

Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

July, 2008

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

For Cause and Profit:

The Private Ship General Mercer of Alexandria by Jim Bartlinski

Part 1 of 2



New London, Conn. 1776

From Massachusetts to Georgia the economies of Great Britain and Her estranged American colonies were undeniably tied to the sea. The majority of colonial America's population was situated in and around maritime mercantile centers like Boston, Providence, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Alexandria, Charleston and Savannah. The sources of revenue of the inhabitants of these ports and surrounding areas were likewise linked to the sea. The profession that was the impetus behind the growth of these mercantile ports along British-America's Eastern Seaboard was that of the merchant-shipper, particularly ones like the wealthy and well connected Alexandria, Virginia merchant, Colonel John Carlyle, formerly of Carlisle, England.

As a successful seaport merchant, Colonel Carlyle dominated Alexandrian society. He served as a trustee of the port and contributed much to the early economic success of his adopted hometown. From 1753, when a thirty-three year old John Carlyle established residence in Alexandria to his death in 1780, the town's harbor had developed into an active port, from which tobacco, flour, and sundry other cargoes were shipped and imports of every kind brought in. Alexandria's large crescent bay was crowded with vessels of every design that were owned, manned, and fitted out by merchant-shippers like Carlyle. From Alexandria's ropewalk came hundreds of miles of rope to hoist the sails made in the town's sail lofts that propelled the shallops, skiffs, ships, brigs, and brigantines that plied her

waters. A number of these vessels were built by the port's master shipwrights. Two designs unique to the Chesapeake region were the single-masted sloops and two-masted schooners, renowned for their speed. Although the majority of these distinctive sloops and schooners were built as merchantmen to navigate the high seas engaging in international and coastal trade, during time of war they were quickly pressed into service as privateers by resourceful merchant-shippers like Carlyle, looking to recoup wartime losses.

As a prominent merchant-shipper, landowner and member of Virginia's aristocracy, Colonel Carlyle relied heavily on the transatlantic trade for his livelihood. His Most Christian Majesty George III's Royal Navy that once protected America's transatlantic trade, now made every effort to suppress it. The blockade of the Virginia capes, the Chesapeake, and the Potomac during the fight for independence by Great Britain's naval forces threatened the way of life that the Colonel and his peers had worked so hard to establish. Therefore, many entrepreneurial ship owners, merchants, and private citizens alike turned to the time-honored practice of privateering. Privateering was not only a means by which to keep the economies of Britain's former American colonies afloat, but it was for patriotic (if not opportunistic) citizens a way to wage an economic war against His Majesty's Empire. Privateering was a unique blend of profit and patriotism. For centuries European powers regularly issued documents known as "Letters of Marqué and

CARLYLE HOUSE

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director

Jim Bartlinski, Curator

Sarah Arnold, Curator of Education



Reprisal” to private citizens. A letter of marque essentially served as a license that made it lawful for privately owned vessels to attack enemy shipping. Without the letter of marque, these same activities were considered acts of piracy and subject to prosecution. When a privateer captured an enemy vessel (known as a prize), an admiralty prize court had to approve the seizure. Then, the prize and its cargo were sold at public auction and the proceeds from its sale were divided among the vessel’s owners, investors, captain, and crew of the privateer, according to a pre-arranged contract.

The term “privateer” was interchangeable. It could be used to identify the captain, a crew member, or the vessel itself. Typically a group of investors financed a privateer to run the Royal Navy’s blockade to deliver their cargoes to foreign markets and bring back goods to America. If, during the voyage, the privateer happened to capture an enemy vessel, they were to be taken back to the United States or to a neutral port, condemned as a prize, and sold. The government or investors that granted the original letter of marque would receive the lion’s share of the spoils.

When the Revolution began the American colonies were in no position to defy British rule of the seas. By 1776, the already battle tested Royal Navy had proven itself to be the world’s dominant maritime power. At no point in the conflict did the American naval forces have adequate resources to confront His Majesty’s Navy on its own terms. To circumvent this imbalance of naval power, George III’s rebellious colonies turned to privateering. On March 23, 1776, Congress responded to the situation by issuing general “Letters-of-Marqué and Reprisal,” making all British shipping, armed or unarmed, liable to capture by American vessels. A month later Congress resolved to send to each of the “United Colonies” blank letters of marque signed by the President of Congress to be issued to anyone willing to be commissioned a privateer. During the war it had been estimated that sixty-four Virginia vessels sailed under letters of marque issued by Congress. The individual states also issued their own letters of marque to entrepreneurial private citizens to harass British shipping.

