

A brief history of piracy during the Revolutionary War

Prelude to the Revolutionary War Privateer Timeline Project

A historical meta-analysis paper

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10 February 2020

re-edited
15 June 2022

Introduction

This project started when one of the local historical sites the AWIPM frequently does events at inquired as to whether we would be willing to put a temporary exhibit together on the subject of Privateers during the Revolutionary War. While I struggled to come up with an idea, the thought of a basic timeline of events leading up to and including actions taken by privateers and taken against privateers from both Rebel and Tory sides seemed like a logical place to start. So, with a newfound fervor and plan in place, I started doing research on the subject. First, I scoured the internet on various websites, even Wikipedia although it is considered taboo by many, that's what researching the sources is for. Nothing came up but an incomplete timeline on Naval actions during the Revolutionary war on Wikipedia.

Next, I started contacting other institutions such as the Independence Seaport Museum, and Museum of the American Revolution, along with various maritime museums and historic sites in the area. I had even consulted other historians to see if they had any leads on a timeline or 12 even a partial one. I kept getting the same response from everyone. No timeline that just deals with the privateers exists. I was being pushed, not by peer pressure, but rather by a need for this particular information to accomplish my initial goal. That's when I was also being asked, not if, but when I create the timeline, would I be willing to share, some of the institutions and libraries that used the word "publish," my results.

This led me to my next question, what books, if any, do they recommend for the research portion of this. Shomette's book *Privateers of the Revolution* came highly recommended and became my bible, Patton's book *Patriot Pirates* became a good read, as well as some of the documents found through the Library of Congress. *The Burning of His Majesty's Schooner Gaspee* by Park had some great info previous to the war, and then back to Wikipedia and those sources, as well as looking over *The British Tars* website.

Then I started the process of looking for dates. Actions, names of ships, policies, and debates in congress, as well as posting on Facebook looking to see who else would have such information that would be willing to collaborate and share information with me. It quickly became clear that nobody over the course of the past 243 years had even attempted to put together a timeline. The closest I could find was Donald Shomette in his book, which as I said earlier became my bible through the beginning of this project.

I say the beginning because I am not finished, and in this day and age to claim it is a complete list is going to be disproven rather quickly. So much in fact that as I was compiling the data I came across the Battle of Kedges Strait on November 30th, 1782 that said "Whaley's surrender ended the last naval action of the Revolution." According to a Wikipedia article I came across, as far as privateer information goes the last two actions I had found were on December 15th, 1782, and March 3rd, 1783 which is what I believe to be the last privateer action of the war. Even as I thought I was finished with compiling data from the various sources I had found another two entries to add while finalizing details on this paper and checking each date over for clarity on the timeline.

The next phase of this project after I publish this paper and timeline will be to put this online with all the information, separated by year, and add a form for people to submit additions, corrections, pertinent data such as crews, captured status, cargo, prizes, casualties, wounded, etc... This will not be a complete work, but just the beginning of a larger one, that hopefully will service many for years to come.

So While I am rambling on, here are a very few highlights of some of what I as a living historian have discovered while becoming impassioned once more about this topic. I do not typically write papers, more of a reader and one that attempts to emulate and bring to life for others. Please be kind, and should you see something out of place, please be able to teach it in a manner befitting to us all.

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Outline:

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The beginning.

Civil unrest as to the King, the British Parliament's policies, taxation on the colonists, treatment by British forces, and others in the various social and political circles in recent and previous years finally led the boiling pot to overflow. The people had finally had enough, something had to be done about it all as the population in the colonies grew ever more agitated.

On June 9th, 1772, The HMS *Gaspee*, a customs schooner, was to patrol and enforce the Navigation Acts in and around Newport Rhode Island under command of one Lieutenant William Dudingston in an effort to collect funds from colonists to recoup British finances for the 7 years war. Dudingston and crew had a reputation for being aggressive with searches.

On this particular day, Dudingston was in pursuit of the packet ship *Hannah*, which when ordered to stop and prepare to be boarded elected to not heave to. The *Gaspee* gave chase and ended up running aground on what is now Warwick, RI. Dudingston had decided to wait for the tide to come in and refloat the ship, but that chance never came.

