

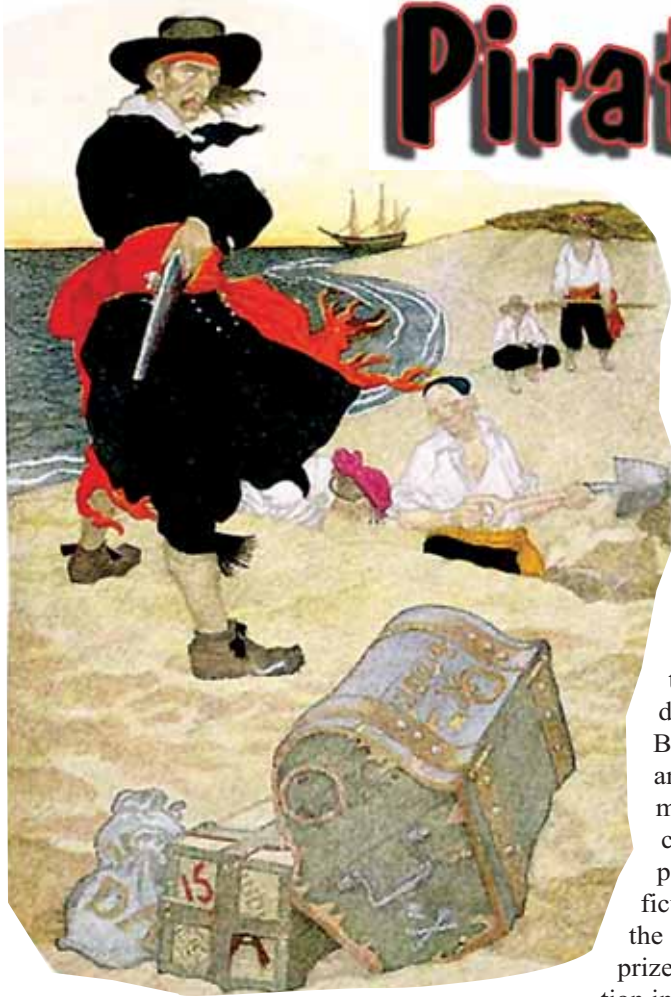
# Pirates & Privateers

by Robert Bachand

## Part IV Section 5 - Nathaniel Shaw, Connecticut's privateer tycoon.



In this issue, contributing writer Robert Bachand continues his five-part series titled "Privateers and the American Revolution." In our June issue, we will continue our series with Part IV Section 6 which describes the Penobscot Expedition.



The crew of the captured schooner tried to sail directly into New London Harbor. As they approached Little Gull Island, the British frigate *Niger* emerged from behind Fishers Island. Quickly changing course, *Two Brothers* attempted to escape up the coast but she was driven ashore on Narragansett Beach. As the British approached, the crewmen open fire, and assisted by a contingent of Rhode Island militia, they managed to save most of the cargo. Distribution of the profits from disposal of the prized cargo added another difficulty. The troops who had come to the aid of the grounded schooner claimed a share of the prize. It inevitably led to a long and bitter litigation in the Rhode Island courts.

There was a great deal of money to be made or lost in backing private-men-of-war. Prior to the Revolutionary War, Nathaniel Shaw of New London had been a successful maritime merchant, but with its onset, he became Connecticut's privateer tycoon.

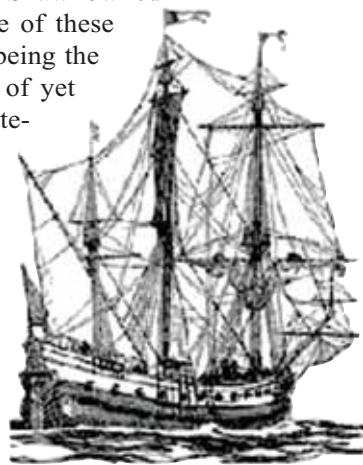
The sloops *American Revenue* and *Revenge* had been in the West Indies trade, making it an easy transition to raiding British merchantmen in the same area. Enlisting the backing of a group of merchants and speculators, Shaw refitted the vessels to accommodate larger crews and armed them for battle. After having received a commission as a privateer, the *American Revenue* set sail in August 1776 under the command of William Packwood. The captain had sailed the West Indies previously in the employ of Shaw with a crew of five or six men, but with a crew of 78, Packwood vastly underestimated the amount of provisions needed. To the dismay of the owners, the cruise had to be shortened, and the sloop returned to port with nothing to show for its effort. "If the captain and the ship's husband had done their duty, there is not the least doubt but she would have made as good a cruise as has been made the whole war," wrote one of the chagrined investors.

