

ON THE COVER:

Lithograph Poster of Sissieretta Jones by the Metropolitan Printing Co., 1899. This theater poster depicts a young Sissieretta Jones wearing numerous gold medals bestowed by civic and government groups to honor the young soprano during her two tours of the West Indies and South America (Courtesy of the Library of Congress).



Rhode Island History

SUMMER/FALL 2014 VOLUME 72, NUMBER 2

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Published by
The Rhode Island Historical Society
110 Benevolent Street
Providence, Rhode Island 02906-3152

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RHODE ISLAND HISTORY is a peer-reviewed journal published two times a year by the Rhode Island Historical Society at 110 Benevolent Street, Providence, Rhode Island 02906-3152. Postage is paid at Providence, Rhode Island. Society members receive each issue as a membership benefit. Institutional subscriptions to RHODE ISLAND HISTORY are \$25.00 annually. Individual copies of current and back issues are available from the Society for \$12.50 (price includes postage and handling). Manuscripts and other correspondence should be sent to Dr. Elizabeth C. Stevens, Editor, at the Society or to estevens@rihs.org.

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One of many studio portraits of Sissieretta Jones, by Marceau Studio, 1909. (Courtesy of the University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections Division, J. Willis Sayre Photograph Collections, negative number JWS12488).

Rhode Island's Star Soprano: Sissieretta Jones

MAUREEN D. LEE

Sissieretta Jones, of Providence, Rhode Island, was an internationally renowned soprano who toured the United States and Europe during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By the time Sissieretta Jones completed her twenty-eight-year career in 1915, she had performed for four United States Presidents; had been one of the first black women to sing at Carnegie Hall; had sung in Europe, South America, Cuba, the West Indies, and Canada; and had performed extensively throughout the United States, appearing in forty-six of the contiguous forty-eight states.¹ Often billed as the "greatest singer of her race," Sissieretta Jones thrilled both black and white audiences with her magnificent voice as she sang operatic arias, European art songs, and concert ballads. The press called her "Black Patti," a sobriquet that suggested a comparison to the famous European opera star, Adelina Patti. Sissieretta was not the only black female vocalist recognized for performing serious music during this time period. Others included Nellie Brown Mitchell, Marie Selika, Elizabeth Taylor-Greenfield, and Flora Batson.² However, Sissieretta Jones was the most famous and her career lasted the longest.

A study of Sissieretta Jones's remarkable career reveals the story of an immensely talented woman who negotiated a world in which her ambitions and desires were thwarted by the pervasive racism of American culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This gifted soprano was never allowed the freedom to pursue an operatic career that her white counterparts enjoyed. Instead she had to limit her professional ambitions because society denied equality to her race. Despite these limitations, she found ways to circumvent the burden of racism to share her voice with the world

and her vision of herself as an artist who could help bring about social change.

Matilda Sissieretta Joyner was born January 5, 1868 in Portsmouth, Virginia, three years after the Civil War ended. She was the first of three children born to Jeremiah and Henrietta Joyner.³ Jeremiah had been born into slavery in North Carolina. At the time of Sissieretta's birth, he was a carpenter and African Methodist minister in Portsmouth. He could read and write. Her mother, also from North Carolina, took in washing and ironing. Although illiterate, Henrietta was an exceptional soprano who sang in the choir at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, Portsmouth's first black Baptist church.⁴ Sissieretta's brother and sister died at an early age. Shortly after her brother's death, Sissieretta and her parents moved to Providence and settled at 20 Congdon Street, near the Congdon Street Baptist Church.⁵ Jeremiah reportedly came to Providence because he had been offered a part-time ministerial position at one of the city's black churches, although documentation as to which church hired him has yet to be found.

When the Joyners arrived in Providence in 1876, they found a thriving and vibrant capital city of residential neighborhoods and businesses along with a transit system of horsecars on rails that linked various parts of the city. The number of African Americans in the city was small compared with the white population. The Joyners likely were welcomed into Providence's black community, especially through their church membership. During the 1880s many African Americans living in Providence had a rich community and social life and were comfortable financially. "In no other city in the Union will you find a colored community

better off than in Providence, when it comes to money," wrote the Providence correspondent to the *New York Age* in his April 28, 1888 column.⁶ This black newspaper and its predecessor, the *New York Freeman*, regularly reported about various African-American organizations and clubs in Providence, such as the Apollo Club and the Narragansett Hallmen, that hosted balls, receptions, cultural programs, recitals, and sponsored cruises down Narragansett Bay. However, Matilda Sissieretta Joyner came of age in a city where racial prejudice was the norm. For example, skilled black mechanics could not get jobs at white-owned businesses and white clerks sometimes refused to rent skates to black children at the local skating rink.⁷

Sissieretta's extraordinary talent was evident from her earliest years. Within two years of the family's arrival in Providence, Sissieretta's parents separated. Sissieretta and her mother moved to 7 Jackson Court (a street between Benefit and North Main Street that no longer exists). Henrietta took in washing and ironing to support herself and Sissieretta. It is unknown whether Jeremiah provided any financial support for his daughter. Sissieretta attended Meeting Street Primary and later Thayer Street Grammar School.⁸ The young girl enjoyed singing around the house, at school and at church. She once said, "When I was a little girl, just a wee slip of a tad, I used to go about singing. I guess I must have been a bit of a nuisance then for my mouth was open all the time."⁹ Her classmates, who called her "Sissy" or "Tilly" loved to hear her beautiful and distinctive voice on "singing teacher day."¹⁰ But it was at church, especially in programs and festivals held at the Pond Street Baptist Church, where the young vocalist got the most attention. Sissieretta recalled one of her first performances on a stage in the church hall. "Oh I was scared so that I could hardly catch my breath. When the applause came I almost fell off the stage. But timidity was soon replaced by confidence, and I kept on singing in charitable enterprises."¹¹

Despite her natural talent, it was necessary for Sissieretta to obtain voice training and instruction in order to realize her ambition to sing professionally. By 1883, when Sissieretta was fifteen, she began formal music training at the Providence Academy of Music, "under the tutelage of Baroness Lacombe, an eminent Italian Preceptor, and Mr. Monros, also eminent in the world of music."¹² It is unknown how she and her mother could afford this instruction. About the same time, the young Sissieretta Joyner fell in love with David Richard Jones, a twenty-one-year-old man from Baltimore who worked as a bellman at the fashionable eight-story Narragansett Hotel on the southwest corner of Dorrance and Weybosset streets in downtown Providence. They married on September 4, 1883 and had a child, Mabel Adelina Jones, on April 8, 1884.¹³ The family lived with Sissieretta's mother, Henrietta, at 7 Jackson Court. The child died two years later from "pharyngitis and croup."¹⁴ After enduring Mabel's death, Sissieretta turned her attention to more vocal training and performances. Some press reports later held that she trained at the Boston Conservatory of Music; others claimed that she attended the New England Conservatory. One music scholar, John Graziano, has suggested she may not have attended either school, but instead had a private tutor in Boston.¹⁵ Whatever the case, Sissieretta was able to get much needed training to develop her voice and expand her repertoire of operatic and concert music. It is not known how she managed to pay for her vocal training.

Restricted to performing in her own community by accepted racial separation, the young soprano was fortunate to live in Providence, which had a black community interested in a wide variety of musical programs and a group of talented African-American performers with whom she could share the stage. These entertainers included actor Benjamin Lightfoot; the musical Melvin sisters—Carrie, who played the violin and mandolin, and

Louise, a pianist; tenor Will Pierce; and mezzo-soprano Flora Batson. Providence columns in the *New York Freeman* and later the *New York Age* between 1886 and 1888 are filled with reports of their appearances at events in the city's African-American community. Lightfoot would eventually manage Sissieretta for a short time and Pierce performed with her for several years. Flora M. Batson, the most popular of them all, was frequently mentioned in the newspaper. She had moved to Providence as a child with her widowed mother from Washington, D.C. Batson, who did not have formal voice training but had a powerful voice, gained experience in Providence's black churches. By the time Sissieretta met her, Batson had performed for three years, from 1883 to 1885, at the People's Church in Boston and had sung in many concerts, including a European tour and a temperance revival in New York City.¹⁶

It was fellow African-American singer Flora Batson who provided Sissieretta Jones's entrée onto the segregated musical stage. By 1885, Batson was performing in the well-known Bergen Star Concerts, led by John G. Bergen, a white concert manager who promoted black singers and arranged concerts to entertain black audiences. Before the end of the year, Batson became the lead singer of the Bergen Star Concerts. The first report of Sissieretta performing with Batson was at a concert and reception for the Fourth Battalion Drum Corp on May 21, 1885, at Providence's Armory Hall.¹⁷ From that point on Sissieretta often appeared with Batson at functions in Providence and later sang in several Bergen Star Concerts, gaining much needed experience and exposure in the music world. Sissieretta joined Batson in a concert at New York City's Steinway Hall in April 1888 and the following month she and Batson sang before nearly 8,000 people in Philadelphia.¹⁸

Once promoted by Batson and Bergen, Sissieretta Jones moved onto a wider stage. Sometime in the



Sissieretta Jones, early 1890s. She posed for her portrait in New York City. (Courtesy of the Dramatic Museum Portrait Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University).

spring of 1888, Sissieretta came to the attention of William Risen, an agent for a major New York entertainment management firm. By July 1888, Risen hired Sissieretta to star in an all-black musical troupe headed for South America and the West Indies. Sissieretta had two very successful tours in the southern hemisphere between August 1888 and July 1891—one led by a white manager and one led by her husband, David, and Florence Williams, a former newspaper reporter for the *New York Age*.¹⁹ Officials of the countries and cities where Sissieretta performed often gave her



Sissieretta enjoyed wearing beautiful gowns adorned with medals she had received from foreign dignitaries during her two tours of the West Indies and South America between 1888 and 1891. (Courtesy of the Dramatic Museum Portrait Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University).

jewelry or gold medals to show their appreciation. These are the medals she wore pinned to her gowns when she performed during her early concert years. It would take until 1892, however, for Sissieretta to begin to make a name for herself in the United States. Early that year she sang at a White House luncheon hosted by President Benjamin Harrison and his wife. One of the selections she sang was Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home," better known as "Swanee River."²⁰ This song became her signature song for the rest of her career.

Soon after her White House concert, other important opportunities opened up to Sissieretta.

In April, two months after her White House appearance, she was hired to sing at a three-day "Grand Negro Jubilee" at New York's Madison Square Garden. On opening night, before an audience of 5,000 people, the majority of whom were white, Sissieretta dazzled the crowd with the cavatina from Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable*, "La Farfalla" by Ettore Gelli, and "Sempre Libera" from Verdi's *La Traviata*. She gave two encores that evening, "Swanee River" and "Maggie the Cows are in the Clover." After seeing the Madison Square Garden concert, one newspaper critic from the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, an entertainment paper of the day, wrote that Sissieretta "sang the cavatina from *Robert le Diable* with a purity of tone, an accuracy of phrasing, and a richness and a power that the audience . . . applauded and cheered . . ."²¹ Another critic, this one from the *Detroit Plaindealer*, called Sissieretta, "a Patti with a soul." He went on to say, "The soul of a nightingale seems to have lodged in that throat. She sings with remarkable passion and depth of feeling." But this critic's closing comments would prove prophetic regarding the future of Sissieretta's stage career:

It is rather pitiful to think of the way in which her career may be hampered because of her race—not because of prejudice exactly, but she certainly cannot appear in opera, in which she would undoubtedly succeed, unless one were written especially for her, and then almost insuperable difficulties would attend its production. She will be limited to concert, and even there, after the novelty has died out, her color will be an unpleasant circumstance to those over-fastidious people who demand an angel in face as well as in voice for their delectation at a public performance.²²

Sissieretta's appearance at Madison Square Garden was a major turning point in her career. An important management contract, additional vocal training, and many more concert opportunities followed this performance. Years later, while thinking back on the 1892 concert, Sissieretta said, "I woke up famous after singing at the Garden and

didn't know it."²³ This concert had such historical significance that it prompted Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer to name Sissieretta's 1892 Madison Square Garden performance as one of thirty-six milestones in the history of "the Negro's participation in American entertainment," in their 1967 book, *Black Magic: A Pictorial History of Black Entertainers in America*.²⁴

Prior to her Madison Square Garden concert Sissieretta had been performing for mostly black audiences, but that changed when she signed a contract with a prominent white manager, James B. Pond, in June 1892.²⁵ Pond, whose American Lecture and Musical Agency, represented famous people like Mark Twain and Charles Dickens, apparently anticipated the difficulties getting white American performers to appear with Sissieretta. The savvy manager avoided this obstacle by featuring Sissieretta with foreign musicians and vocalists, like English-born band leader and cornetist Jules Levy and Spanish-born violinist Princess Lily Dolgorouky. These combinations also helped to attract more white concertgoers. Pond booked Sissieretta for festivals and fairs like the Pittsburgh Exposition and other venues, such as Congress Spring Park in the resort town of Saratoga Springs, New York, where she would be seen by large, predominately white audiences and reviews of her appearances would be reported in the mainstream press. Asked by a Canadian reporter in 1892 whether she liked singing for mostly white concertgoers, Sissieretta said, "I do not feel as much at home with them yet. I am a little shy lest they should not like me. But so far they have proved most kind."²⁶ During the two years Sissieretta was under Pond's management her fame spread throughout the United States, although her relationship with her manager was rocky at best. In 1893, the New York Superior Court had to resolve a contract dispute between the two parties.²⁷ Sissieretta and Pond ended their professional relationship in mid-1894.

