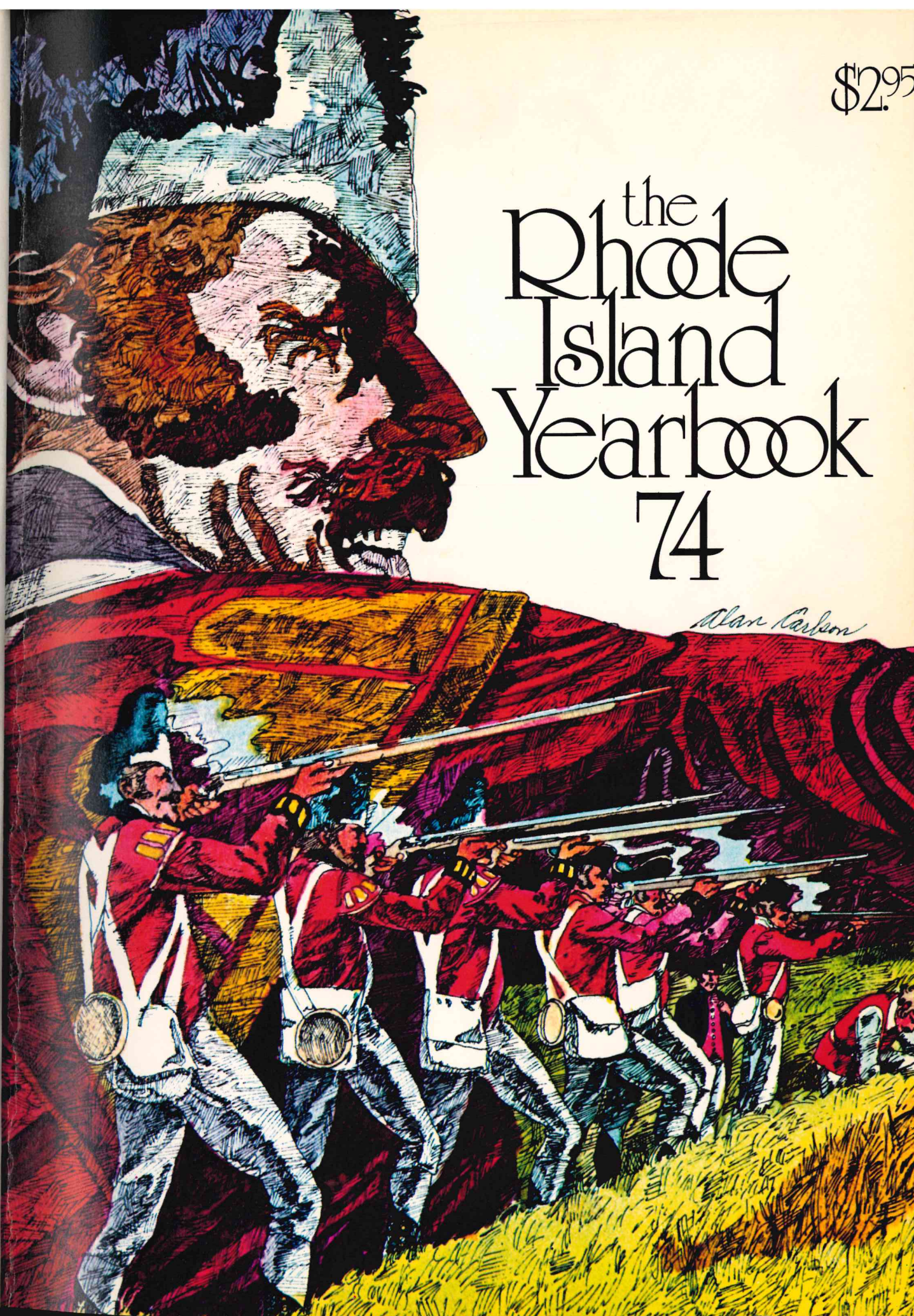


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Alan Carlson

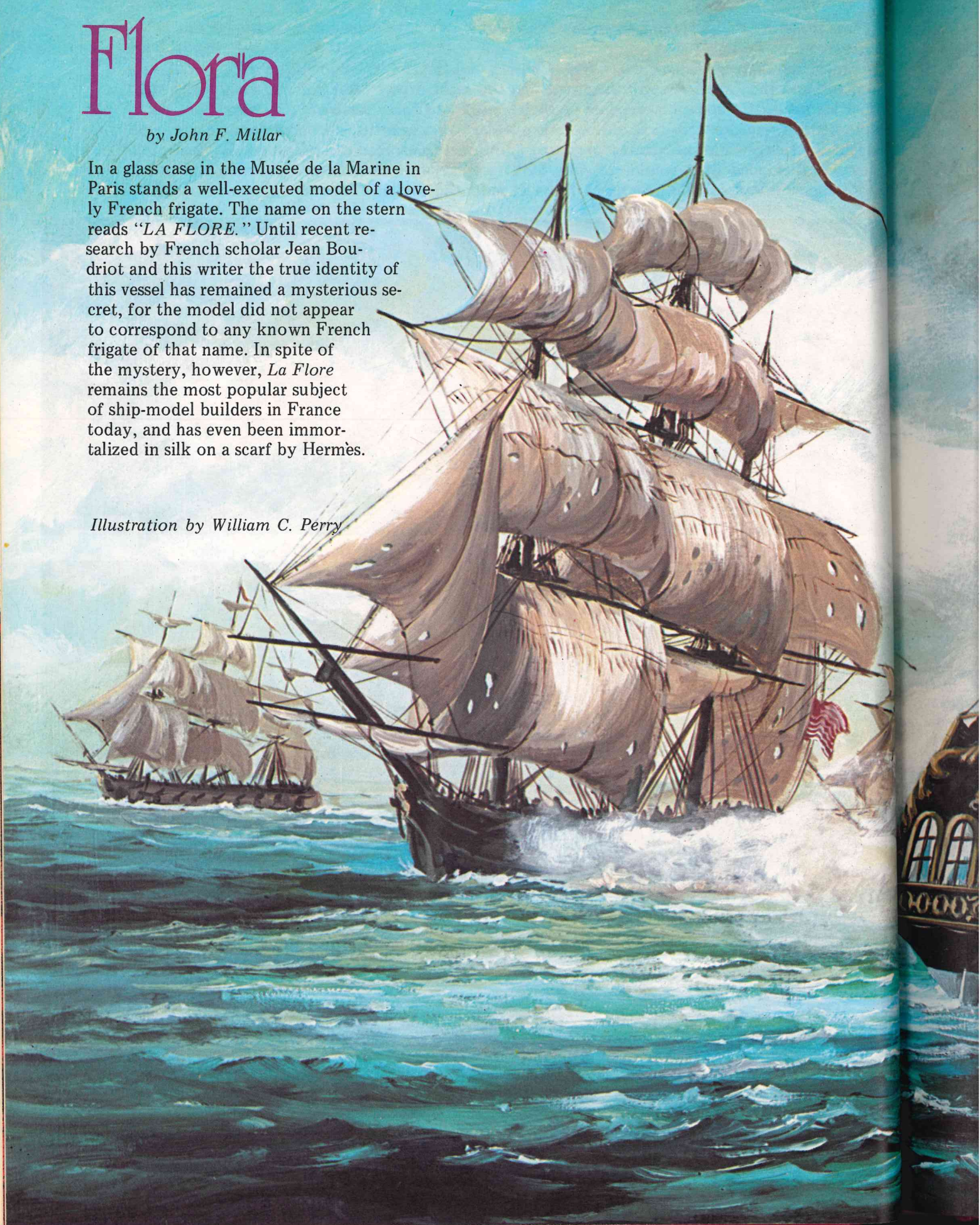


Flora

by John F. Millar

In a glass case in the Musée de la Marine in Paris stands a well-executed model of a lovely French frigate. The name on the stern reads "LA FLORE." Until recent research by French scholar Jean Boudriot and this writer the true identity of this vessel has remained a mysterious secret, for the model did not appear to correspond to any known French frigate of that name. In spite of the mystery, however, *La Flore* remains the most popular subject of ship-model builders in France today, and has even been immortalized in silk on a scarf by Hermès.