As the *Gaspee* sat helpless in shallow water waiting for the tide to come in, a group of men from Providence led by Abraham Whipple and John Brown saw her there, knowing the particulars, and sick of the mistreatment by the crown, etc... decided to act on "opportunity offered of putting an end and trouble to the vexation that she daily caused." (*1) The men rowed up, boarded her, the crew did not put up much of a fight, a Joseph Bucklin shot Lieutenant Dudingston in the leg, and the men set fire to the ship burning her to the waterline.

A year and a half later in Boston on December 16th, 1773. Bostonians sick of the "taxation without representation" were rather riled up as everything was coming to a head. The main complaint of this event was the Tea Act which had come into effect in May earlier that year. We all know the story that went on from there. Samuel Adams addressed the crowd at the Old South Meeting house, and the crowd had apparently had enough talk, and eventually, 30-130 men dressed as Mohawk warriors raided East India Trading Co. ships and let loose the tea in the Harbor from the three ships the colonists were protesting about.

The war hadn't started until that fateful day of April 9th in 1775 when British Regulars came to retake and destroy military supplies such as arms and gunpowder at the towns of Lexington and Concord. That was the official start of our war for independence. Total numbers of 1,500 British Regulars came to the area to follow the orders from the crown and 3,960 Massachusens started to defend a nation.

After the Boston Tea Party, King George III implemented a ban on the import of gunpowder and arms into the colonies which set up the perfect firestorm on that fateful day. Gunpowder was in short supply and high demand as the war was starting, and importing it was not really an option. We were in need of Gunpowder and provisions for our fledgling army.

The misconception:

This need for gunpowder was also where a common misconception of the war led us all to believe that the saving of this war effort to bring gunpowder home was the effort of Privateers. His excellency General George Washington, needing crucial supplies for his armies, provisions, arms, and gunpowder, set orders out to the Continental Army's 14th Massachusetts Regiment (also known as the Marbleheaders), under the command of Colonel Glover.

General Washington had secured a number of schooners and had them commanded by Continental Army officers and crewed by the troops. It was the Marbleheaders as a Continental Army force that had conducted the procurement of necessary provisions from September 1775 till November 1777. Privateering didn't really start until December of 1775, which lessened the burden on the Marbleheaders.

Rhode Island's "most wild" plan

On October 5th, 1775 the unheard-of subject arose in congress by the Rhode Island delegates a plan they had been discussing in their General Assembly which had deemed that an American fleet be built up as quickly as possible. When brought to congress the idea of fielding ships to intercept the two vessels Britain had dispatched to deliver troops to destroy and plunder the colonies. Opponents of this notion called this "the most wild, visionary, mad project that had ever been imagined."

But even after a hotly debated course, Congress decided to approve this plan and commission 2 ships in support of this plan. On the 30th of October Congress had also approved the addition of 2 more, and then on November 25th in 1775 Congress officially founded the Continental Navy.

The Push for Privateering

Just 2 days after the Continental Congress had approved and formed the Continental Navy on November 27th, 1775, Simeon Dean, wrote his brother Silas who served in Continental Congress as a representative of Ct. and said that he was asked by “a number of gentlemen” whether or not he had influence over congress enough to “grant commission to private adventurers to fit out a privateer or privateers to take British property on the coast, or in the West Indies.” (*4).

This was debated in Congress for four months. During which States and others took it upon themselves to see privateering actions legalized themselves without congressional approval around early December of 1775. The debates ranged all over the spectrum and even led to the how and why, rules of engagements, legalities, etc... Finally, on March 23rd, 1776 Congress approved the resolution to allow privateering. Two days later the Privateering Resolution was published in the Pennsylvania Gazette sparking off a very lucrative industry.

On April 11th, 1776 the first letters of marque and reprisals were issued to the Schooners *Chance* and *Congress* from Philadelphia. Over the course of the war, almost 1700 letters of marque and reprisal would be issued by Congress to those who could afford the bond and the vetting process. More would be issued by individual states, and King George III would start issuing instructions and letters of marque first to only Englishmen, starting around March 27th, 1777, and later in the West Indies on January 10th, 1778.

Whaleboats, Whalers, “Refugees,” and other small boats became a popular trend in shallow coastal and river areas. Often the smaller vessels were state-granted privateers, and the British small boats were known as “refugees” because of a popular tactic to swarm a vessel and board it under false pretenses. This became a rather annoying problem for colonial rebels along the Delaware and Chesapeake Bays throughout the course of the war.