Sissieretta remained on the concert stage until the summer of 1896, making enough money to support herself and her husband, and to help her mother in Providence. She sang popular ballads, concert songs, and selections from operas such as *Robert Le Diable*, *Les Huguenots*, *La Traviata*, and *L'Africaine*. Her concert experiences included weeklong bookings at the 1892 and 1893 Pittsburgh Exposition, a one-evening performance at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, an 1894 concert at Madison Square Garden led by the famous Czech composer Antonin Dvorák, an appearance at London's Covent Garden in 1895 during a nine-month tour of Europe, and four performances at Carnegie Hall between 1892 and 1896.



An anonymous portrait of Sissieretta Jones, Providence, R.I., c. 1900. Ink on paper. Print. (Courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society, RHi X5 358).

Many critics were highly flattering in writing about Sissieretta's concerts. They described her soprano voice as powerful, clear, warm, sympathetic, and well-trained. For example, a review in the August 6, 1892 *Saratoga* (N.Y.) *Union*, said Sissieretta's voice was "beautiful, clear, steady, and resonant. There is neither brass in her notes nor thickness in her phrasing. Her enunciation is also perfect. The exquisite crispness with which she executes complicated scales in rapid time delighted all. Withal she sings intelligently, without affectation, and with much feeling."²⁸ Three years later, when Sissieretta was touring in Europe, a German review reprinted in the May 4, 1895 *Indianapolis Freeman* stated that, "Her well trained voice is of great range and fine carrying power. Her technical ability is admirable, she executes the most difficult florid passages with perfect ease, and the good taste of her delivery shows natural talent developed by careful and well directed study. A certain sharpness in the upper tones may have been the fault of the hall."²⁹

Although she received mostly positive and glowing reviews about her voice and performance, some of the reviews, often in the white press, described Sissieretta's physical appearance, her voice, and her achievements in demeaning ways—even when they were trying to compliment her. For example, many reports talked about the color of her skin, the size of her lips, the whiteness of her teeth, and the texture of her hair. Often newspaper reviews described how attractive, confident, graceful, dignified, and well-dressed she was and how her voice was highly cultivated, as if critics and concertgoers were surprised that an African-American singer would have such stage presence. The following quotations exhibit the veiled racism that Sissieretta encountered throughout her career.

This sable diva is highly cultivated, of profound insight into the spirit of her art. Yet she sings intelligently, wholly without affectation and with sound musical feeling. Her voice coming from a skin

as white as her teeth would be counted the wonder of all lands—it is a strong and beautiful voice, that sounds with the steadiness of a trumpet. Though it does not ring with passion, it shakes the heart, not your ears, with the pathetic warmth that marks all negro singing.³⁰

Miss Jones is well worth hearing. Her color doubtless does much to enhance her reputation, but apart from that she has a splendid and well-trained voice.³¹

Madame Jones is a woman of exceedingly pleasing presence. . . . Her skin has a soft lack-lustre tint as of blue plush in shadow. Her eyes are expressive. . . . Her teeth would be the envy of her fair sisters and the despair of dentistry. Her rather thin lips are fond of exposing their own even rows, snowy white, whether in song or conversation. Her hair is straight. . . .³²

Every true Christian and every sincere philanthropist must rejoice to find a member of the African race arising this high in the noble art of music.³³

The career limitations that Sissieretta Jones faced as an African American only strengthened her racial identity. When a San Francisco newspaper reporter asked Sissieretta in 1896 whether she wanted to appear in opera, Sissieretta said the lyric stage had always been her desire, but several reasons prevented her from achieving that dream. She said her extensive travel schedule made it difficult to study operatic roles. But she explained that her chief obstacle was that her skin was not the color of most prima donnas. The reporter suggested that wigs and costumes could bring about "marvelous transformations" on the stage, to which Sissieretta replied, "Try to hide my race and deny my own people? Oh, I would never do that. I am proud of belonging to them and would not hide what I am even for an evening."³⁴ Another time, while talking to a newspaper reporter about her experiences in Europe, Sissieretta said, "In Europe there is no prejudice against my race. . . . If a man or a woman is a great actor, or a great musician, or a great singer, they will extend a warm welcome, no matter whether he be a Jew or Greek or Gentile. It is the artist's soul they look at there, not the color

of his skin."³⁵ Sissieretta's comments demonstrated her longing for a world in which people would judge her solely by her singing ability.

African Americans of her day were proud of the talented soprano who sang beautiful concert and operatic pieces and dressed in elegant gowns and beautiful jewelry. Reviews in the black press took note of her confident, dignified manner and often mentioned her kindness and modesty. The initial reaction from most white audiences who heard her for the first time was surprise and curiosity that someone from the black race, from a people who had been enslaved for so long, had such talent and polish—characteristics they identified more with white people than black. She appeared so different from the stereotypical perception most whites had of African Americans that she likely caused some to reconsider their views. In recent years, one music scholar has written, "She was a role model, a public representative of the progress and accomplishments of her generation of African Americans born after the Civil War."³⁶ Sissieretta was well aware of her role as a public representative of her race. When she was in London in 1895, a newspaper reporter asked her about her recent tours in the southern United States. He reported:

Among her other exploits was a tour through the south, whereof she treasures the memory for two good reasons—the white folks came to hear her, more graciously, she supposes, than they had ever come to hear a coloured artist before, while her own people were frantic with delight at her success. Coloured people are passionately fond of music, and have produced some sweet singers. In the South, the coloured people are rigorously divided from the white folks in places of entertainment; but Miss Jones is overjoyed to think that her tour may have done something to soften racial prejudice.³⁷

Sissieretta enjoyed her time in Europe, where she experienced more freedom from the racial discrimination she lived with back in the states. She was in Europe between February and early

November of 1895, although little is known of her itinerary. She went to Europe with her husband, David, and her manager, Rudolph Voelckel. While there, Sissieretta performed for the Duke of Cambridge and the Prince of Wales in London,³⁸ and gave concerts in Paris, Berlin and likely Italy as well.³⁹ She had fond memories of her time there, particularly in London. She once told a newspaper reporter in 1906, "My appearance in Covent Garden, London, was one of the most exalted triumphs of my career. There was a fine audience and women took bouquets from their corsages to throw upon the stage."⁴⁰

Sissieretta left Europe and returned to New York in November 1895 to sing in a vaudeville show at Proctor's Pleasure Palace.⁴¹ She hoped to return to Europe the following spring, but that was not to be. Little did Sissieretta know that her brief foray into vaudeville would signify a major career change. She came back from Europe with a new manager, Mary Rodman, a woman she had met in Berlin. Rodman got a few concert bookings for Sissieretta, but was more successful booking appearances for her in vaudeville shows, which had become very popular in America.⁴² At this time, most of the other black women who sang serious music on the concert stage during Sissieretta's day—such as Marie Selika, Flora Batson, and Nellie Brown Mitchell—also found less concert work and turned instead to opening music studios or directing church or community choirs. These black vocalists were no longer a "curiosity" to white audiences, as music historian Eileen Southern explained in her 1983 book, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, "The fickle public soon tired of black prima donnas. Although the singers were gifted, well trained, and fortunate in obtaining good management, their careers on the concert stage were relatively short. . . . By the mid-1890s the black prima donna had almost disappeared from the nation's concert halls because of lack of public interest."⁴³



Sissieretta Jones's managers, Rudolph Voelckel and John Nolan, used advertising flyers and handbills to publicize the Black Patti Troubadours. This line drawing (c. 1897) was often used in newspaper advertisements as well. (Courtesy of the Museum of Performance and Design, San Francisco).

In 1896, Sissieretta was offered a new opportunity to star in a black road show that would bear her name—the Black Patti Troubadours. With few well-paying concert appearances available and with the need for a steady income to support herself and her husband, Sissieretta changed the

course of her career. The show was owned and run by her former manager, Rudolph Voelckel, and his partner John Nolan. The three-act show, similar in its organizational format to a minstrel show, included comedy, music, farcical skits, dance, and vaudeville, and it featured Sissieretta singing operatic and concert pieces in the third act, which was called the Operatic Kaleidoscope. With the Black Patti Troubadours, Sissieretta found steady employment, a good income, and dependable management.⁴⁴ As the star of this new troupe, she could expect a forty-week season with an income of about \$500 a week, or \$20,000 annually, which would make her one of the highest-paid African-American entertainers of her time.⁴⁵

The Black Patti Troubadours was not the only black road show of its kind. There were others, like the “Octoroons” and “Oriental America.” These shows, which grew out of the black minstrel show tradition, capitalized on the emergence of ragtime music and the growing popularity of vaudeville. Some historical perspective about the development of black musical entertainment helps us to understand why these shows, which people today would find racist and demeaning, were not only acceptable to blacks and whites, but popular in Sissieretta’s time. Minstrelsy offered many African Americans their first opportunity to gain access to the stage. Commercial blackface minstrelsy, in which white performers blackened their faces and imitated blacks, began in New York in 1843 and became a popular form of entertainment. After the Civil War, large numbers of African Americans eager to become entertainers began to perform in minstrel shows and by the 1870s some formed their own companies.⁴⁶ Just as white performers in blackface made fun of and ridiculed African Americans, so too, black minstrel show performers had to follow the same conventions. A generation of black performers got their training and experience in minstrel shows even though they had



The Black Patti Troubadours on stage, most likely at the Third Avenue Theater, Seattle, in December 1904. (Courtesy of the University of Washington Libraries, Special Collections Division, J. Willis Sayre Photograph Collection, negative number JWS23872).

to “perpetuate the genre’s derogatory stereotypes of black life.”⁴⁷ As one scholar has noted, “Since the minstrel show was often the only outlet for black performers, they had no choice.”⁴⁸ By the 1880s black minstrel companies had become so popular they took white audiences away from

white minstrel troupes and in the process employed hundreds of black musicians and performers.

Then came ragtime music in the early 1890s with its syncopated melodies. The music, created and developed by black musicians like Scott Joplin, appealed to both black and white audiences. It

paved the way for African Americans to move away from nineteenth-century "Ethiopian minstrelsy" and encouraged creativity among black performers and musicians. As ragtime developed, some scholars say white audiences came to accept a wider range of black music and stage entertainment than just minstrelsy.⁴⁹ The popularity of ragtime music coupled with the success of vaudeville and the remnants of minstrel shows fostered the development of black musical comedy shows. This kind of show offered Sissieretta, who could not perform in opera and had lost her concert milieu at the turn of the century, a venue to continue her vocal career.

One of the negative outcomes that accompanied ragtime music was the advent of the "coon song," which added lyrics to this music and became synonymous with ragtime in the public's view. Two music history scholars, Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, who have studied these kinds of songs, have said, "Coon songs, with their ugly name, typically featured lyrics in Negro dialect, caricaturing African American life, set to the melodious strains of ragtime music."⁵⁰ The most famous "coon song" and the one these two scholars assert "was adopted as the slogan of a Jim Crow society that refused to acknowledge African Americans as individuals," was "All Coons Look Alike to Me."⁵¹ The song was written by black composer and performer Ernest Hogan in 1896. Hogan later was Sissieretta's co-star in the Black Patti Troubadours from 1897 to 1899. The lyrics to the song were not objectionable, but what people remembered most was the offensive title. Although Hogan found financial success with the song, he later regretted writing it.⁵² Soon, syncopated "coon songs" became the rage. They found their way quickly into Broadway musicals, particularly through "coon shouters" such as May Irwin. Irwin was a white actress whose success singing a "coon song" in an 1895 show prompted her to add such songs to all

her future Broadway musicals. In fact, Irwin was the first to perform Hogan's "All Coons Look Alike to Me" in an 1896 show.⁵³ Black entertainers, both male and female, also became "coon shouters" and "coon songs" were featured in many black shows. Eventually the emerging black middle class and the black press condemned these kinds of songs and helped bring about their demise by about 1910. The managers of the Black Patti Troubadours show included numbers like "coon songs," buck dancing, farce comedy, and cakewalks, all of which were very popular with black and white audiences and acceptable at that time.

