



Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

For Cause and Profit:

The Private Ship General Mercer of Alexandria by **Jim Bartlinski**

Part 2 of 2

Next time you find yourself standing at the quiet Alexandria waterfront, perhaps on your way to dinner at the Chart House, pause and imagine large ships being built here, the noise and the crowds of a busy port town. One such ship was the *General Mercer*. The ship *General Mercer* was built in Alexandria, but as Captain Robinson's letter to Franklin attests, states that she belonged "to Philadelphia." This was not an unusual occurrence for a vessel to be constructed in a different place from where her owners resided. Though another reason why the *General Mercer* was constructed in an Alexandria shipyard may have been due to the occupation of Philadelphia from 1777 to 1778 by General Howe's army. But the fact still remains that most privateers and, in some cases, merchantmen were owned by several men (sometimes from different locales) who shared in the profits, as well as in the inherent hazards of this sort of scheme. Without further research there is no way of knowing if John Carlyle owned or invested in privateers but it appears likely. The merchants Robert T. Hooe and Richard Harrison, partners in the firm "*Hooe and Harrison*" of Alexandria had letters of marqué issued to several of their vessels. It stands to reason that Carlyle would have done as his colleagues Hooe and Harrison and had his merchantmen put into service as privateers.

Due to the Royal Navy's blockade and the activities of Loyalist privateers, a savvy merchant like Carlyle undoubtedly contracted with Alexandria, Baltimore and Philadelphia merchant-shippers and stakeholders to transport his hogsheads of tobacco and barrels of flour languishing in his warehouse to France or to the West Indies. Therefore, it is not out of the realm of possibility that John Carlyle was associated in some capacity with the ship *General Mercer*. One of the owners of the *General Mercer* was Samuel Morris, a prominent merchant of Philadelphia. As it happens, Morris and John Carlyle share a bond. In 1756, Morris had been



Joshua Barney

commissioned by Pennsylvania governor Robert Hunter Morris (an attendee at the "Grandest Congress" held in Carlyle's dining room in April 1755) to settle the accounts of the ill-fated Braddock expedition. Perhaps with Carlyle as "Storekeeper of all the Provisions, Arms Ammunition Baggage of all other kinds" for Braddock's campaign, the two merchants had dealings to reconcile the accounts. If this is the case, then it is conceivable that Carlyle maintained his business relationship with Morris and may have had a financial interest or been involved in the construction and fitting out of the vessel.

Captain Isaiah Robinson, commander of the ship *General Mercer*, was said to have been a native of Philadelphia. But one period source indicates that Robinson was born in England and refers to him as a "Whitehaven Man." If Robinson was in fact from Whitehaven, the English port where an adolescent John Carlyle was apprenticed to the merchant-shipper William Hicks, might Carlyle have been acquainted with Robinson as well as Barney?

In November 1778, Joshua Barney's old friend and mentor Isaiah Robinson arrived in Baltimore. A year had passed since they served together on the *Andrew Doria*. Like Barney, Robinson had probably been idle these last years, due to the shortage of vessels and the excess of officers in the Continental service. Captain Robinson offered Barney a commission aboard the privateer *General Mercer* that he was appointed to

CARLYLE HOUSE

Mary Ruth Coleman, Director

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command, then fitting out in Alexandria. Apparently Robinson and Barney had developed a friendship, trust, and a respect for one another, which prompted them to serve together on a number of occasions. During their respective careers the two mariners would ship together on at least five vessels, including the *General Mercer*.

The *General Mercer* was armed with twelve guns of various sizes and a crew of thirty-- five men. Barney served as the ship's first lieutenant and was even offered an equal share of her "privileges." Barney did not accept Robinson's generous offer and was content to receive the share due him as the *General Mercer's* first lieutenant. Mary Barney explained her father-in-law's refusal of Robinson's offer by stating that he "*never had a mercenary feeling in his life.*" If Mary's interpretation is accurate, one must assume that Barney wanted to be rewarded for his merit, not for his friendship with Robinson. With all agreed to the arrangements, the young lieutenant continued on to Alexandria to see to the outfitting of the ship *General Mercer*.

