled with anything of value from both ships. The privateers then sailed southward, capturing two additional schooners and a sloop before arriving at their homeport in Massachusetts. Despite the schooner *Hannah and Molly's* success, the British West Indies were much more profitable hunting grounds just as they had been for colonial privateers during King George's War and the French and Indian War (see *Pirates & Privateer Part III*).

The French, Spanish, and Dutch islands in the West Indies welcomed American privateers during the Revolutionary War. When British war vessels ventured too close to a French island, French men-of-war sometimes escorted the Americans.



The most common prizes taken from British merchantmen in the West Indies were rum, sugar, and to a lesser extent cotton, indigo, and fustic (a wood that yields a yellow dye). The success of privateering, especially in taking large quantities of rum and sugar, drove the price down for these goods. There was a limit to the amount that could be absorbed by the country, and exporting the excess was difficult with the constant threat of British warships and privateers. By late November of 1776, the British had become more efficient at protecting their convoys and in early December, the enemy occupied Newport. As a result, all privateering out of Rhode Island and Long Island Sound came to a halt. At the same time, the Massachusetts legislature placed an embargo on privateering in the hope of recruiting (and retaining) more men for military service in the Continental Army and Navy.

In Part IV (Sec 3) of *Privateers & the American Revolution*, Massachusetts rethinks its embargo on privateering.