In late 1776, the unbridled zeal for sailing under a letter of marque caused one Bostonian to write - “the spirit of privateering has got to the highest enthusiasm: almost every vessel from 20 tons to 400 is fitting out here.” The same scene was repeated in every port along America’s east coast. As it might be imagined,



Privateer Ship Rattlesnake

the allure of prize money from privateering was so enticing that the United States Navy found it difficult to man its own vessels. This lack of willing sailors resulted in American press gangs combing the wharfs, taverns, and brothels of ports from Boston to Savannah, seeking “recruits” for service in the navy of the thirteen United States.

For the first few years of the war, the Royal Navy had the resources to combat most American privateer activity. With the alliance between the fledgling United States and France in 1778, and Spain a year later, the vessels of His Royal Majesty’s Navy were spread thin. American privateers were able to take advantage of the reduced British naval presence in its waters. Together with the ability to use French and to some extent Spanish ports throughout their respective empires, American privateers and naval vessels alike had the capacity to attack George III’s naval and commercial fleets in their home waters. According to statistics compiled by the United States Merchant Marines, from 1775 to 1783 the Continental/United States Navy consisted of only 64 vessels with American privateers adding another 1,697. The American Navy had an arsenal of 1,246 guns aboard its vessels; the privateers had 14,872. The American Navy captured 196 enemy vessels during the war compared to the privateers 2,283. It is estimated that American naval forces inflicted upwards of £66 million of damage to British shipping, causing insurance rates to skyrocket 30 to 50 percent during the conflict. The London Spectator candidly admitted: “The books at Lloyds will recount it, and the rate of assurances at that time will prove what their [American privateers] diminutive strength was able to effect in the face of our navy, and that when nearly one hundred pennants were flying on our coast. Were we able to prevent their going in and out, or stop them from taking our trade and our storeships even in sight of our garrisons? Besides, were they not in the English and Irish Channels, picking up our homeward bound trade, sending their prizes into French and Spanish ports to the great terror of our merchants and shipowners?”

In contrast the British had 800 privateers, compared to the 1,697 American privateers in service during the Revolution. Military and naval historian Angus



Konstam points out in his work Privateers and Pirates 1730-1830, that His Majesty's privateers were primarily "coastal vessels, designed to capture enemy shipping in the English Channel," not on the high seas. Therefore, British privateers did not have the same damaging effect on the economies of the thirteen United States as did their rebel counterparts on that of Great Britain's. It was the blockade of the American coast by the men-of-war of His Majesty's Royal Navy and the actions of the Loyalist privateers that impeded commerce. Evidence of this appears in the March 12, 1779 issue of the Virginia Gazette printed by John Dixon and Thomas Nicolson of Williamsburg. In this issue the Gazette published a report from Baltimore dated February 23, 1779 that announced: "the merchants of this town have had several meetings of late, to consider the state of their trade, which has suffered greatly by the enemy's privateers: and that in consequence thereof they have come to a resolution of laying up all their vessels for some time." In April 1779, Jonathan Williams, Jr., a commercial agent for the United States in France observed that "the situation of our [America's] Trade is very trying." As mentioned earlier, to combat this strain on the American economy, merchant-shippers like John Carlyle turned to privateers, not only to run the British blockade, but to act as armed escorts for their poorly armed or unarmed merchantmen.

It is not clear if Colonel John Carlyle owned or invested in privateers, but his contemporaries undoubtedly did. During the war General George Washington invested in at least one privateer. On November 14, 1777, he wrote his stepson, John Parke Custis, concerning the sale of one of the vessels that "It is perfectly agreeable, too, that Colonel Baylor should share part of the privateer. I have spoken to him on the subject. I shall therefore consider myself as possessing one fourth of your full share, and that yourself, Baylor, Lund Washington, and I are equally concerned in the share you at first held." Lieutenant Colonel George Baylor of Virginia was Washington's former aide-de-camp and the first commander of the 3rd Continental Light Dragoons, the regiment that a teenaged George William Carlyle served during his short and tragic military career. Lund Washington was the general's cousin and business manager. Based on this example it is likely that Washington's kinsman through marriage, John Carlyle, was involved in some capacity with privateers.

Albeit risky, privateering could be a lucrative

enterprise. Not unlike George and Lund Washington, it would not have been bad business for a merchant like Carlyle to invest in such a scheme. According to the memoirs of Commodore Joshua Barney (a naval hero of the Revolution and War of 1812) edited by his daughter-in-law Mary Chase Barney in 1832, as a nineteen-year-old lieutenant in February 1779, he shipped aboard a privateer fitting out in Alexandria. In Barney's memoirs the vessel was to carry "a cargo of tobacco ... to Bordeaux." A native of Baltimore and known as a skilled and brash sailor, Barney was barely sixteen when he began his service to his Country. Owing to his success against the Royal Navy during America's two wars with Great Britain, Lieutenant Barney became something of a popular hero.