When Barney arrived in Alexandria, he found that outfitting the vessel would be more difficult than he suspected. There was a general lack of men and armament available, which delayed the vessel's sailing by about three months. The *General Mercer* got under way in February 1779, still deficient in armament and crew. The owners of the *General Mercer* ordered Captain Robinson to avoid an engagement with the enemy until her cargo of tobacco was safely delivered to Bordeaux. Three days after the ship cleared the Virginia capes, she fell in with the British privateer *Rosebud*. Commanded by a Captain Duncan, the *Rosebud* was a brig of sixteen-guns and was considered by Barney to be a "*fast sailer.*"

The British privateer gave chase and caught up with the *General Mercer* about eight o'clock on a clear moonlit night. At this time Captain Duncan hauled up the Union Jack and ordered Captain Robinson to identify himself. Robinson replied by raising the Stars and Stripes, which Duncan promptly ordered to be struck. Captain Robinson was not one to be intimidated, so he gave the order and the *General Mercer* delivered a broadside. The broadside had the desired effect, and the British brig *Rosebud* lost her "*fore-topsail, cutting away a good deal of their rigging.*" A running fight ensued until around midnight, and finding that they could not shake the enemy that hung about the *General Mercer's* "*quarters and stem,*"

Thinking on his feet, Lieutenant Barney came up with a plan to cut a hole in the *General Mercer's* stern and placed a "*long three pounder*" there to return fire.

Soon after the stern-gun was in place, the *Rosebud* attempted to approach the *General Mercer* from the stern. To Captain Duncan's amazement, Captain Robinson fired his new "*stern-chaser*" into the unsuspecting *Rosebud*. The surprise of being fired upon from the *General Mercer's* stern put Captain Duncan and his crew into a state of confusion and resulted in their backing off until morning. At dawn the British privateer made one more attempt to take the American brig by again approaching from the stern. Aided by the *General Mercer's* quartermaster and helmsman, Lieutenant Barney was in command of the stern-chaser, which he had loaded with grapeshot. Captain Robinson and the rest of the crew were on the ship's gun-deck, ready to deliver a broadside if necessary. When the *Rosebud* drew near, Barney kept up a steady fire of grape, keeping the enemy at bay. In one of the rounds fired at the *Rosebud*, Barney placed an iron bar to cut away at the enemy's rigging and sails. The brash Lieutenant's use of an iron bar was not that uncommon, for irregularly shaped pieces of iron shot called "*langrage*" was regularly used by privateers. The wide pattern created by langrage when fired caused excessive damage to the rigging and sails of an enemy vessel. As a result of Lieutenant Barney's well placed shot, Captain Duncan was forced to bring his vessel about, which provided Captain Robinson the opportunity to give the *Rosebud* a complete broadside. With his rigging cut to shreds and forty-seven of his one hundred twenty men either killed or wounded, Captain Duncan prudently decided to give up the chase. With the danger past, the *General Mercer* proceeded to Bordeaux without further incident.

Upon arriving in Bordeaux, Captain Robinson unloaded his cargo of tobacco and took on brandy for the return trip. While in port, Lieutenant Barney and Robinson saw to the rearming of the *General Mercer* with "*eighteen six pounders and increased her crew to seventy men.*" From Bordeaux, Robinson and Barney traveled to Paris where they met with Benjamin Franklin. After the recall of Silas Deane, Franklin had been elected the sole United States Minister to France in September 1778. In this capacity Franklin's authority ranged from overseeing the purchase and shipping of materials to America for use by the United States Army to managing the activities of America's various navies (United States Navy, State and privately owned American privateers) in Europe. While in Paris, Freemason Franklin invited Robinson and Barney to accompany him to the "*La Loge des Neufs Soeurs*" or Lodge of the Nine Sisters, the "*most*

Robinson and Barney contemplated their next move.



Bar shot or crow bar, c. 1799.



Vues des ports de France, Première vue de Bordeaux 1758
by Joseph Vernet

celebrated of all the world's Masonic Lodges." Franklin was among the leading Brethren of the Lodge. Some Masonic sources state it was there that Barney and Robinson were initiated into the Masonic rites, but other evidence points to Philadelphia in 1777.

In early August 1779, having been refitted and loaded with her cargo of brandy, the ship *General Mercer* left Bordeaux for the United States. Having celebrated his twentieth birthday a month earlier, Barney was likely hoping that the rearmed *General Mercer* would have the opportunity to take a prize or two on her return voyage to America. One morning mid-way into her crossing, the *General Mercer* spied a vessel that appeared to be sizing up the ship. The approaching vessel was the British letter of marqué, the ship *Minerva* of sixteen guns from Halifax bound for the Dutch Colony of "Surinam [Suriname]," located in Northern South America. The ship *Minerva*, named for the Roman goddess of warriors and commerce, was loaded with a cargo of "fish & c." presumably to feed the enslaved Africans who worked the coffee, cocoa, sugar cane and cotton plantations along the rivers of Suriname. Within a short time the enemy vessel was in range, and several broadsides were exchanged in a running fight that lasted for nearly thirty minutes. The contest still seemed in debate when the British privateer unexpectedly broke off the engagement, crowded on canvas, and escaped. Captain Robinson gave chase, but finding his vessel heavily laden with cargo, she quickly fell behind. Near evening a fresh wind blew up a rain, allowing the American ship to once again engage the British privateer ship. One or two broadsides from the *General Mercer's* six pounders were delivered, prompting the *Minerva* once again to make good her escape. With the next morning came a dead calm, Captain Robinson and Lieutenant Barney spotted the enemy ship four or five miles ahead, "rigged out the ship's long oars," and made for her.