A few other black shows also included opera like the Troubadours, but the Troubadours had something no other black road show had—a famous, talented singer with star quality and a big name—Black Patti, the incomparable Sissieretta Jones. The Black Patti Troubadours, with its all-black cast, debuted on August 17, 1896, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts.⁵⁴ After a first act skit, "At Jolly Coney Island," by the troupe's 40-member cast and a second act of vaudeville entertainment, Sissieretta made her entrance in the show's third act, the Operatic Kaleidoscope. She and several members of her troupe, performed selections that night from *The Bohemian Girl*, *Il Trovatore*, and other operas. This three-part format, with Sissieretta only singing in the third act, lasted many years. During this third act, Sissieretta and members of her company would sing concert ballads and various selections from operas like *Rigoletto*, *Orpheus in the Underworld*, and *Lucia di Lammermoor* and also present scenes from operettas and light operas like *H.M.S. Pinafore* and *The Chimes of Normandy*. Eventually Sissieretta also sang in the second act as well. By the end of her career she had a major speaking role in the comedy skit. Sissieretta remained the star of the Black Patti Troubadours, later called the Black Patti Musical Comedy Company, from mid-1896 until the end of 1914—almost nineteen years. Her

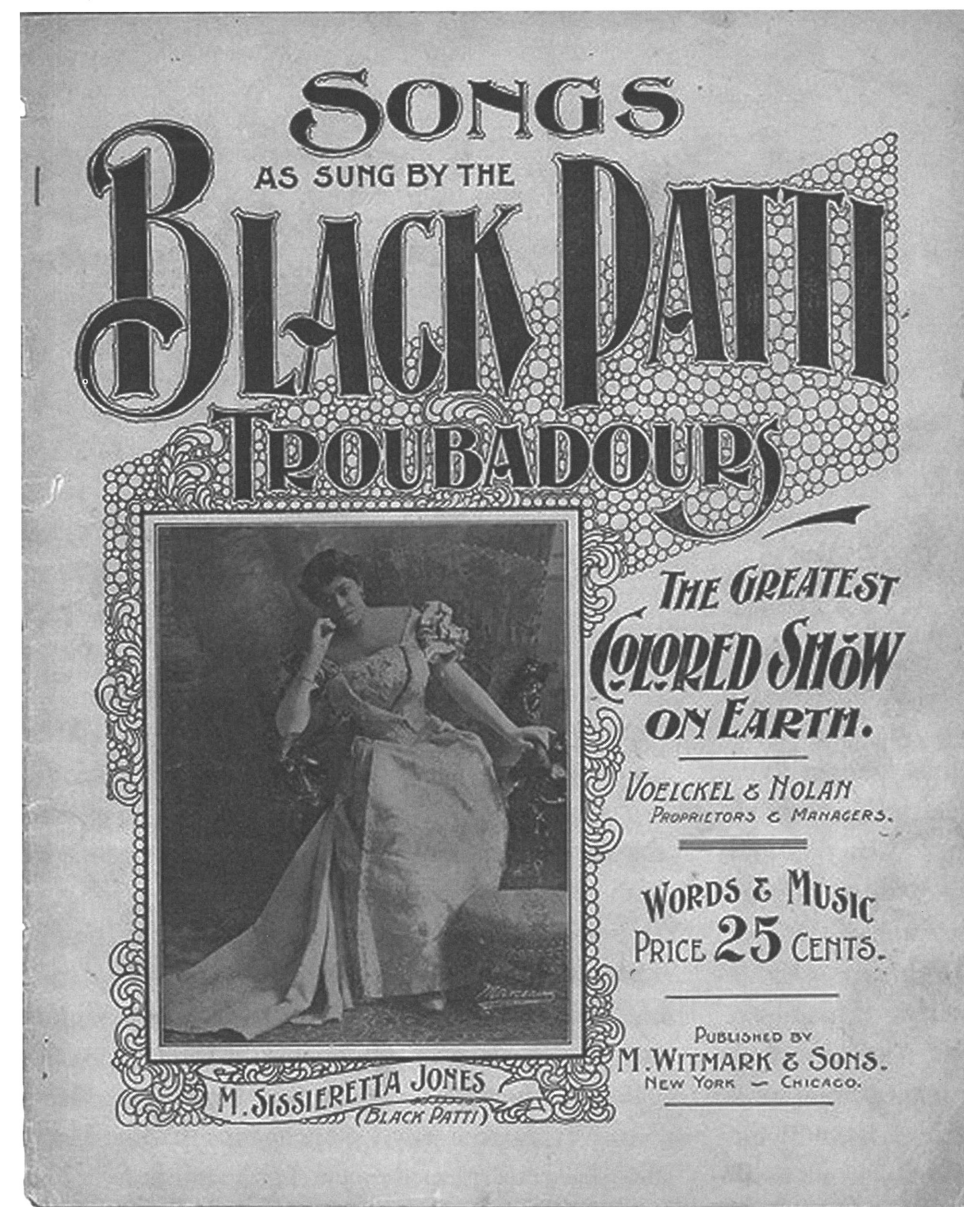
troupe became a training ground for many African Americans seeking a career in show business. Some of those who worked in her show went on to have successful careers as comedians, composers, singers, and dancers.

The Black Patti Troubadours followed a grueling schedule. During the years Sissieretta and her company were on the road, they began their

touring season in late August or early September of one year and finished in late May or early June of the following year. Sissieretta and her troupe were on the road forty-two to forty-five weeks at a time. By November 1899, managers Voelckel and Nolan had arranged for the troupe to travel in a private Pullman car with their own cook, making it easier for the black performers to navigate lodging, eating,

and travel arrangements in the segregated world in which they lived and worked.⁵⁵ They had a rigorous schedule with few week-long bookings. Instead, they usually did one-night stands, performing in five or six cities and towns a week and often giving both a matinee and evening performance. This kind of schedule meant that most nights after their performance the troupe would have to pack their costumes and sets on the train and travel by night to the next stop, where they would set up for the next show, be it a matinee or evening performance, or both. At the end of each season, Sissieretta always returned to Providence to stay with her mother, with whom she had a very close relationship. In 1898, she filed for divorce from her husband for non-support and it was granted the following year.⁵⁶ She said her husband was constantly drunk and

spent her money, earning none of his own. He also reportedly once struck her with a chair.⁵⁷



Witmark and Sons published several songbooks titled, "Songs as Sung by the Black Patti Troubadours." The music booklets always featured a photograph of Sissieretta Jones on the front cover (From the author's private collection).

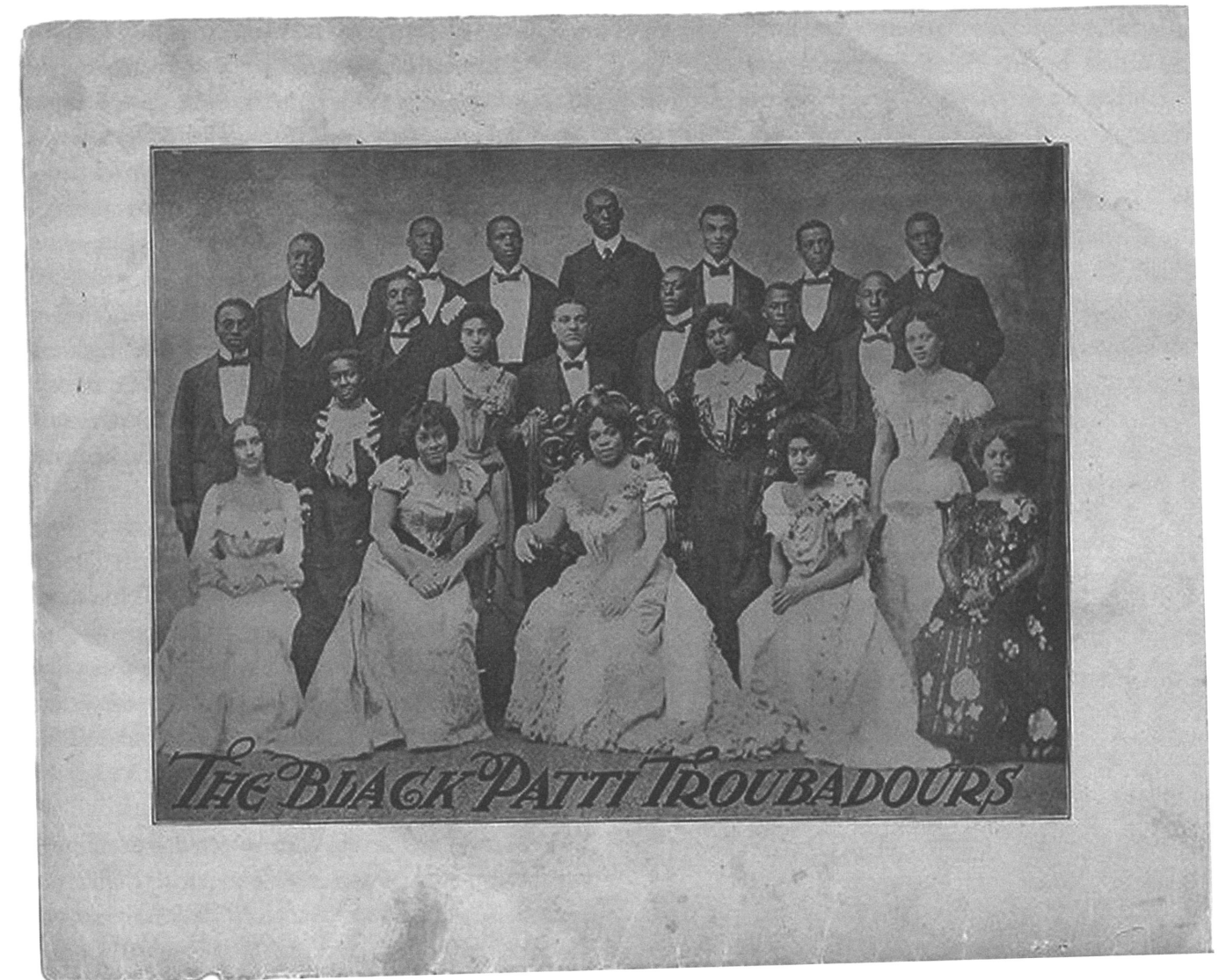
Sissieretta Jones was popular and well known throughout the country, performing many times in California, Oregon, Texas, the upper Midwest and in states along the East Coast. The company criss-crossed America and Canada by rail and even performed in Havana, Cuba, in March 1904.⁵⁸ Her troupe apparently only performed in Rhode Island twice during her years with the Troubadours and later the Black Patti Musical Comedy Company. The first time was August 30, 1897 at the Providence Opera House.⁵⁹ The *New York Dramatic Mirror* reported that the Troubadours “gave a very good entertainment, which consisted of coon comedy, vaudeville, and opera.”⁶⁰ Fifteen years later Sissieretta and the Black Patti Musical Comedy Company performed at the Imperial Theatre in Providence. The *Dramatic Mirror* called the show “one of the best musical comedies seen at the house this season.”⁶¹

By 1898, Sissieretta and her troupe became increasingly popular in the South and Southwest. For example, between 1898 and 1913 the company performed in sixty-nine cities and towns in Texas, returning to these places multiple times. At a time when blacks and whites had to buy tickets at different places and sit in separate sections of the theater, Sissieretta was such a box office favorite that she was able to draw people from both races to her show wherever she performed. Sometimes the announcement that Sissieretta and company were coming to town was front-page news in a town's mainstream newspaper. One of her contemporaries, lyricist, author, and civil rights activist James Weldon Johnson, wrote in his book, *Black Manhattan*, that Sissieretta “had most of the qualities essential in a great singer: the natural voice, the physical figure, the grand air, and the engaging personality.”⁶²

The prevailing views on separation of blacks and whites ensured that seating arrangements for black and white patrons at Sissieretta's show were always

an issue—and not just in the South and Southwest. Two of the day's foremost black theater critics wrote about how the races were divided in many New York theaters and called on managers to find an equitable seating plan for both races. Theaters in the South and Southwest regularly separated black and white patrons, but not always as one might expect. For example, when Sissieretta and the Black Patti Troubadours first came to Columbia, South Carolina, in December 1900 to play at the new 1,500-seat Columbia Theatre, black patrons were permitted to attend the performance, as a Columbia newspaper noted: “Inasmuch as the better class of negroes are so anxious to hear this celebrated troupe it was deemed simple justice to allow them the privilege and hence the balcony has been set aside for them. The white people are no less anxious to see Black Patti and they can get down stairs seats at balcony prices for this attraction, which is said to be very fine.”⁶³ During the first few years the Troubadours performed at the Columbia Theatre, first floor seats and box seats were reserved for white patrons and the balcony for black theatergoers. However, for the April 13, 1905 performance the policy was changed to accommodate the growing number of African Americans who wanted to see the show. For this performance, first floor seats were sold to blacks and seats for whites were reserved in the balcony. No whites attended the performance. Over the years the theater tried various seating arrangements so both races could see Sissieretta's show.