Illustration by William C. Perry





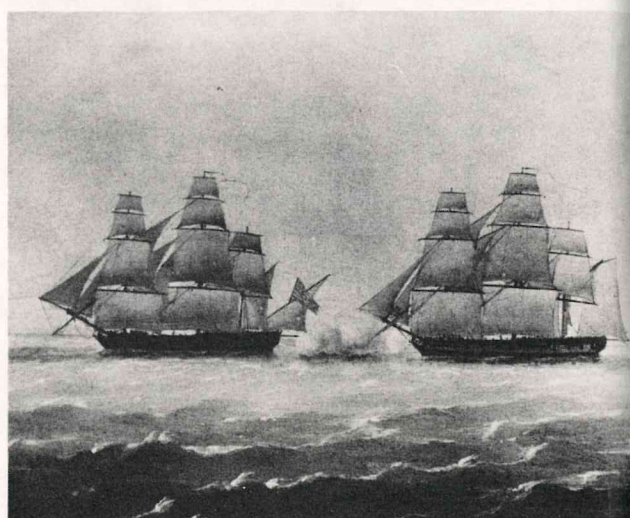
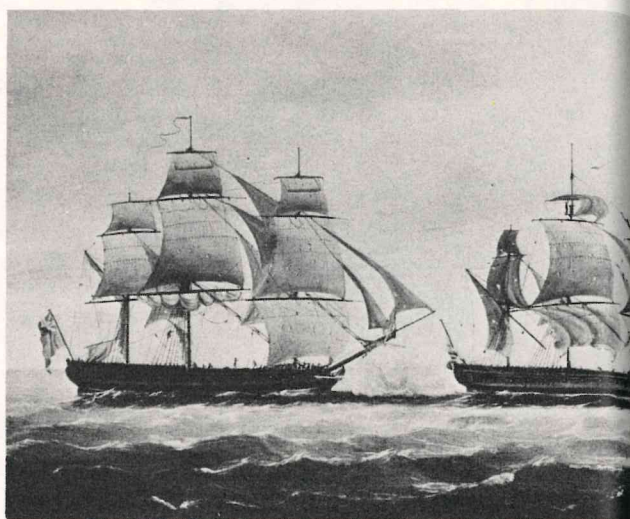
The FLORA (left), having lowered her ringtail, has changed direction and is now chasing the American prize frigate FOX in this the third painting in Holman's set portraying the battle in July 1777. The FOX had been captured shortly before from the British by the HANCOCK and the BOSTON. Not long after her recapture by the FLORA, the FOX was once more taken, this time by the French. Courtesy Childs Gallery.

Flora

According to French Naval records, several Naval vessels have borne the name *La Flore*. The first, 1706-1720, was constructed at Le Havre under master-builder Cochoy, and measured about 70 feet in length. She mounted ten small cannons, and was classified as a corvette, rigged probably with two masts.

The second, built at Toulon in 1728 by the important French naval constructor, Francois Coulomb, was a much more substantial vessel. She mounted about 30 cannons, and was inaccurately described as a frigate. She carried her guns on two gundecks, and by definition a frigate has only one gundeck. The lower of the two gundecks was so close to the waterline that it could only be used in calm weather, so only a handful of cannons were placed on it, the rest of the space being occupied by small ports for rowing the vessel in calm weather. The mere thought of rowing a vessel displacing over 500 tons leaves one's tongue hanging out of one's mouth. This *La Flore* soon became out of date because of her peculiar deck arrangement and so she was relegated to the job of stationary headquarters for the admirals in the port of Marseille until she was broken up in 1761. She can be seen flying a white flag over the three lanterns on the stern in one of Vernet's beautiful paintings of Marseille, and she bears no more resemblance to our model than did the corvette we investigated earlier.