Noteworthy Battles:

Turtle Gut Inlet - June 29th, 1776. This was the first actual privateer battle of the war. The American Brigantine *Nancy* laden with war provisions was attacked by the British. Three Continental Navy ships watching from afar as *Nancy* ran aground dispatched their tenders to help unload her cargo. Most of the cargo was removed in time, and as they had set a long fuse to destroy the remaining 100 pounds of gunpowder to scuttle the remaining cargo and ship they retrieved their colors before disembarking the ship.

The British seeing the colors lowered took this as a sign of surrender and dispatched men to take the prize. As British troops boarded and started to search the lit fuse reached the gunpowder and set it off destroying the vessel and killing every man aboard.

Battle of Chestnut Neck and the Little Egg Harbor Massacre

On October 6th, 1778 British Army Captain Patrick Furgeson set out to raid and destroy the patriot privateer fort at Chestnut Neck in New Jersey. This particular battle proved to end up a draw after a lengthy battle and not making headway, Furgeson withdrew and moved on. The port at Chestnut neck never recovered.

Five days later he attacked the Privateers at Little Egg Harbor in the early hours of the day after receiving intelligence from a deserter passing by. One Lt. Gustav Juliet had found Furgeson's encampment on a nearby farm and had informed him the location of the privateers, that security was lacking, and that morale was low. Furgeson quickly loaded up 250 of his men and set forth. Upon reaching the encamped privateers the attackers had killed one of the sentries with a bayonet and proceeded to kill 50 men while they slept before anyone could rise.

The British called it an affair, the Americans called it a massacre. Five days later Little Egg Harbor started to rebuild and returned to business as usual as a privateer port.

The Privateer Flotilla of August 1780

On August 7th, 1780 something unique happened off the coast of Little Egg Harbor. 3 ships had conspired to come together and hunt in a pack, basically making a small flotilla and attacking enemy vessels at will. This was a very lucrative month for the Captains and the owners of these vessels.

The *Fair American*, *Holker*, and *Enterprize* had come together and captured the King's mail ship the *Mercury Packet* that first day. On the 8th, the trio captured the Loyalist Schooners *Nancy* and *Arbuthnot*. After that, it continued for the duration of August. Vessels captured were the Loyalist Schooners *Poplar*, *Gage*, *Lewis*, the British Privateer ship *Queen Charlotte*, the *Lady Margaret*, and the sloop *Dispatch*.

About the middle of the month, *Enterprize* was replaced by *General Greene*, and the ships continued on to wreak havoc on the British and loyalist ships near Little Egg Harbor. Until upon one of their resupply trips into port they were summoned by the Continental Ships *Trumbull* and *Deane*, thus putting an end to their success. The Continental ships pressed all but a skeleton crew on each of the vessels.

The Battle of Delaware Bay.

What started out as a seemingly simple task for Captain Barney, Master of the *Hyder Ally*, who with 2 other vessels (*General Greene* and *Charming Sally*) was “to convoy a fleet of merchantmen to the capes, but on no account proceed to sea; it being the intention of the state simply to protect its own people, within its own waters, and chiefly from the annoyance of the ‘refugee boats.’ ” (*5) ended up as what would be an eventful day on April 8th, 1782.

The evening before the fleet of American ships had to come to anchor as the wind had changed, so they decided to await more favorable winds so the merchant ships could make the voyage across the bay and into the open ocean. While at anchor Barney had noticed 2 sails off in the distance. The next morning those sails were identified as foes. The larger of the two proved to be the *HMS Quebec* commanded by Captain Mason, and the other *General Monk*, commanded by Captain Rodgers.

The British, also observing the American Fleet, the evening before, had dropped anchor at Cape May to keep the enemy ships from escaping into the open ocean. That next morning the British vessels took note of 3 British privateers coming into the bay and raised a signal for them to join them in attacking the American fleet. Two of the ships, for either fear of having sailors pressed into Royal service, or other reasons, ignored the signal. However the captured, now British privateer ship *Fair American* did respond and heaved to. That’s when things went awry for the British.

While the *General Monk* had decided to wait for the two privateers to join in pursuit of the Americans, to no avail, the *Quebec* decided it was time to oblige her enemies and shoved off in pursuit without the *Monk* or *Fair American*.