Seating arrangements throughout the rigidly segregated South were affected by the popularity of Sissieretta's troupe. When Sissieretta and her company performed on January 13, 1910 at the Jefferson Theater in St. Augustine, Florida, the Black Patti Musical Comedy Company was the first black show to perform at the new \$100,000 theater. The management decided to change its usual seating policy for the Black Patti show by allotting the orchestra and first balcony seats to black patrons,



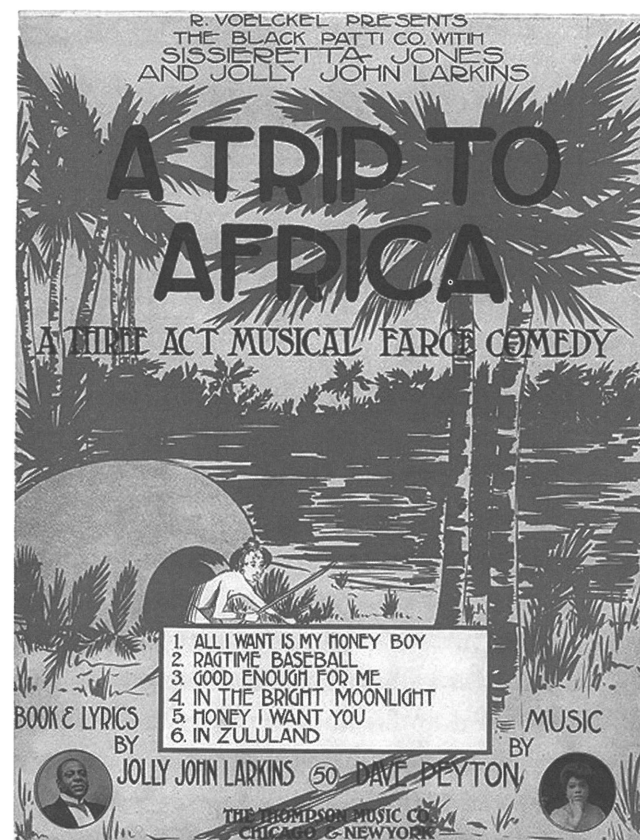
The cast of the Black Patti Troubadours posed for a formal photo. This photograph appeared on the back cover of one of the Black Patti Troubadours' songbooks published by M. Witmark and Sons. (From the author's private collection).

but in doing so they failed to consider how the white ushers would react to this change. They did not take it well, as the city's newspaper reported: “When these knights of the seat check learned that colored people would occupy the first floor they turned so many colors that their faces, for a few minutes, rivaled the rainbow for diversity.” They told the management that seating blacks in the orchestra would mean “the degeneracy of Southern traditions.” When opening

night arrived, none of the ushers showed up, leaving the management with a problem. Theater managers called the board of directors to the theater to find a solution. The directors agreed, after much discussion, that they would escort people to their seats. Although both the new ushers and the black patrons apparently showed some embarrassment, everything went smoothly. That night the house did the largest business it had done since the theater opened a few months

earlier. The *New York Age* wrote about the incident. The article began, "Southern ethics and customs were given a solar plexus during the engagement of the Black Patti Musical Company at the Jefferson Theater." The *Age* said that the *St. Augustine Evening Record*, in its review of the Black Patti Show, also wrote about the seating arrangements: "The orchestra was given up to the colored people, and both it and the gallery were crowded. The balcony was filled with white people. It was an appreciative audience as will ever be seen in the Jefferson, for, to the members of her race, Black Patti stands at the very head of her profession."⁶⁴

Sissieretta Jones's company reflected the evolution of black entertainment from primarily farce comedies



Sissieretta Jones had her first speaking role in a show called "A Trip to Africa." She played two parts: Lucinda Lee and Princess Lulu. The Black Patti Musical Comedy Company debuted this new show on September 23, 1909 in Hot Springs, Arkansas. (From the author's private collection).

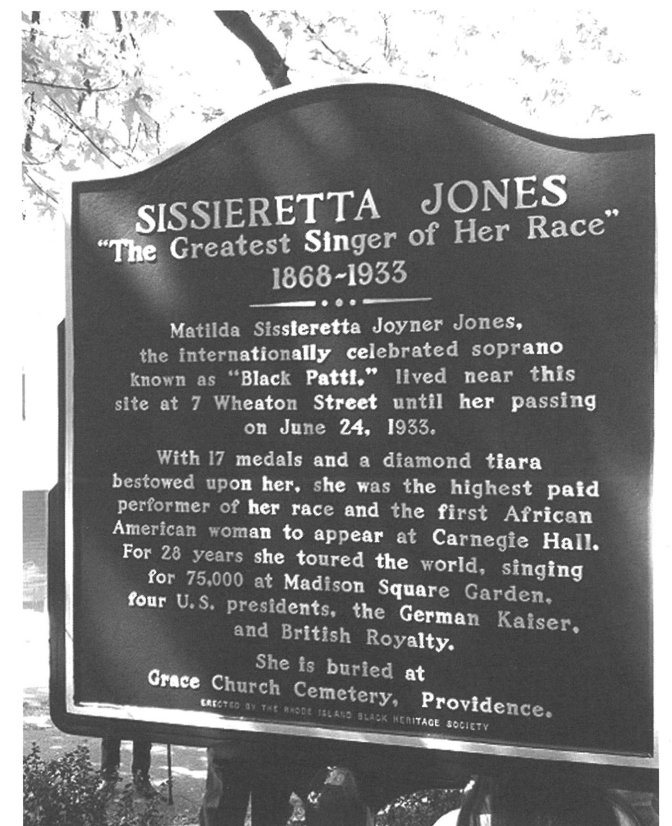
accompanied by music and patterned after three-part minstrel shows into more of a musical comedy and variety show. Sissieretta and her troupe spent nineteen years on the road. In fact, her company was the longest running African-American road show in the United States in its day. Black entertainment became more professional as African Americans who aspired to the stage had more opportunities to learn their trade and display their talent while working in well-run shows such as the Black Patti Troubadours and the Black Patti Musical Comedy Company. Many African-American shows began to use opening comedy sketches with stronger story lines rather than relying on a farce with a thin story line whose main purposes were to introduce the cast, support various musical numbers, and get the audience laughing. Additionally, a crusade by black theater critics, and some black entertainers, composers, and playwrights to stop the custom of African Americans ridiculing themselves on the stage and using racial epithets like "coon" and "nigger" in comedy sketches and music lyrics achieved some success and helped change the quality of black musicals.

Evolution in entertainment venues eventually caught up with Sissieretta's company. In all the years Sissieretta was on the road, she rarely missed a performance due to illness. That changed during the summer of 1913, when throat surgery and the need to care for her ill mother kept her off the stage the entire season from August 1913 until July 1914.⁶⁵ Her manager, Rudolph Voelckel, did not take the Black Patti Musical Comedy Company on the road that season. Unfortunately, it was a bad time for Sissieretta and her show to be away from the stage as more and more cheap vaudeville and movie houses were taking business away from live road shows. The company opened its final season in September 1914. The first two months went well with successful weeklong bookings in Harlem; Washington, D.C.; Philadelphia; Baltimore; and Norfolk, Virginia. Once the troupe headed into the

South, business turned "very disastrous," according to Manager Voelckel.⁶⁶ The Black Patti Company arrived in Memphis, Tennessee just before Christmas to perform at the Church Auditorium, a black-owned theater. Voelckel was unable to meet expenses and pay bills, which prompted the theater owner to attach the Black Patti railcar and prevent the troupe from moving on to its next booking.

Voelckel disbanded the troupe, effectively ending Sissieretta's long career on the stage. Sissieretta returned home to Providence in early January 1915 to retire and live with her mother and stepfather, Daniel Crenshaw, whom Henrietta had married in 1903.⁶⁷ Sissieretta performed two more times that year on the vaudeville stage, without the Black Patti Company—a week in Chicago and two weeks in Harlem at the Lafayette Theatre.⁶⁸ After her Chicago performance Sissieretta told theater critic Sylvester Russell that her mother was ill and she was needed at home.⁶⁹

The famous soprano spent her final years in Providence. Once she left the stage, she was out of the public eye and no longer featured in the press, thus little is known about the latter years of her life. She lived quietly, tending her rose garden and occasionally singing in the choir at the Congdon Street Baptist Church. As the years passed, Sissieretta supported herself by selling many of her valuables such as jewelry, silver, some of her medals, and several rental properties she owned on the East Side. In addition to her nine-room home at 7 Wheaton Street, which she kept until her death, she at one time owned a second property on Wheaton Street, another at 15 Church Street and one at 94 Benefit Street.⁷⁰ The two Wheaton Street properties are gone now. The street (located below the statue of Roger Williams in Prospect Terrace Park) is now called Pratt Street. The properties on Church Street and Benefit Street still exist. Some reports in a Providence newspaper claimed that Sissieretta worked as a cook for a wealthy family



The Rhode Island Black Heritage Society honored the memory of Sissieretta Jones by erecting a plaque near her home site on College Hill. The plaque is located at the intersection of South Court and Pratt streets, just east of Benefit Street. (Photograph by the author)

on the East Side sometime during her retirement years.⁷¹ A realtor, who was a neighbor and former president of the local NAACP chapter, William P. H. Freeman, often helped by loaning her money to pay her property and water taxes, as well as her wood and coal bills.⁷² Sissieretta was quite poor when she died of cancer on June 24, 1933.⁷³ Freeman, who was appointed executor of her tiny estate, made sure she was buried next to her mother at Grace Church Cemetery rather than in a pauper's grave. To this day, neither Sissieretta's nor her mother's graves are marked by headstones.⁷⁴

Sissieretta Jones's record of achievement was remarkable given the racially segregated world in which she lived and the limited opportunities available to African Americans, particularly black

women. She was an ambitious, determined, and confident woman, who was passionate about her music. She was highly successful, well-paid, and greatly admired for her work by both black and white audiences. Sissieretta's thrilling voice,

singing operatic arias rather than minstrel songs, gave white audiences a new appreciation for the talent and potential of African-American vocalists. Unfortunately no recording of her voice has been found, although the technology was available to do so during the latter part of her career. Perhaps someday one will be discovered. In 1911, black theater critic Lester Walton wrote, "Mme. Sissieretta Jones is really a remarkable woman—an artist whom biographers cannot overlook in days to come when giving historic references to performers past and present and their accomplishments."⁷⁵ Yet this remarkable singer has been overlooked and has only recently begun to receive the attention she deserves. It is fitting that the recognition has come from groups in Providence, where the famous soprano made her home. In the spring of 2013, Sissieretta was inducted into the Rhode Island Music Hall of Fame. The previous year, the Rhode Island Black Heritage Society led the effort to have an historical marker citing Sissieretta's musical achievements placed near her homesite on College Hill.

Had Sissieretta Jones had more vocal training and been allowed a career with a professional opera company like the Metropolitan Opera, she might be remembered today like Marian Anderson, the first African American to sing with the Metropolitan Opera. Despite the limitations she faced, Sissieretta seized the opportunities available to her and pursued a lengthy, lucrative, and successful musical career. Her efforts helped pave the way for other African-American opera divas who would follow her. Matilda Sissieretta Joyner Jones stands out as a supremely talented individual whose musical career was shaped and limited by the restrictions of a segregated society. Her evident talent, courage, and will to persevere despite the hurdles she faced have earned her a significant place in the history of American musical entertainment.

On April 28, 2013, Sissieretta Jones was inducted into the Rhode Island Music Hall of Fame. She was honored for her many achievements during her twenty-nine years on the stage. (Photograph by the author).

A portrait of Sissieretta Jones, n.d. (Courtesy of the Dramatic Museum Portrait Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University).