The third *La Flore* was built at Brest in 1757 to the plans of master-builder Groignard. Since our model looks as if it was of a ship of the 1750's to 1770's we might expect this ship would be likely to correspond to our model. Not so. Although at 136 feet 7 inches long on the gundeck she is only a few inches different from our model, yet the third *La Flore* has quite a different shape both in the bow and the stern, as shown by blueprints preserved in the French archives that were used to guide the craftsmen in carving the ornamentation on the bow and stern. In addition, our model has 15 gunports a side on her gundeck with no cannons on the quarter deck, while the third *La Flore* had but 13 ports a side and carried some cannons on her quar-



The FLORA (right) under British colors chasing the Continental frigate HANCOCK (left) which clearly displays the Grand Union Flag as her ensign. HANCOCK was captured later in the action by H.M.S. RAINBOW. The square sail set on the spanker gaff on FLORA was known as a ringtail. The picture, first of a set of four painted shortly after the battle by British artist Francis Holman, is courtesy of Childs Gallery in Boston.

terdeck. The latter is known to have had 8-pounder cannons, and while the model is also fitted with cannons of this size, her gunports are larger than would normally have been cut for cannons of this size. The third *La Flore* was not too well built, it seems, as her fastenings opened up to the extent that she leaked seven inches of water per day towards the end of her life, and she was broken up in 1785. Clearly this ship is not our model, although she came close.

From what little that was known of our model, she was claimed to have been American. Judging from her design, she was definitely not built in America, but she could have been a loan or gift of

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the French to the Americans for the period of the War of Independence. None of the standard American works on ships of the Revolutionary War (such as Chapelle's *History of the American Sailing Navy*) mentions any French-built ship in American service that survived the War that could remotely match our model. French records do show that there was a frigate called *La Flore* that arrived in France in 1784 either as a gift or as a purchase from America, and that since there was already a frigate of that name in the French Navy (see above) her name was immediately changed to *LA RECONNAISSANCE*. She was found to be in good condition, although old, and was taken into the Navy for a few years. In 1792, she was sold out of the service to the Sieur Faure de Rochefort for 35,000 livres, and he employed her as a privateer in the war that was then being fought against the British. Unfortunately for him, The British frigate *PHAETON* captured her in 1798, and, as we shall shortly see, this was her second time around to be captured by the British.

Further perusal of the French records do not reveal much about the vessel before 1784, except one thing; she apparently had been sunk in 1778 in Newport Harbor by the British at the approach of the powerful fleet of Admiral d'Estaing. This was the one vital missing link needed to establish the identity of the model. A quick check of British records of their frigates sunk at Newport on that occasion reveals that the following ships were burned or blown up: *CERBERUS*, 28 guns; *JUNO*, 32 guns; *ORPHEUS*, 32 guns, and *LARK*, 32 guns. But there was one more frigate that was not blown up or burned: the *FLORA*, 32 guns, was simply sunk about half way between the Treadway Inn and Goat Island, along with the corvette *FALCON*, 16 guns. *The Diary of Frederick Mackenzie* records that the British attempted to raise the *FALCON* a few weeks later, but that her hull had so filled up with mud in that short space of time that it was deemed impossible to raise her. He says nothing at all about *FLORA*, other than that her commanding officer, Captain John Brisbane, was senior officer of the Royal Navy present during the siege of Newport.