Aboard the *Hyder Ally*, they had already prepared for the worst and dispatched a pilot boat the evening before to take notice and observe the enemy. Upon the return of the pilot vessel the word “that there were several vessels belonging to the enemy, coming round the cape” and advised that they quickly get underway. Barney had thought the 3 ships were part of a larger force, and also learning about the 2 other ships in the area that had refused to join the group, reacted quickly. Without any hesitation, he “made signals to his convoy to get underway and return up the Bay” at the best speed and keeping as close to the shore as possible, where the deeper draft vessels could not follow.

After an hour as the convoy made its way up the river as fast as they could to avoid being captured by the British, Barney was able to make out the classes of ships that followed. The British were closely observing the fleeing convoy as well trying to ascertain what they were doing as they “manifestly appeared undetermined what to do.”

The British basically tried to flank the fleeing convoy. However, due to the drafts of the vessels being vastly different they were forced to head into deeper waters and fire off their broadsides from afar. In the heat of that moment, possibly due to panic, *General Greene* ran aground on the Cape and the crew quickly escaped off the ship and onto dry land to avoid capture by the British.

At this point, it became all too clear to the British that the only vessel capable of putting up a fight was the *Hyder Ally*, whose Captain was all of 22, and the crew was maintained by an unknown number and small complement of Bucks County “Marines” who lacked experience on a ship, let alone battle at sea.

General Monk, briefly occupied with taking the stranded *General Greene*, the *Fair American* made for the remaining American ships that were attempting to enter the Morris River. As the *Fair American* passed the *Hyder Ally* a single broadside from the British was given, but not replied to as the *Hyder Ally* was saving their strength for the second vessel. As both sides were hastily making their ways to and fro, that’s when things got costly. At the same time on one side the *Charming Sally* ran aground on the east side of the overfalls, and at the same time, *Fair American* ran hard aground on the Egg Island Flats leaving the *General Monk* to continue the pursuit by herself.

As the *General Monk* passed the *Charming Sally* on her port she “wantonly and infamously” fired a volley of small arms into the stranded *Sally*, wounding the chief mate and pilot. Then a short time later the *Monk* had dropped a tender with 13 or 14 men on it and they took possession of their prize. After an hour the crew of the *Sally* retook their vessel and managed to refloat her. Then they saw what was presumably the *HMS Quebec* coming into play and a battle about to take place between the *Hyder Ally* and *General Monk*, the *Sally* ended up running aground again in the Flats.

The *Hyder Ally* was still on the stern of the convoy in Cape May Channel “watching the motions of the enemy with all the eagerness and anxiety natural to so important a trust.” The only hope he had for the convoy escaping was to put his own ship right in harm’s way and fight a delaying action. The *Fair American* being grounded had evened the odds slightly but the *General Monk* was still coming straight for the *Hyder Ally*.

The *Hyder Ally* was out manned, out gunned, outmaneuvered by the *General Monk*. The odds were stacked against them. Barney knew whatever he had to do it had to be swift and decisive. It also had to be soon, because the *Monk* was coming fast.

Captain Rodgers, having no knowledge of the smaller vessel as far as ship's strength and being concerned that his cannonades may be a handicap if the *Hyder Ally* had long guns, he determined to close quickly upon her quarter and attempt to board her. Rodgers must have got a welling of confidence when he witnessed the *Hyder Ally* cut loose her tender and fire a couple of bow chasers in desperation a distance of a hundred yards. As the *Monk* approached the *Hyder Ally* to within pistol range, without firing, Rodgers quickly discovered the American "so full of men, and so well provided with defenses against boarding," that he had to switch tactics and use his cannonades.

Barney thought the close approach was due to the *Monk's* "impression that her unequal foe would not venture to make battle." The thought here is that the crew of the *General Monk* prematurely started to congratulate them on an easy capture as they moved closer to them without firing from their main battery. If that was the case, Rodgers was in for a bit of an awakening, for as the *Monk* was passing, the *Hyder Ally's* gun ports were open and well-placed broadsides at pistol-shot range into the *General Monk* "which spoke her determination in a language not to be misunderstood."

This was a pivotal point in the battle. Barney had devised a clever ruse de guerre (ruse of war) designed to "deceive and confuse" his enemy. "He gave orders to the man at the helm to interpret the next command he should give him aloud a revers, or in his own words to the seamen, 'by the rule of contrary.'" This was the moment, as the *General Monk* was closing in on the starboard quarter of the *Hyder Ally* that Barney shouted to his helmsman "Hard a-port your helm! Do you want him to run aboard us?" Rodgers, hearing this, ordered his own helm to the port to keep abreast of the *Hyder Ally* and keep from being raked by them. And on cue, Barney's helmsman put the ship to starboard, instead of port, bringing the ship directly across the *General Monk's* bow.