- Age, April 28, 1888, 1; and "Providence Driftings," *New York Freeman*, January 31, 1885, 1.
8. Daughtry, *Vision and Reality*, 3.
9. "Music Knows No Color," *Evening Herald*, n.d., n.p. in Sissieretta's scrapbook (hereafter referred to as SJScrapbook). Sissieretta's scrapbook contains press clippings, mostly from 1892-1896. It is located in the Dr. Carl R. Gross Collection at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Manuscript Division, Howard University, Washington, D.C.
10. F. C. Terry, "The Closing Chapters of the Life of 'Black Patti,'" *Providence Sunday Journal*, July 16, 1933, E2.
11. "Music Knows No Color," SJScrapbook.
12. W. Allison Sweeney, "The Black Patti," *Indianapolis Freeman*, August 29, 1891, Columbian Exposition edition, 2; and "A Successful Singer," *New York Age*, February 8, 1890, 2. A search of Providence City directories did not show any listings for an Academy of Music, Baroness Lacombe, or a Mr. Monros.
13. David Richard Jones and Matilda Sissie Joyner, Marriages Registered in the City of Providence, R.I., for the year ending December 31, 1883, 536; and Mabel Adelina Jones, April 8, 1884, Births Registered in the City of Providence, recorded July 1884, 211.
14. Mabel Adeline [sic] Jones, City of Providence Death Records, Providence, R.I., 1886, 714.
- The Odyssey of an African-American Singer in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 53 (2000): 549.
16. Rosalyn M. Story, *And So I Sing: African American Divas of Opera and Concert*. (New York: Warner, 1900), 33.
17. "State Election Providence May 26," *New York Freeman*, May 30, 1885, 4.
18. Lee, *Sissieretta Jones*, 11-12.
19. See Lee, *Sissieretta Jones*, 14-29 for details about Sissieretta's two concert tours to the West Indies, Central America and South America.
20. "Madame Sissieretta at the White House," *Washington Post*, February 25, 1892; and "The Great Prima Donna," *Washington Bee*, February 27, 1892, 3.
21. "The Colored Jubilee," *New York Dramatic Mirror*, May 7, 1892, 5.
22. "A Patti with a Soul," *Detroit Plaindealer*, May 20, 1892, 5.
23. Carl R. Gross, "A Brief History of the Life of Matilda Sissieretta Joyner Jones, the 'Black Patti'" (short unpublished biography, Providence: 1966), 2. This document is part of the Dr. Carl R. Gross Collection, Collection 41-1 to 42-1, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Manuscript Division, Howard University, Washington, D.C.
24. Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer, *Black Magic: A Pictorial History of Black Entertainers in America* (New York: Da Capo, 1969), 244.
- October 1, 1892, 2.
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31. "Black Patti," *Brantford* (Ontario) *Courier*, February 3, 1893, in SJScrapbook.
32. "Madame S. Jones," *Message*, May 14, 1892, in SJScrapbook.
33. "She Sings Well," newspaper clipping from Cincinnati, n.n., n.p., in SJScrapbook.
34. "Is a Singer by Nature," *San Francisco Call*, July 4, 1896, 5.
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36. Graziano, "Early Life," 579.
37. "Music Hall Gossip," *Era* (London), May 25, 1895, 17.
38. "The London Music Halls," *Era* (London), April 20, 1895, 16; "Music Hall Gossip," *Era* (London), April 27, 1895, 17; and "London Day by Day," *Daily Telegraph* (London), April 23, 1895, 7.
39. Lee, *Sissieretta Jones*, 91-92.
40. "Has Sung around the World," *Pittsburgh Post*, March 11, 1906, 3.
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43. Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: Norton, 2nd ed., 1983), 244.
- Theatre* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 94, 107-13.
47. Allen Woll, *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 2.
48. Woll, *Black Musical Theatre*, 2.
49. Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged but Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007), 3, 7.
50. Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged but Right*, 11.
51. Abbott and Seroff, *Ragged but Right*, 14.
52. Woll, *Black Musical Theatre*, 4.
53. Hill and Hatch, *History of African-American Theatre*, 142.
54. "Correspondence, Massachusetts, Pittsfield," *New York Dramatic Mirror*, September 19, 1896, 7.
55. "Holiday Issue. Black Patti's Troubadours," *Indianapolis Freeman*, December 30, 1888, 9.
56. *Matilda Sissie Jones v. David Richard Jones*. Petition for Divorce. Case number 11643. Appellate Division of the Supreme Court in Providence, R.I. Filed June 4, 1898.
57. "The Stage," *Indianapolis Freeman*, July 8, 1899, 5.
58. "Route," *Indianapolis Freeman*, March 12, 1904, 5; and "Today's News," *Fort Collins* (Colo.) *Weekly Courier*, November 23, 1904, 11.
59. "Advertisement." *The* (Providence)
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66. Rudolph Voelckel letter published in "A Disastrous Season," *New York Age*, February 11, 1915, 6.
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71. Maureen McGettrick, "Black Patti Was a Success, Her Audience Was a Failure," *Providence Sunday Journal*, September 28, 1980, 14.
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Sheldon S. Cohen is Emeritus Professor of History at Loyola University Chicago. He has written numerous articles and several books, including *Yankee Sailors in British Gaols*, *Prisoners of War at Forton and Mill, 1777-1783*; *British Supporters of the American Revolution, 1775-1783*; and *Commodore Abraham Whipple of the Continental Navy*.



Rhode Islander John Peck Rathbun served valiantly in the American navy during the Revolutionary War. This image shows an American naval engagement between Captain John Paul Jones of *Bonhomme Richard* and Captain Richard Pearson of the British naval vessel, *Serapis*, September 22, 1779. Balthazar Friedrich Leizelt, engraver, between 1779-1790. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (Reproduction No. LC-USZ62-112).

Rhode Island's Captain Courageous: John Peck Rathbun

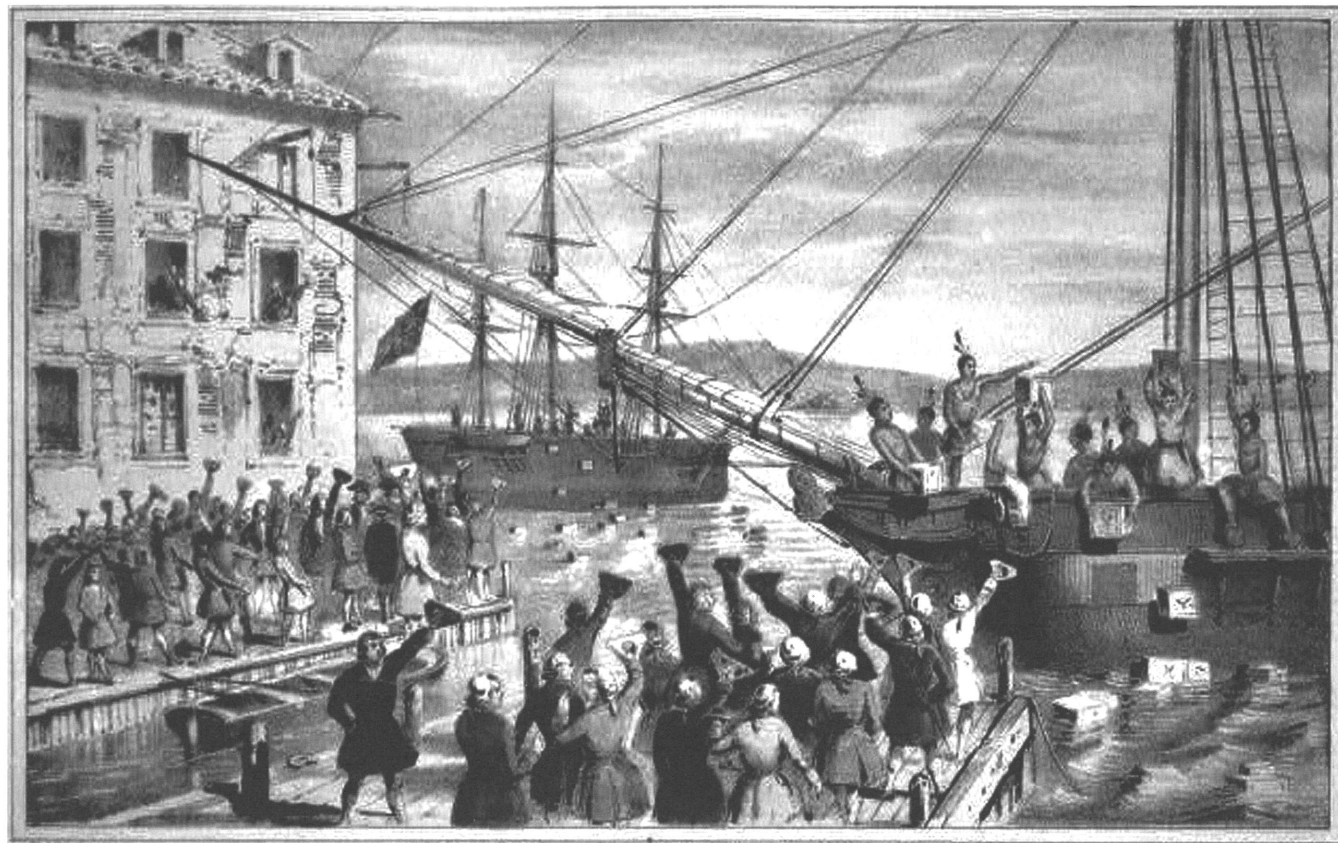
SHELDON S. COHEN

The prominent and long-held byname, “Ocean State,” was surely applicable to diminutive Rhode Island throughout the American Revolution. Already shaped by a long history of nautical ventures, the state sent a proportionately large number of men to assist maritime efforts in the “glorious cause” of American independence. And while ordinary seamen received comparatively little individual notoriety for their exertions, most Rhode Island ship captains of the Revolutionary era have been recognized for their contributions. Over the years, the maritime efforts of skippers such as Commodore Abraham Whipple, Commodore Esek Hopkins, and Captain Benjamin Page have been described in several publications.¹ Nonetheless, the wartime deeds of one naval captain from the state, John Peck Rathbun, call for further elaboration and assessment. John Peck Rathbun was listed among the first naval officers appointed by the Continental Congress, yet his bravery, daring, and fortitude, and particularly his willingness to sacrifice his life for his country have not received attention since the war in which he fought so valiantly.

John Peck Rathbun was born on March 23, 1746 in Exeter, Rhode Island at his parents’ farm. According to family historian Frank H. Rathbun, John Peck Rathbun’s father, Nathaniel Rathbun had moved to Exeter in 1744 from Block Island where the family also owned properties.² Nathaniel Rathbun died in 1750 when his son, John Peck Rathbun, was only four years old. His mother, Ann Peck Rathbun, sold the family farm in Exeter and moved with her four children to Boston. Ann Peck Rathbun died three years later and although it is not known where John Peck Rathbun lived for the rest of his childhood, it is quite possible that he resided

with his mother’s brother, Thomas H. Peck, a wealthy fur merchant and hatter in Boston. Frank H. Rathbun relates that, at his uncle’s home, the young John Peck Rathbun, “heard glowing tales of his mother’s family, including a great uncle who had captured and slain the dreaded pirate, Blackbeard, and others [Peck relatives] who had held high positions in the British Army and Navy.” According to Frank H. Rathbun, John Peck Rathbun was educated in Boston until he reached his teens. The young man was “then was sent to sea as a ship’s boy on one of his uncle’s trading vessels.” By 1773, twenty-seven-year-old John Peck Rathbun was “commanding a small schooner in the coastal trade between New England and the maritime provinces of Canada.”³

Boston was Rathbun’s “home port” in the early 1770s and events there may have shaped Rathbun’s patriotism. In 1770, the Boston Massacre, the killing of five colonists by British soldiers, took place only steps from Thomas Peck’s haberdashery shop; John Peck Rathbun’s cousins remembered the scene of blood and bodies lying in the street. In 1773, the Boston Tea Party, in which a large group of patriots boarded a British ship and dumped a cargo of tea into Boston harbor as a protest against British trade policies would also have been an inspiring incident. Family historian Frank H. Rathbun speculates that Thomas H. Peck, John Peck Rathbun’s uncle, an ardent patriot, “was likely one of the town leaders who helped plan” the Tea Party.⁴ It is not known whether John Peck Rathbun was himself involved in this or other anti-British actions; however, he was undoubtedly aware of the sharp protests against Parliamentary legislation, including the Revenue (Sugar) Act, the Stamp Act,



The Destruction of the Tea at Boston Harbor. N. Currier, 1846. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division (Reproduction No. LC-USZC4-523).

Townsend Regulations, and the Tea (Revenue) Act. Rathbun may well have participated in some of these pre-Revolutionary episodes, and he may even have been associated with the Sons of Liberty in New England. However, there appears to be no record of Rathbun's direct involvement in any of these activities.