As a matter of fact, although Mackenzie fails to record it, a later attempt was made to raise *FALCON*, and the little corvette was able to sail out of Newport once more, only to be lost at sea a year later. As for the *FLORA*, she surprisingly remained on the bottom of Newport Harbor until she was raised by the Americans two years later; the *Hartford Courant* of 11th July 1780, carries this news, datelined Providence, 1st July, "*The British frigate FLORA which the Enemy sunk in the Harbour of Newport, was on Thursday last raised, and got to*

one of the Wharves, in order to be repaired." Papers of General Heath confirm this. She must have been exceptionally well built to have so easily been made serviceable following two years at the bottom of the harbor.

Because of the similarity of the names, this must be the same ship as represented by our model. Her earlier history is a matter of record at the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, England. She was built in France in 1756, the same year the *ROSE* was built in Yorkshire, and was named *LA VESTALE*. She was about 25 feet longer than the *ROSE*, but carried about the same weight of armament: 26 eight-pounders on her gundeck with no cannons on her quarterdeck at all. She was captured in 1761 by the British, and since they already had a frigate named *VESTAL* they changed the name of the French ship to *FLORA*. *FLORA* was considerably larger than the British frigates of her class, and indeed was larger than the British frigates of the 32-gun and even of the 36-gun classes. Hence, it is not surprising that they were tempted to increase her armament. They apparently added one more gunport per side and enlarged all of her existing gunports so as to be able to replace her eight-pounders with twelve-pounder cannons. Then they placed four or six six-pounders on the quarterdeck, thus converting a weak 26-gun ship into a powerful 32-gun ship.

At this point, it would be instructive to spend a few lines on armament. In the eighteenth century, a ship was given a 'rate' of so many guns, but she may actually have carried more. *FLORA* was rated as a 26-gun ship, but actually was described many times in log-books as a 32-gun ship. Further to confuse the issue, not all gunports mounted guns; the pair closest to the bow was usually empty (to make handling the anchor gear easier) except when used for bow chaser cannons during a chase, and occasionally the pair closest to the stern was left vacant to give the captain more room in his quarters. Hence, the *FLORA*, with 15 ports to a side, was described by both French and British alike as mounting only 26 guns on the gundeck, while the model clearly shows ports for 30. The model also shows that the ports were spaced according to the French rules exactly 1.92 metres apart, which rules apply only to vessels mounting 8-pounder cannons; 12-pounder ships had their ports spaced 2.03 metres apart. At the same time, the size of the model's ports are the standard size of a ship mounting 12-pounders, which indicates that the British up-graded the *FLORA*'s power after capturing her. The French recorded that when they took possession of the ship once more in 1784 she was fitted with

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Flora continued from page 31

12-pounders, which they quickly replaced with 8-pounders once more.