After two or three hours of hard rowing, the *General Mercer* was again ready to engage the British privateer when she surrendered without another shot being fired. The *General Mercer* fared well with only one death

and two injured. From her crew of seventy the *Minerva* lost twelve men and had several wounded. The vessel herself had been badly damaged in her two engagements with the *General Mercer*. Lieutenant Barney was put on board the *Minerva* as prize-master and immediately saw to the repair of the vessel's damaged rigging, sails, and hull. Within a few days the prize had been repaired and Barney sailed for Philadelphia in company with the *General Mercer*. Both vessels arrived at the restored rebel capital without further incident on Sunday, October 10, 1779. Joshua Barney and Isaiah Robinson parted company after this voyage, but it appears Robinson chose to continue serving as a privateer aboard the Alexandria built ship. On November 8, 1779, Samuel Morris, the merchant of Philadelphia who owned a share in the *General Mercer* and "company," were "permitted to export a Quantity of codfish, taken by the privateer" during her cruise from Bordeaux to Philadelphia.

In the papers of Benjamin Franklin there is a letter dated July 3, 1780 from "Messrs. Harman and Lewis" in Philadelphia to Franklin's grand-nephew, Jonathan Williams, Jr. Williams served for a time as agent at Nantes, procuring supplies for the American war effort. In the letter "Messrs. Harman and Lewis" reported the probable capture of the ship "*General Mercer, Capt. Robinson.*" Though the exact date of Robinson's death is unknown, his will was dated August 12, 1777 and was probated in Philadelphia on September 25, 1781. In view of the fact that a "Captain Robinson" is associated with the seizure of the ship *General Mercer*, it is likely that Robinson died within two years of his last voyage with his young protégé Barney. Possibly he was mortally wounded during the capture of the *General Mercer* in 1780.

Colonel John Carlyle, like Robinson, would not live to see the end of the war. The "Old" Colonel died sometime in the fall of 1780. Through their entrepreneurial spirit, courage, and patriotism, merchants like Carlyle and daring privateers like Barney and Robinson kept the Revolution alive.

Selected Sources

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New Map Graces Upper Passage

In the coming weeks an expansive six-and-half-foot by four-and-a-half-foot reproduction of an 18th-century map will grace the walls of John Carlyle’s upper passage. The original map was created by university trained physician and native Virginian John Mitchell (1711-1768). Mitchell had developed a deep interest and proficiency in botany but is best known for his sprawling map of the British colonies in North America. In striking contrast to French cartographers of the day, who depicted the British colonies constrained by the Appalachian Mountains, Mitchell presented an almost boundless view of British North America. The map proved an instant success in Britain and America, where copies were distributed to each of the colonial governors. It is possible that Braddock utilized Mitchell’s masterpiece while planning his ill-fated campaign against the French. It is also plausible that Carlyle owned a copy of the map as well.

The first edition of Mitchell’s celebrated map



was published in February 1755. Its original title was “*A Map of the British and French Dominions in North America ...*” The map was the product of a request by George Montagu-Dunk, 2nd Earl of Halifax, president of the Board of Trade and Plantations. Halifax’s objective was to create a map that maximized British territorial claims in North America. By 1775, with England’s victory over the French in the Seven Years War, Mitchell’s map had dropped the “*French Dominions*” from its title and was renamed “*A Map of the British Colonies in North America ...*” For some unknown reason the copyright statement on subsequent editions of the map still retained the “1755” publication date. Although the reproduction of Dr. Mitchell’s map in the museum’s collection bears the early date, it is in fact a reproduction of the fourth edition, published in 1775.

Although this was the only map Mitchell ever produced, it is one of the most significant maps in American history. It was the only map used during the Treaty of Paris peace negotiations between Great Britain and her former American colonies in 1783. Mitchell’s map helped settle many subsequent treaty negotiations and boundary disputes, the latest in 1932.



August 2, Saturday

Housewarming:

“It’s a fine beginning.”

12:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.

August 23, Saturday

War of 1812 Reenactment:

Alexandria—A City Occupied.

10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

September 21, Sunday

Volunteer Appreciation Barbecue

Cameron Run Regional Park

5:00 p.m.