Not long after hostilities commenced in April 1775, John Peck Rathbun's name does appear in naval records of the American Revolution. The documents reveal his early affiliation with the insurgents. On July 10, British Captain Thomas Flin [Flynn], commanding the packet sloop *Falmouth*, signed a deposition in Halifax, Nova Scotia. The certificate declared that on the previous Monday morning, an American sloop commanded by "one

Rathbone," had attempted to harass and prevent his vessel from reaching the port of Machais, in Maine. This minor encounter signaled John Peck Rathbun's initial seaborne participation in the war.⁵

The confrontation happened only two months after John Peck Rathbun's marriage on May 4, 1775 in Boston. Rathbun's wife was Mary Leigh (b. ca. 1756), daughter of Benjamin Leigh, a prominent merchant and a known Loyalist sympathizer.⁶ After their marriage, the Rathbuns left Boston to live in Rhode Island, possibly at the home of Rathbun's older sister, Ann, wife of Immanuel Case, a shopkeeper and tavern owner in South Kingstown. It is not known whether John Peck Rathbun and his wife, Mary Leigh Rathbun established a separate household in South Kingstown. However, it appears

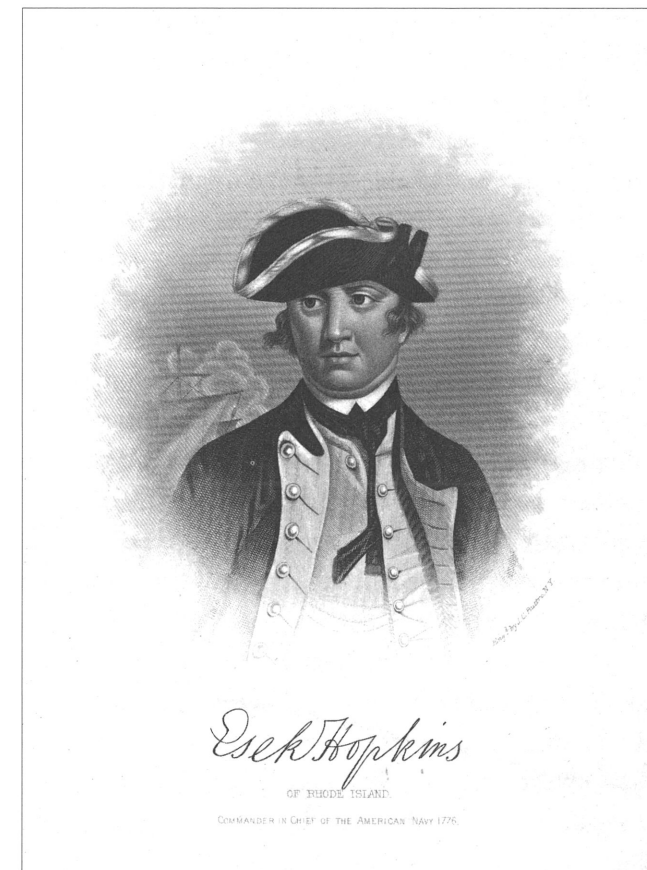
from court documents following his death that he and his wife settled in the town at this time.⁷

News of Rathbun's aggressive naval action off Maine had undoubtedly reached and impressed the Second Continental Congress then meeting in Philadelphia. Although there is no extant documentation, it seems possible that when the Congress established a Continental Navy in October 1775 and subsequently named officers to serve on its available warships, Rathbun was commissioned as a lieutenant. He was subsequently appointed to serve on the already active sloop-of-war, *Providence* (formerly *Katy*). This small ship was then captained by John Hazard from Rhode Island, another officer appointed by the Continental Navy.⁸

The initial coordinated engagement of the newly formed naval force, commanded by Rhode Island's Esek Hopkins, began on February 16, 1776 when Commodore Hopkins, commanding five armed warships, sailed down the ice-free Delaware River and into the Atlantic. Rathbun was then on board the warship *Providence*. The "flotilla" proceeded south, avoiding Royal Navy warships off Virginia, sailing toward the Bahama Islands, which according to intelligence were quite vulnerable and unprepared. More importantly, the British main island of New Providence reportedly had plentiful stocks of gunpowder.⁹

On March 3, 1776, shortly after the American squadron's arrival near New Providence Island, a selected force of about three hundred sailors and marines launched a successful amphibious attack. The assault captured the poorly protected and poorly maintained forts guarding the island's capital of Nassau. The entire foray, however, seized only a small amount of gunpowder and weapons. Nevertheless, the departing crewmen on *Providence*, including Lieutenant Rathbun, took justifiable pride in their participation in this noteworthy early naval success.¹⁰

On its return voyage to New England the American squadron captured two small, poorly



Rhode Islander Esek Hopkins commanded the initial coordinated engagement of the newly formed American navy. Rathbun served under his command. Portrait of Esek Hopkins, J.C. Buttre Engraver, n.d. Collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society (RHi X3 688)

protected British ships. But much of their triumphal spirit soon dampened when the American naval force was outmaneuvered and outfought by a Royal Navy frigate, *Glasgow*, in early April off New London. *Providence* avoided being drawn into this failed engagement, but Hopkins's poor leadership of the squadron led to a court martial and his subsequent dismissal from the Continental Navy. Captain Hazard's conduct was also condemned, and he was cashiered from the Navy, but Rathbun escaped any significant blame. The newly named commander of *Providence* was Lieutenant John Paul Jones.¹¹

During most of the remaining months of 1776, Lieutenant Rathbun made occasional visits to his Rhode Island home, and participated in more

notable successful cruises of *Providence* under the skilled handling of Captain John Paul Jones. Initially the sloop-of-war, following instructions from Congress, performed convoy duty, but Captain Jones also seized several vulnerable enemy merchant ships including *Sea Nymph* (as noted below), *Nathaniel*, and *Elizabeth*.¹² A listing of the commercial cargo taken from these vessels included foodstuffs, manufactures, and, most notably, a large amount of rum. The seizures enhanced a growing prominence which Jones had in America, even according to his British adversaries. In August 1776, the Scots-born mariner was rewarded with command of the twenty-gun frigate *Alfred*, and Lieutenant Hoysted Hacker, another experienced Rhode Island mariner, took the helm of *Providence*.¹³

On August 21, 1776, before taking the helm of *Alfred*, Captain Jones, along with Lieutenant Rathbun, sailed from Delaware Bay, barely escaping capture by a British frigate. Within a week, *Providence* had captured the whaling brigantine, *Britannia* and put a prize crew on board to return her to an American seaport. On the following September 3, *Providence* seized the brigantine, *Sea Nymph*, sailing to London, and four days later, she captured another such trading vessel, *Favourite*, with a Liverpool destination.¹⁴ The sizeable spoils from these takings included sugar, rum, Madeira wines, ginger, oil, clothing, shoes, and "Twelve Pipes" used to carry wines or oil. *Providence* then cruised on to Canso near the tip of Nova Scotia. Arriving there on September 22, Jones was able to take several fishing vessels, many of which he burned. He returned to Narragansett Bay on October 8 with four of his prizes, including the sizeable brigantine *Defence*, with a cargo of dried fish, oil, and other spoils and more importantly, with the personal satisfaction that he had inflicted considerable damage to Britain's North American fishing fleet. Jones's lieutenant, John Rathbun, had been an invaluable aide to Captain Jones on this

successful expedition. Former commodore Esek Hopkins subsequently wrote to John Hancock of Rathbun's gallantry. Years later, the famed American historian Samuel Eliot Morison, in his biography of John Paul Jones, also singled out the diligent and courageous Rathbun for praise.¹⁵

Rathbun was fortunate to return to Rhode Island when he did that October. Two months later, a British military expedition led by General Sir Henry Clinton, with Royal Navy support, captured Newport along with the remainder of Aquidneck Island, and, as a consequence, more firmly controlled the sea outlet from Narragansett Bay. American ships were consequently even more bottled-up in Providence harbor. While the American naval lieutenant could still visit his home in the state, by the close of that year, he would have to have done so through an indirect route.¹⁶

In April 1777, the American Congress recognized Captain John Paul Jones's previous year's achievements. He was officially appointed to command the twenty-gun frigate *Alfred*. At the same time, Rhode Island's Hoysted Hacker briefly assumed command of *Providence*, but was, in turn, succeeded by John Peck Rathbun. He was appointed captain by the Navy Board; Congress approved the appointment. With this new prestigious command, Rathbun had to search for fresh crewmen and also to secure provisions during the late spring.¹⁷ And with a full ship's complement he then intended to resume the raiding expeditions that had proved successful with Captain Jones during the previous autumn.

It was not an easy task. The Americans had suffered several serious reverses the previous year; the British had captured New York and much of New Jersey, and available funds meant to support the American cause were far more limited than British funds. Yet on June 19, 1777, Captain Rathbun could submit a "Muster Roll" showing that he had been able to sign up several crewmen for his expected departure. A week later, John Bradford,

a Continental naval agent in Boston, wrote that Rathbun had "25 Barrells of provisions on board" and that he was at last prepared to begin his intended cruise.¹⁸ However, the necessity of replacing a mast caused a further delay until mid-July. At last, however, the sloop-of-war departed at the beginning of August, and, on Saturday, the sixteenth of that month, the *Providence Gazette* noted that, "A Prize Schooner, [*Loyalty*] arrived at an eastern Port last Tuesday, taken by the sloop *Providence*, Capt. Rathbun, in the Service of the United States; she was bound from New York to Jamaica."¹⁹

Providence continued seeking additional unprotected and exposed enemy trading vessels in the Atlantic. On November 13, the Navy Board of the Eastern Department voted that Rathbun, "fill up [promote] those persons who are proper [competent] for warrant officers" and that he was to proceed on his course. Two days later, this naval administrative body voted that Captain Rathbun be notified that the board had information of a possible enemy attack on New Bedford and that he should immediately move his sloop-of-war from that vulnerable vicinity. But Rathbun himself had no intention of remaining in the New England area and had already shifted his course to the south.²⁰

Rathbun's initial success in southern waters was reported by *The South Carolina and American General Gazette*. In its issue of December 25, 1777, the newspaper recounted that "the Continental sloop *Providence* [had arrived in Charleston] after a short engagement with the enemy privateer sloop, *Governour Tryon*, carrying 10 guns, and is commanded by Capt. Demas [Downham] Newton, and is fitted out as a privateer from St. Augustine [East Florida]. Both the *Providence* and her prize are in port."²¹

Rathbun had in mind taking bigger stakes than the small privateers or merchant ships in the area, however. He now planned to strike a blow against a British island garrison further south, with which

he was familiar. Rathbun undoubtedly recalled his participation in the victorious amphibious attack by the Continental Navy on New Providence Island in the Bahamas almost two years previously. Now, Rathbun intended to make a similarly daring attack employing only *Providence* and her ship's complement. While this action might have seemed foolhardy, Rathbun had previously received intelligence, allegedly from a willing Captain Newton who commanded the sloop, *Governour Tryon*, taken in December. The British captain is said to have reported that the New Providence-Nassau garrisons were again unprepared for a hostile attack, and, in addition, the reconstruction of its two protective forts had not been completed. Still a further incentive influencing Rathbun was that the town reportedly held several Americans in custody.²²

A subsequent account of the New Providence episode was recorded by Rathbun's lieutenant and captain of marines, John Trevett (1744-1823). The lieutenant, who was originally from Newport, wrote that prior to the expedition and despite some specific reservations and spirited discussions with Rathbun in Georgetown, South Carolina, he had agreed to embark on the proposed expedition.²³

Lieutenant Trevett's decision proved to be advantageous for Rathbun. The American surprise attack in late January 1778 was a glowing success, much of it due to Trevett's marines, who stealthily and carefully climbed the walls of Fort Nassau, forcing the few surprised guards to surrender without a struggle. On February 26, 1778, *The South Carolina and American General Gazette*, which relayed first-hand information given by an American patriot from New Providence, offered a definitive description of the initial achievements:

Mr. Samuel West arrived here a few days since from New-Providence, by way of North-Carolina, and has favoured us with the following intelligence

"On Jan. 25th 1778, the Continental sloop *Providence*, of 14 guns and 75 men, commanded by Capt. Rathbun



Rathbun participated in the raid on New Providence Island in March 1776; he would return in January 1778, in his ship, *Providence*. "Landing at New Providence, March 1776," oil painting by V. Zveg, 1972. (Courtesy of the U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command #NH19419-N).

arrived at the west end of New-Providence, where, in the evening, he landed Mr. John Trevett, his captain of marines, with 23 men. This party immediately proceeded to Mr. James Gould's plantation; from thence to Fort Nassau, which they took possession of, and secured [captured] 3 men who were in it. In the fort were also ten American sailors (among whom was our informant) who joined Capt. Trevett. At daylight the inhabitants of New-Providence were not a little astonished to observe the American colours displayed on the bastion; every thing having been so quietly conducted, that not the least alarm had been given during the night. Capt. Trevett, early in the morning, sent 5 men in a boat to a Jamaica ship that had put in there in distress: she was called the *Mary*, mounted 16 guns, had 30 men on board, was owned by Mr. Alex Ross, merchant in Kingston, and commanded by [Mr. Henry] Johnson; her cargo consisted of rum, sugar,

wine, coffee, &c. destined for New York. The ship was immediately given up, and the Captain and crew carried to the fort, and there secured. Capt. Trevett then sent 6 men to [Lieutenant] Governour [John] Gambier to demand the immediate surrender of Fort [Montagu] Johnson, which after some little hesitation, he agreed to: the party thereupon took possession of the fort, spiked the cannon, and then rejoined their comrades at Fort Nassau. ...²⁴