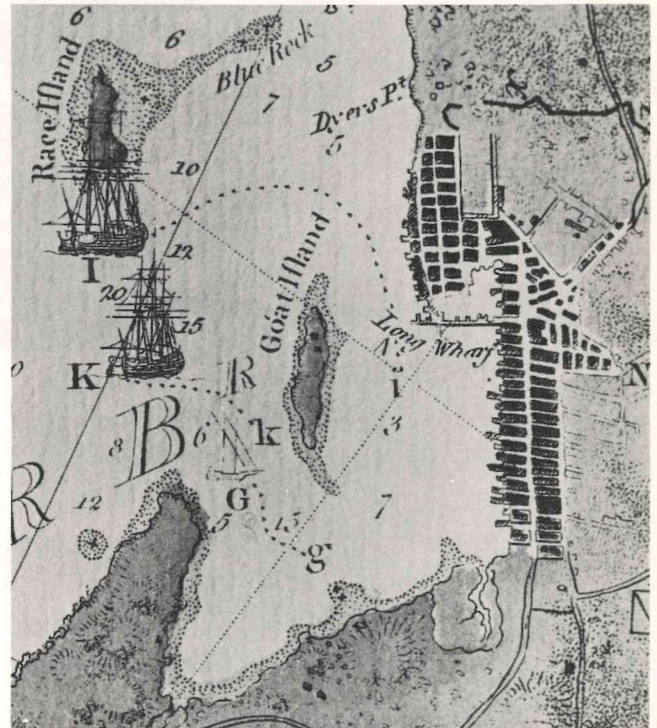
This same *FLORA* was cruising off the coast of New England in 1777 in company with *HMS RAINBOW*, 44 guns, when they came across an American squadron of superior power. This was the 32-gun frigate *HANCOCK*, which the British later described as the 'most beautiful frigate that ever swam,' the 28-gun frigate *FOX* which had recently been captured from the British by the *HANCOCK*, and the 24-gun frigate *BOSTON*. At the approach of the British, the Americans panicked and scattered, while the British coolly and methodically picked them off: *RAINBOW* went for *HANCOCK*, while *FLORA* went for *FOX*, and soon it was all over for two of the largest ships in America's tiny Navy. The *BOSTON*, meanwhile, had escaped, and her captain was court-martialled for not supporting the other two. John Brisbane, captain of the *FLORA*, commissioned marine artist Francis Holman to paint a series of four oil paintings of the battle, and they can be seen in the Childs' Gallery in Boston, where they are for sale. Close examination of the paintings substantiates that this *FLORA* looks a great deal like our model, although that in itself would not be conclusive proof of the ship's identity.

One question remains to be answered: what happened to *FLORA* between 1780 when she was raised and 1784 when she was returned to the French? It is fairly certain that she did not become part of the Continental Navy, as she does not match the descriptions of any Naval vessels. If she was used as a privateer, one would expect to find some mention of her activities during those years, for she would have been about the most powerful privateer in American hands. All we do know is that she was towed to Providence and repaired after she was raised, and that these repairs necessitated her being hove down on her side or 'careened'. *The Independent Chronicle of Boston*, in its issue dated 8th August 1782, mentions a Massachusetts privateer called *FLORA* operating at that time, and mounting 26 guns, but there is no way at present of proving that they were the same vessel. It seems a likely possibility, however, that this privateer was our *FLORA*, as privateers mounting 26 guns or more during the War of Independence were extremely scarce. This privateer *FLORA* does not appear in the list of privateer bond holdings for Massachusetts or Rhode Island, although that in itself means little because of the incompleteness of the list. It seems likely that she maintained her name of *FLORA* under American colors, as the French captain who brought her back to France in

1784 renamed her *La FLORE*, and he must have had some basis for doing so.

Chronology of the frigate *FLORA*

- 1756 built in France, named *La Vestale*, mounting 26 8-pounders.
- 1761 captured by *HMS Unicorn*, renamed *Flora*, mounting 26 12-pounders and 6 6-pounders
- 1777 in company with *HMS Rainbow*, captured American frigates *Hancock* and *Fox*. This battle was painted in oils by Holman.
- 1778 sunk by her captain, John Brisbane, in Newport Harbor at the approach of d'Estaing and the French fleet.
- 1780 raised by the Americans, towed to Providence and repaired.
- 1782 a *Flora* mounting 26 guns is recorded as being a privateer in an account in a Boston newspaper.
- 1784 given or sold back to the French Navy, renamed *La Reconnaissance*, mounting 26 8-pounders; model at Musee de la Marine may have been made at this time.
- 1792 Sold to Sieur Fauré de Rochefort as a privateer.
- 1798 captured by *HMS Phaeton* and presumably broken up shortly after.



Detail from a chart of Narragansett Bay in the British cartographic series *The Atlantic Neptune*, published in the 1770's. The *FLORA* is shown moored at "I" on the eve of the French invasion, and was moved to "i" and sunk in Newport Harbor. "K" represents the corvette *FALCON*, and "G" a small galley, both of which were similarly sunk near *FLORA* at the same time.