Samuel Champlin, who had been employed by Shaw as the master of a West Indies trading vessel, was given command of the *American Revenue*. The privateer set out from Stonington Harbor in October of the same year. For weeks, there was no word of her and Andrew Huntington, one of the investors, expressed concern. "I want you should send me some good news from Capt. Champlin's privateer," he wrote Shaw. There was good news. A prize vessel taken by *American Revenue* arrived at Chatham, Cape Cod and soon after another made its way into Bedford Harbor. On January 3, the privateer also had captured the Irish schooner *Two Brothers*, bound to the West Indies with a cargo of linens and 800 firkins (1 firkin = 9 imperial gallons) of butter. However, getting it to the safety of a friendly port was not as easy.

A fourth prize, the brigantine *Sally*, was sailed into New Bern, North Carolina. Samuel Mifflin claimed in a Philadelphia court that he was the rightful owner of the vessel and that a privateer could not capture it legally. The dispute ended in litigation that went on for more than 10 years. The first two captured vessels with their cargoes of sugar and rum were disposed of for £33,037.40, a handsome profit since the privateer had been rigged originally for just £5,194.56!

In June 1777, the *American Revenue* set out on another cruise joined by the privateer sloop *United States* out of Warren, Rhode Island. Together they captured three vessels, one of them described as "the finest and best ship that has been in the war." Profits from her disposal brought £40,000 of which each crewmember aboard the *American Revenue* received £300.

During the late summer and fall of the same year, the *Revenge* accompanied the *American Revenue* and together they captured four vessels. Nathaniel Shaw owned the largest share of these privateers, and being the majority owner of yet another private-man-of-war, the *Ranger*; he was becoming fabulously wealthy. Driven by the early success of his ventures, Shaw enlisted additional investors in the construction of a ship that he termed "one of the finest privateers."



*Revenge*

In the spring of 1778, the new privateer named *General Putnam*, after a Connecticut hero, neared completion. Built in a New London shipyard, the 350-ton vessel bristled with 20 nine-pounders, the "heaviest guns ever carried by a

Revolutionary privateer," according to historian Sidney Morse.

Investors tripped over each other to get in on the venture. In July 1777, General Benedict Arnold contacted Shaw with the intention to purchase an eighth or a sixteenth share in the privateer. However, when Shaw disclosed that cost overruns had changed the final price from approximately £20,000 to £45,000, some investors, including Benedict Arnold, backed out while others reduced the percentage of their commitment. Isaac Sears and Alexander Rose kept the one-eighth shares each as they had agreed, but with the dropouts and reduced investor shares, Shaw was nearly the majority owner with 31/64 shares. Arnold, as pointed out by historian Sidney Morse, spared himself a financial loss or embarrassment when in 1781 as a British general, he directed the burning of New London homes, warehouses and shipyards including those owned by Nathaniel Shaw. Shaw's home survived the fire. It still stands at 11 Blinman Street, New London and is open to the public year-round, Tuesday-Saturday, 1:00-4:00 PM.

Captain Thomas Allen received command of the *General Putnam*. During the ship's sea trial on May 20, 1778, the captain was pleased, to say the least, with her performance. "She exceeded my most sanguine expectations," he reported to Shaw. The ship had covered a distance of seven miles in 28 minutes – about 15 miles an hour. A few days later, Shaw directed the captain to proceed on a six-month cruise "to take as many British merchant ships as you can and send them into the most convenient port of the United States."

The *General Putnam* set out from New London during the last days of May, but in the meantime, Shaw's other privateers continued to be successful. Josea Waters, Shaw's agent in Boston, reported that the captured ship *Lovely Lass* would "come out at about £30,000 for your private account." In June, Shaw's privateer *Nancy* captured the British mail packet *Le Despencer* off Bermuda. She was sailed into New London, and once refitted, Shaw had her commissioned under the same name as yet another of his privateers.

At one time or another, the New London privateer-tycoon partially or fully owned 12 private men-of-war that reportedly captured 57 vessels. Most of these privateers were abandoned or lost eventually. During the summer of 1779, the *Ranger* wrecked on the Maryland coast as did the brig *Favorite* off Cape Cod. On July 3, Massachusetts authorities commandeered the *General Putnam* for a campaign against the British at Penobscot, Maine. By early fall, Shaw's fleet had been reduced to just the *Revenge*. With his privateer-financing days nearly over, Shaw went on to serve in the Connecticut legislature. "Pirates & Privateers - Part IV (Sec #6)" will describe the Penobscot Expedition.