The newspaper's account continued by reporting that the "townspeople to the number of near 200 were now in arms," apparently set to repulse the sudden American invasion. But allegedly a firm message from Lieutenant Trevett to the non-combative Lieutenant Governor John Gambier, threatening to open fire with cannon from the captured fort on any

gathering of ten men or more, ended any resistance. The next afternoon, *Providence* sailed unmolested into Nassau harbor, closely followed by a damaged and unsuspecting British armed ship of sixteen guns, *Mary*.²⁵ Henry Johnson, her captain, who had been ill, made a fatal blunder. Once inside the harbor, he suddenly found himself fired upon from the American-occupied fort as well as from the nearby American sloop. He thereupon gave command of his ship to his lieutenant. Afterward, the new skipper had to surrender *Mary* to the Americans while Captain Johnson went ashore to rally available resistance from among the inhabitants. He thereafter made his way about two miles to Fort Montagu where he reportedly gathered, "100 men," including the remainder of his crew from *Mary*, intending to challenge the unexpected interlopers.²⁶

It all proved futile. Captain Rathbun, who had some American sympathizers among the inhabitants, already had ordered an assembly of most of the town's residents, which thereafter gained him an additional force of fifteen (formerly captive) New England sailors. Following the captain's orders, Lieutenant Trevett, with his own contingent of marines in addition to the former American prisoners, gathered in defensive positions in the town.²⁷ When acting Governor John Gambier, administrative director of the island, imprudently challenged Trevett's actions, the lieutenant responded bluntly that if any of the inhabitants attempted to assault the captured fort or his men, "his intention was to lay the town in ashes;" —that "the colours were nailed to the staff, and that it was the determined resolution of all his men, as well as himself, never to surrender." These defiant words had their effect that evening: Governor Gambier and his men found it prudent not to offer any defiance, and the American intruders remained completely in charge.²⁸

The following day, the American occupying contingent, including the newly freed American prisoners, secured their positions and gathered available plunder. The goods sequestered from the

sloop *Mary* considerably augmented their spoils. Other captured vessels in Nassau harbor were also searched and plundered for any possible objects of worth. Rathbun was careful to note how fit for sea each of the docked vessels appeared to be. On January 27, *Providence* experienced another threat when William Chambers, commanding the Jamaican privateer, *Gayton*, appeared off the island intent on challenging Rathbun. The peril ended late that evening when Chambers's inept pilot ran the privateer aground, putting her out of action.²⁹

On January 28 after the guns of the forts had been spiked and the personnel of the forts evacuated, Rathbun prepared to depart, surprisingly without any losses. He made sure that he seized and took with him the most seaworthy prize ships and sequestered the plunder. The latter included 1600 pounds of gunpowder, three hundred small arms, twenty barrels of rice, in addition to a considerable amount of coffee, sugar, rum, and wine. Rathbun also took with him the twenty-four to thirty-two freed American seamen who then helped to man his three prize ships. He was unable to take two other ships, which the captain ordered burned. Lieutenant Trevett later gave his version of the entire episode although Trevett's estimate of mileage was not exact and his estimate of the total number of American prisoners and British military defenders was faulty. Perhaps the more reliable account of Rathbun's triumph appeared in the South Carolina newspaper:

"On the 28th, in the morning, Capt. Trevett evacuated the fort, having previously spiked upwards of 50 pieces of cannon. He gave Capt. [Henry] Johnson and three men that he found in the fort their liberty; the other prisoners, 32 in number, he carried with him on board. Capt. Rathbun burnt two American sloops that had been taken by [Captain William] Chambers, and then set sail, having with him the ship *Mary* and three sloops, besides the *Providence*...."³⁰

Providence returned to New Bedford, Massachusetts, at the beginning of March taking along her



Rathbun captained the twelve-gun sloop *Katy/Providence* in a successful raid on New Providence Island in the Bahamas. Continental sloop *Providence* (1775-1779), oil painting by W. Nowland Van Powell, U.S. Navy Art collection, Washington, D.C. (Courtesy of the U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, #NH 85201-KN.tif).

sequestered spoils and ship prizes. Lieutenant John Trevett wrote of their homecoming, noting first that the sloop-of-war, *Providence*, was by then "Repairing and getting a New Rudder" at Edgartown on Martha's Vineyard, and afterwards, "we are A going to Bring her to [New] Bedford." He added that, after spending two days supervising the repairs, Cpt. Rathbun Sett out for his Home and left me Att. Taunton to go to Plimouth with lawyer [Robert Treat] Paine of Taunton to the Triall of the ship." The cited ship was *Mary*, which had been taken at New Providence.³¹ The "Triall" held that May disappointed both Rathbun and Trevett; the judges decided that the captors and Congress, as well, would share the prize money obtained from the sale of the captured *Mary*. A month after the court decision, Trevett himself traveled to the Continental Congress, which was meeting at that time in York, Pennsylvania, but the lieutenant failed in his vain attempt to get the ruling overturned.³² In the end, there was enough money raised from the sale of seized Bahamian goods to give Captain Rathbun particular satisfaction.

Rathbun evidently spent some of his time during the remainder of 1778 visiting his wife, Mary, at their Rhode Island residence. He also did work for the Navy Board of the Eastern Department headquartered in Boston, while keeping *Providence* battle-ready. More importantly, Rathbun may well have assumed that his recent successful foray would rate another ship command.³³

Both Rathbun and Trevett received new commands in early 1778. Rathbun's assignment proved extremely challenging. His designated new ship was a renamed and refitted merchantman, *Queen of France* (formerly *La Brune*), which had been purchased by the American Commissioners in France in September 1777. She was first used with Congress's authorization, and approval from the Navy Board and American Commissioners to carry munitions to the insurgents in America.

John Green of Pennsylvania, who had received a commission from the Continental Navy, and who was then in France, became her first commander, and, as such, he had sailed her to America. But on her arrival in Boston, Green surrendered his captaincy. Rhode Island's Joseph Olney was next appointed her skipper, but he deferred to Captain Rathbun. (These events occurred prior to final approval of the Franco-American treaties of 1778, which brought France into the conflict on America's side.)³⁴ When she arrived in America, however, *Queen of France* was in decidedly poor shape. She was rather aged, her armaments were deficient and in poor condition, and her wood frame was reportedly quite worn, as was much of her planking and rigging. Naval officials assumed that getting her into shape to sail in 1778 would fall upon her new skipper. Rathbun, after taking command of this converted vessel from Captain Olney, then turned over command of his much lauded *Providence* to his Rhode Island friend, Hoysted Hacker. Hacker's veteran sloop-of-war then continued her commendable service until August 14, 1779, when she was burned during the ill-fated Penobscot expedition in Maine.³⁵

After assuming command of *Queen of France* in New England, Captain Rathbun's first endeavor was to bring the ill-conditioned and deficient warship into watertight fighting condition. The talents of Boston's experienced maritime repairmen were put to the test in efforts to bring the impaired, barely seaworthy vessel into a ship-shape and combat-effective warship. Britain's Royal Navy likely would have little use for such an untrustworthy ship and might well have had her scrapped. However, the Continental Navy, still short of larger warships to bolster its limited fleet, was willing to take the chance. The process took until late in 1778, when captain and crew took *Queen of France* to sea.³⁶

The following spring, Rathbun commanded *Queen of France* when she functioned as part of

another combined Continental Navy expedition. The primary goal of the mission was set during the early months of 1779. The Navy Board of the Eastern Department had become aware that with France already in the conflict and Spain about to join her, the British Admiralty would be obligated to readjust its placement of Royal Navy armed ships. It also would now be incumbent upon those ships to protect vital European bases such as Gibraltar and those in the West Indies.³⁷ This necessary re-adjustment left some of Great Britain's ocean trading routes less protected and open to belligerent attack. While the Continental Navy had already lost several of its armed ships, American naval officials and the Eastern Navy Board still depended upon experienced skippers, including Abraham Whipple, Thomas Simpson, Samuel Tucker, John Rathbun, and the indefatigable John Paul Jones to take on British armed ships.

Aware of this opportunity, the Navy Board, on June 12, 1779, sent directions to Abraham Whipple, who was still in charge of combat-ready ships. Their commands were clearly laid out:

To Abraham Whipple:

"Your ship being ready for sea, you are to proceed with the ships *Queen of France* and *Ranger*, if the last be ready on a cruise against the enemy. You being the superior officer, will, of course command the whole: and ours [orders?] will be that they will obey yours accordingly. You are to proceed with the ships immediately, to the southern parts of the banks of Newfoundland, and there to cruise; and to thee [the] southward part of the banks of Newfoundland, and there to cruise; and to [sail] southward of said banks, as the most likely cruising ground to effect the double purpose of intercepting the enemy's out-ward bound transports for New York, &c and the homeward-bound West India ships."³⁸

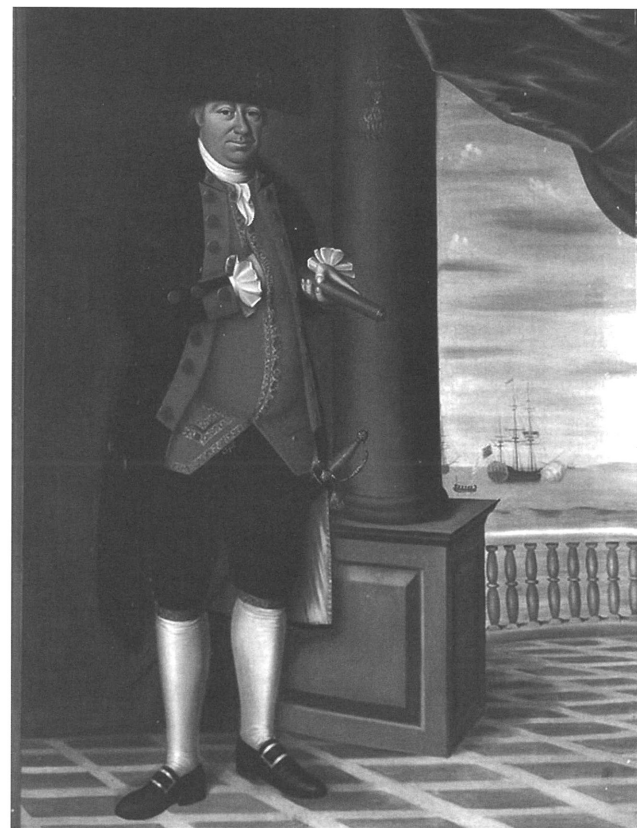
The Navy Board orders commanded Whipple to act cautiously with his squadron stating that, "if the enemy may have gained intelligence of you," he should alter course to evade them and await the possible arrival of other Continental Navy ships.

Additionally, Whipple was directed to "take, burn, sink, or destroy as many of the enemy ships as may fall your way," and to send any of his prizes to a Continental agent in an American-controlled port. The directions declared that if the squadron was unsuccessful in its voyage to the Grand Banks, and was also unable to take homeward-bound ships from Hudson's Bay, and if ships provisions were dwindling and they were unable to make an American-held port, the squadron was to sail to the West Indies to cruise there for the winter and to receive assistance from Continental agents stationed in Haiti or Martinique.³⁹

Providence, *Ranger*, and *Queen of France* sailed from Boston on June 17, 1779. The new *Providence*, unlike the aforementioned sloop-of-war, was a twenty-eight gun frigate, built under authorization of the Continental Congress, and launched in New England in late 1776. She became the warship from which Abraham Whipple directed the three-ship squadron. The Royal Navy did maintain a presence of sorts outside Boston harbor, but, by then, it was not especially difficult for American ships to reach the Atlantic. Unfavorable winds and gales delayed a normal passage, but the squadron was eventually able to resume its intended north-northeast course. As a result, in mid-July, Whipple and his armed vessels had reached their planned locale—the Grand Banks south of Newfoundland.⁴⁰

The lurking Yankee ships did not have to wait long in their position off Newfoundland before they struck. When an early morning fog lifted on Saturday, July 18, Whipple's squadron encountered part of a large British convoy of sixty ships traveling from Jamaica to London. The American convoy sought to attack immediately as only one enemy ship, an armed merchantman, *Holderness*, was observed to be protecting the rear of the convoy.⁴¹

Taking advantage of the many hours of daylight, the squadron moved quickly to interdict their prey. John Rathbun, commanding *Queen of*



Rhode Islander Abraham Whipple took a leading role in American naval engagements. Rathbun served under him in several operations, including the unsuccessful attempt to prevent the British from taking Charleston, South Carolina. Portrait of Abraham Whipple, oil on canvas by Edward Savage, 1786, U. S. Naval Academy Museum Collection. Gift of John Nicholas Brown, 1949. (Photograph courtesy of the U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, #KN-10876).