Much to Barney's delight and Rodgers's surprise, the two vessels were now locked upon each other as the *Hyder Ally's* jib boom was firmly locked into the *General Monk's* fore-rigging, placing Barney's ship in the raking position, whereas Rodgers could offer little response. As the *Hyder Ally* crewmen lashed the two ships together making it impossible to separate the two, they let loose their starboard broadside time and time again, they even moved some of their port side 6-pounders to the starboard to add to the volley. The *General Monk* wasn't completely helpless, they were able to put several of their port stern guns at an acute angle and managed to strike the stern of the *Ally*.

As the broadsides came from the *Hyder Ally* raking the *General Monk*, according to Shomette's description of this part of the battle "plowing down men, dismounting cannon, and slicing braces and rigging to ribbons," sharpshooters from the *Hyder Ally* did what "they do best." Barney, in order to get a better vantage point to watch the battle, had climbed onto the binnacle, exposing himself on the quarterdeck, whereupon he took fire. A musket ball hit his hat, just grazing the crown of his head, and another tearing the skirt of his coat he called for the commander of the Bucks County "marines," Mr. Scull, and instructed him to direct his riflemen's fire into the enemies fighting top "from which he had just been annoyed." An order that was quickly obeyed, and within minutes every man had been brought down.

Moments later a rifleman less acquainted with the rules of etiquette aboard ship than he was with his own rifle and skill called down to Barney from one of the fighting tops. "Captain! Do you see that fellow with the white hat?" he shouted, then fired the shot. Barney saw the result of the rifleman's skill as the man in the hat made "a spring at least three feet from the deck, and fall to rise no more." "Captain! That's the third fellow I've made hop." said the rifleman to Barney.

Musket fire cleaned the decks of the *General Monk*, and when the smoke cleared it was discovered that each of the fallen British men that had met their demise by small arms had either suffered a head shot or chest shot, which could only be attributed to the practiced skill of the "backcountry riflemen, and their true and deadly aim."

Barney remained perched atop the binnacle until a round shot splintered the structure under his feet, and he had managed to recover his footing and unhurt carried on. The cannons aboard the *Hyder Ally* still roaring, and the *General Monk* was silenced a little more than fifteen minutes into the fray, except for shots from their small arms. Rodgers attempted to have his men maneuver the *Monk* out of the death-like grip of the tangled rigging, but to no avail. Barney had seen what was going on and dispatched men accordingly to cut loose the *Monk's* sails before they could fill with wind. Soon the sails of the *General Monk* were just flapping helplessly in the breeze. Captain Rodgers's situation was looking grim. His losses grew with each passing moment, no relief in sight from the still grounded *Fair American*, and the *Quebec* was too far away. Several of his bow posts were "knocked into one," the "rigging so much shot as to render it impossible to haul off." As well as several of his officers were wounded or dead, as well as the deck was littered with injured or dead seamen and marines. Then as he was contemplating surrender the decision was made for him as a shot crashed into his foot. Unable to stand, he ordered the colors struck, thus sealing the American victory.

This was not the only battle to have happened in this area, there would be two more resulting in clashes between the French Navy, and Royal Navy in September that year, and another in December with Privateers from South Carolina, and 3 more ships that lost to the British.

The End of the War

Things had started to taper off as far as actions went after the start of 1783. Peace was looming over, people were growing tired of the war, especially the British. The war on the water far outlasted the war on land, and in some rare cases, piracy was getting out of hand before peace was finally agreed upon. The final privateer action was believed to be on March 3rd, 1783 when the British sloop *Katy* fell to the American privateer *Lively* off the coast of New Jersey.

After that, on the timeline we have the HMS *Amphion* arriving at the prison ship *Jersey* on April 9th, 1783 to determine the condition of the prisoners and secure their release. Two days later Congress proclaimed a formal cease to all hostilities. The final two prize ships of the war were sold at public auction, in New Jersey happened with the sale of British sloops *Rachel* and *Nancy* on April 19th, 1783 putting an end to a very lucrative industry and forgotten piece of history. Finally, in September the Treaty of Paris was signed thus ending the war, Congress ratified it on January 14th the following year.

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