As Joshua Barney's autobiography points out, this was not his first time in the port of Alexandria. From 1769 to 1770, an adolescent Barney was apprenticed to a merchant "friend" of his father, "engaged in a brisk and active business at Alexandria." Might this merchant have been John Carlyle? If not apprenticed to Carlyle, surely as a prominent merchant and trustee of the town, he was acquainted with Barney in some fashion. It is likely that between 1770 and 1779, the youthful seaman had returned to Alexandria on a number of occasions, but as of yet no record has surfaced to substantiate this supposition. In any case, Carlyle was likely aware of the self-assured young sailor's exploits and if involved in this privateering venture, he probably would not have opposed Barney's participation.

Although Barney never refers to the "private" vessel "laying at Alexandria" by name, she was likely the ship *General Mercer*, captained by Isaiah Robinson. Most naval historians of the American Revolution have mistakenly identified this vessel as the brig *Pomona* and her master, John Robertson (also spelled "Robinson") of Philadelphia for Isaiah Robinson. Robertson/Robinson was in command of the *Pomona* in March 1779, the same month that primary sources state that Isaiah Robinson and Joshua Barney were making their way from Alexandria to



Joshua Barney



Bordeaux aboard the *General Mercer*. Further evidence shows that in July 1779, the brig *Pomona* was captured by the British and John Robertson/Robinson was taken prisoner. An October 8/10, 1779 letter from Benjamin Franklin in Passy to his friend David Hartley, the British statesman and scientist who negotiated prisoner exchanges with Franklin as well as the treaty that ended the war, gives additional credence to this claim. Franklin writes his friend stating that he would like to procure the parole of “a Captain Robertson [John Robinson] of Philadelphia, who was Master of the Brigantine *Pomona* which sailed in June last from Amsterdam, and is now with his Son a Prisoner at Forton.” The enemies of Great Britain captured in European or African waters were sent to one of two prisons, Mill Prison near Plymouth and Forton Prison, near Portsmouth. Obviously it is the similarity of the two captain’s names that caused this confusion. Further proof that Isaiah Robinson was not in command of the *Pomona* stems from the fact that the brig and her captain were captured in July 1779, when Robinson and Barney were still in France aboard the *General Mercer*.



Ben Franklin, c. 1779

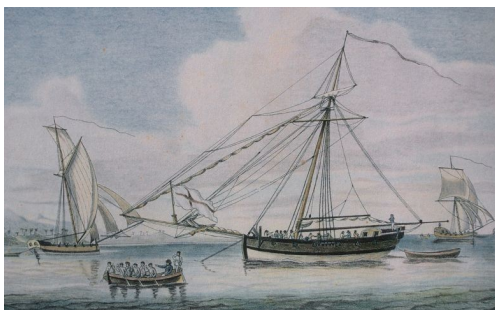
Additional clues to the identity of this mystery vessel from Alexandria can be found in the published papers of Benjamin Franklin. While writing to Franklin on April 24, 1779, John Bondfield, who had been appointed by Congress in February 1778 to serve as commercial agent for the new United States in

Bordeaux (the first known American diplomatic station in the world), asserts that he expected “a vessel dayly from Alexandria.” According to the American commercial agent, the vessel had been “ready for Sea in February [1779]. This information is collaborated by Barney in his memoirs. Nearly a month after Bondfield’s correspondence with Franklin, a May 11th letter from Captain Isaiah Robinson to the elder statesman in Paris makes known that he had “arrived here [Bordeaux] a few days ago from Virga. in a Ship, built there, belonging to Philadelphia ... the Ship, *General Mercer*.” In this same letter Robinson mentions to Franklin that he brought a passenger with him from Alexandria, a Martial-Jean-Antoine Crozat de Crénis. Crénis was a French army officer who

briefly served with the Continental Army. Apparently the Frenchman was “intrusted with Letters” for Franklin that Robinson doubted had “much more Authentick Intelligence, than I can pretend to give You; to these therefore I beg leave to refer You on that Subject.” The evidence provided in the letters written by Bondfield and Robinson lay further claim to the identity of the vessel in question, being that of the Alexandria built private ship *General Mercer*. But there are some period sources that continue to muddy the waters for naval historians attempting to identify the vessel commanded by Isaiah Robinson.

Apparently there were a number of vessels of various designs named for Brigadier General Hugh Mercer of Fredericksburg, Virginia. Mercer a native of Scotland became a martyr to the American cause after his death in January 1777 at the Battle of Princeton. Within three months of Mercer’s death, a James Babson of Gloucester, Massachusetts was commissioned on April 30, 1777 as commander of the privateer brigantine *General Mercer*. In June 1777, Alexander Murray of Kent County, Maryland was understood to be Captain of the Maryland privateer sloop *General Mercer*, mounting ten-guns with a crew of 50. The October 10, 1777 addition of the Virginia Gazette printed by Alexander Purdie of Williamsburg, reported that “The *General Mercer* privateer, belonging to Baltimore, has taken, and brought safe into port, a fine new brig bound for Lisbon with 150,000 wt. of codfish; the vessel and cargo valued at upwards of 10,000l.” This “*General Mercer* privateer, belonging to Baltimore” is in all probability the same privateer sloop *General Mercer* commanded by Alexander Murray. To further confuse the issue, derivatives of the fallen hero’s name were also used to name American fighting vessels.

A newspaper from John Carlyle’s native Cumberland County, England reported on July 5, 1777, that a vessel named “*Mercer*” was “To be sold by the Commissioners appointed by H.M. High Court of Admiralty at Whitehaven, 21 Jul: the cargo of the ship *Mercer* (master, Nathaniel Dowse) ‘lately Condemned, in the said Court, as Rights and Perquisites of Admiralty’ - 506 hogsheads of tobacco ‘Duty Free, for Inland Consumption only’; also some fustick [a wood used to make a yellow dye] and staves, duty free. Catalogues available soon; payment must be made in ‘Bank Notes or heavy Guineas’.” A subsequent report indicates that “the *Mercer*’s cargo was sold by auction, producing £31,788/1/9.5.” On May 5, 1778 privateer captain, Dowse wrote to the American Commissioners



Bermuda design Privateer

in Paris from Bordeaux, that he had “sailed from Virginia as master of the *Mercer*, with tobacco consigned by Congress to the Delaps [the islands of Antigua and Barbuda]. On May 4 [1777] my crew mutinied and took me in to Whitehaven, where I was imprisoned until I escaped and found a vessel that arrived here yesterday. I tender you my services. Several local merchants have made me offers, but I shall wait until I hear from you. John Adams, Esq., whom I know, will answer any questions you may have about me.” This *Mercer* was classified a “ship” out of Virginia like the *General Mercer* of Alexandria. But because of her destination, date of capture, the name of her captain, etc., it is virtually impossible that they are the same vessels. The fact that the three “*General Mercers*” have distinct design designations (brigantine, sloop, and ship), provides further proof that the vessel Captain Robinson and Lieutenant Joshua Barney served on is the privateer ship *General Mercer* of Alexandria. The 1780 edition of William Falconer’s Universal Dictionary of the Marine bears this hypothesis out with contemporary descriptions of a brig or brigantine, sloop, and ship. The explanations are as follows:

“BRIG, or BRIGANTINE, a merchant-ship with two masts ... Among English seamen, this vessel is distinguished by having her main-sail set nearly in the plane of her keel; whereas the main-sails of ... a brig, the foremost edge of the main-sail is fastened in different places to hoops which encircle the main-mast, and slide up and down it as the sail is hoisted or lowered: it is extended by a gaff above, and by a boom below.”

“SLOOP, a small vessel furnished with one mast, the main-sail of which is attached to a gaff above, to the mast on its foremost edge, and to a long boom below; by which it is occasionally shifted to either quarter.”

“SHIP, (vaisseau, Fr. scip. Sax.) In the sea-language ... is more particularly applied to a vessel furnished with three masts, each of which is composed of a lower mast, top-mast, and top-gallant-mast, with the usual machinery thereto belonging.”

To any longshoreman, merchant-shipper, marine agent, landsman, ordinary or able-bodied seaman worth his salt, the proper identification of a vessel’s design or rigging would have been second nature. And as so clearly illustrated in Falconer’s Universal Dictionary of the Marine, the distinctiveness of each of the three designs, as well as the evidence provided by Barney, Bondfield, Franklin, and Robinson, it can be surmised that the vessel in question is the Alexandria built private ship *General Mercer*.

Tune back to next month’s newsletter to learn more about the Alexandria private ship, *General Mercer*!

Hands-on-History a Huge Success!

On June 26, Carlyle House welcomed 200 children and family members to its annual Hands-on-History Tent, more than double the number of visitors at last’s years event.



The *Lion*, a model schooner, graced the streets in front of Carlyle House— once visitors stepped into the yard, they could play games, make and sail a boat or clap along to period music. Out back the fun continued with crafts, dress up and tattoos!



Huge thanks to Rosalind Bovey, Judy Cyre, Philippe Halbert, Nancy Hough, Suzanne Kalvaitis, Katherine Maas, Shelly Miller, Sue Newton, Candace Quinlan, Pam and Eileen Smith, Doug Thurman, and Helen Wirka for helping out on this hot day and putting smiles on the faces of Alexandria children. We couldn’t have done it without you!