France, made the initial capture. Not revealing his American colors, Captain Rathbun deceived the British skipper of a merchant vessel into assuming his frigate was an escort warship. When the British captain brought his vessel about, she was boarded by well-armed seamen from the American ship and easily taken. Observing Rathbun's triumph, Whipple and Captain Thomas Simpson, then commanding *Ranger*, adopted this successful ploy.⁴² Throughout the day, the Yankee raiders were able to seize ten well-laden merchant ships. Adding to these achievements, Whipple forced the undermanned, though armed, *Holderness* to strike her colors, offering little resistance. Seeking

to avoid detection from more powerful Royal Navy warships not far in front of the squadron, the American skippers all agreed to return to New England as quickly as possible.⁴³

The return voyage of the American warships to a rebel port in New England was slow, due not only to the burden of their captured prizes but to the unsatisfactory sailing condition of *Queen of France*. This slowdown enabled some Royal Navy armed ships to catch up with the Americans and retake two of the captured prizes. The remaining eight seized ships, however, plowed onward under the control of Whipple's warships. Then on Thursday August 21, the victorious American ships, along with their prizes, entered Boston harbor with church bells pealing in their honor. Captain Rathbun apparently was singled out for special praise by local merchants and officials, possibly because he had taken the initial prize.⁴⁴

This triumphant event was later referred to as "the million dollar cruise," because of the comparable value of the captured cargo seized and sold. The goods included bales of cotton, a large number of bags filled with ginger, rice, tea, hundreds of hogsheads of sugar, a large amount of rum, plus considerable "fustick [dyewood], indigo, 82 puncheons [casks] of rum, 142 bags of pimento, rice, alspice [allspice], eighteen tons of logwood, lemons, coffee," some bananas, and a captain's library. The spoils also included some weapons and gunpowder.⁴⁵ When these and other captured items were sold, ships officers received the larger share of the total, but Captains Rathbun, Simpson, and Commodore Abraham Whipple saw to it that lower-ranked seamen were not left out. Andrew Sherburne, a fourteen-year-old boy from Rye, New Hampshire who was serving on *Ranger* later recalled that for his share he had received, "a quantity of rice, a large quantity of tea, thirty to forty gallons of 'fourth proof' Jamaica rum, about twenty pounds of cotton, the same quantity

of logwood and alspín [allspice], and about seven hundred dollars in paper money."⁴⁶

Following his own return, John Rathbun visited his wife, Mary, in Rhode Island, where he most likely also received a laudatory reception. With the spoils that he had earned from his recent enterprise he could consider himself a prosperous member of the South Kingstown community. In the autumn days of 1779, Rathbun still was obliged to maintain contact with the Eastern Board of the Navy under William Vernon. It is quite probable, therefore, that the young maritime skipper occasionally traveled to Boston with his older and more experienced mariner friend, Abraham Whipple.⁴⁷

By autumn the Eastern Board found a new assignment for Rathbun—in the maritime waters of the southern colonies, which seemed to be threatened by British advances. General Sir Henry Clinton had evacuated his garrison at Newport and its surrounding areas of Aquidneck Island in October. Now, for Continental Army and Navy strategists, military developments in the Southern states had become especially worrisome, and there was a new need for Continental Navy assistance.⁴⁸

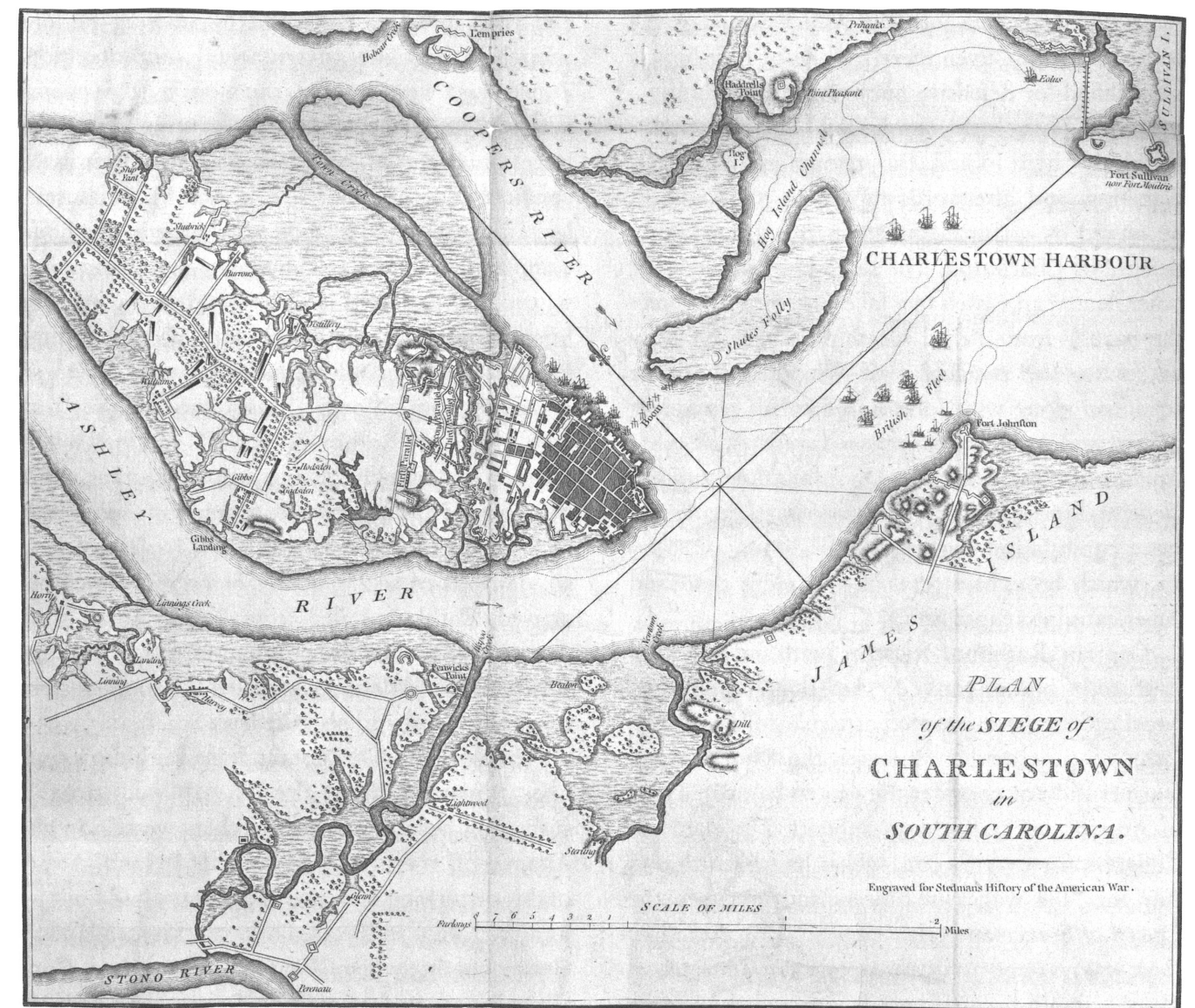
Royal forces had captured Savannah, Georgia on December 29, 1778, and by mid-October of 1779, they had successfully repelled a Franco-American attempt to retake the town. The British assumed control over other parts of the state, and the American insurgents knew that a larger British Army under General Clinton along with a powerful naval force under Admiral Marriot Arbuthnot was being sent to the American south with the express purpose of seizing Charleston, the largest American city in the region. Congress, General Washington, and the Navy Board decided to employ Captain Rathbun and his fellow maritime officers in organizing an expedition to thwart any such enemy objective.⁴⁹

In October, Abraham Whipple was selected as Commodore of the new naval force. His flagship was to be the frigate *Providence*, with other squadron

ship captains ordered to obey his directions. Whipple, along with Captains Rathbun, Simpson, Hacker, and Samuel Tucker, quickly set to work to assemble ships and crews. Finding crewmen proved a rather difficult undertaking: privateer owners and captains, offering more appealing terms, were disinclined to enlist under unappealing service terms; others felt satisfied with prize shares from the recent Grand Banks ship captures; and other men were reluctant to sign on because of family opposition or needs. But by November 19, after Commodore Whipple had used some of his own money to personally pay enlistees and to meet maintenance costs, four armed ships, *Providence*, *Queen of France*, *Boston*, and *Ranger*, appeared ready to sail from Boston. Whipple received his orders the following day from the newly established Marine Committee and Board of Admiralty, and the squadron departed from Boston for southern waters on Tuesday, November 23, 1779.⁵⁰

It was not until December 21 that the American warships entered Charleston harbor. A strong gale, ship repairs, and an unplanned stop in Bermuda delayed their passage. The unreliable progress of *Queen of France* further slowed their voyage. Captain Rathbun appears to have exhibited exemplary seamanship and intrepidity in simply getting his shoddy merchantman to her destination, but he doubted that she "would ever go to Sea again without much greater repair." In addition, the considerable frustration of his crew had become so obvious that Rathbun was obliged to forbid his men to go ashore and to move his ship because he was told that "part of his crew have formed a design to desert together, if possible."⁵¹

The ensuing struggle for Charleston proved to be a fiasco for the American forces led by Massachusetts General Benjamin Lincoln and Abraham Whipple. Whipple previously had been directed by his superiors to follow Lincoln's orders despite Lincoln's lack of



Plan of the Siege of Charlestown (now Charleston), South Carolina. Rathbun served in the American attempt to defend Charlestown from the British. (Charles Stedman, *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War*, plate 4 (London, J. Murray, 1794).

relevant maritime training. British General Clinton and Admiral Arbuthnot coordinated their strategy with positive results. Lincoln's defensive actions were inadequate in the face of Clinton's experienced forces, which began their move in March 1780. By the following month, the English general's veteran army had cut across the neck of land above the port, isolating the town itself. Clinton and Arbuthnot also

seized strategic defensive islands, which were vital protective bastions.⁵²

At this critical stage, General Lincoln, possibly aware of being outmaneuvered, ordered Commodore Whipple to gather his ships in the harbor area of the Ashley River. Rathbun, who had earlier advised the Marine Board that his armed ship "was unfit to continue much further," somehow maneuvered

the unsteady frigate into the Ashley River at the end of February. Even there, *Queen of France* was unqualified for defensive purposes, and Rathbun—probably with little regret—had her scuttled.⁵³ Rathbun then joined the remaining squadron warships, and afterwards moved to shore where he served as an artilleryman in the deteriorating defense of Charleston. The same fate occurred for other American vessels in a failed attempt to protect the harbor from Royal warships. Then, on May 12, 1780, the remainder of Whipple's maritime squadron along with John Rathbun, his remaining officers and crew, and officers and crews of all other American ships, surrendered to Admiral Arbuthnot. General Lincoln, with his own forces, made the same capitulation with General Clinton on May 12, which brought a total of over eight thousand Americans into captivity.⁵⁴

Captain Rathbun, together with many other captured higher-ranked American maritime naval officers, was granted a parole following the Charleston surrender. However, the Rhode Island mariner did not consider the war to be over. Thus, in August 1781, Rathbun submitted a claim to Congress for over \$1500, which had been due in July for "the wages of officers and crews in the *Queen of France* and other vessels."⁵⁵ By that time, there was no opportunity to captain any Continental Navy warship because very few armed ships were available. The same could also be said then for the many states which had established navies of their own; the number of their available armed ships for significant assignments, aside from several row galleys, had become almost non-existent. Although Rathbun's parole technically forbade him to resume hostile acts against Britain, he and hundreds of other enterprising American insurgents were quite willing to overlook this restriction for the betterment of the patriot cause—and often themselves.⁵⁶

Rathbun then decided to go to sea on a New England privateer. Privateering was a long-standing

and risky practice employed by warring nations whereby through governmental authorization, armed ships were granted sanctions to seize enemy vessels. The state of Massachusetts fitted out the largest number of such armed ships during the conflict.⁵⁷ On August 4, 1781, the Massachusetts legislature accepted his bond and granted Rathbun command of *Wexford*, a twenty-gun brigantine, which had a listed ship's complement of one hundred and twenty. Rathbun selected Samuel Phillips as his first lieutenant; he was a veteran mariner from North Kingstown whose first wife had been Rathbun's sister.⁵⁸ *Wexford's* new skipper was quickly able to assemble other ship's officers and crewmen. His reputation apparently had not suffered after the fall of Charleston. And so, desirous of seeing action before poor weather arrived, Rathbun sailed from Boston about mid-August 1781 with his destination fixed for Cape Clear and the Atlantic waters off the southwestern coast of Ireland and also the Irish Sea.⁵⁹

The voyage was Captain John Rathbun's final one. Privateers had already achieved notable success in seizing enemy merchant vessels in the Atlantic off the southwest coast of Ireland. Aware of this disturbing fact, the Royal Navy had built up its armed ships in the area to protect its sea lanes.⁶⁰ Consequently, when *Wexford* approached Cape Clear Island at daybreak on September 28, *HMS Recovery*, a Royal Navy 32-gun frigate, spotted her. *Recovery*, commanded by John Augustus Lord Hervey (1757-1796), moved almost immediately to pursue the evidently hostile ship. For his part, Rathbun did his best to elude his foe for almost a day, but his seamanship was not sufficient this time. The next morning, *Wexford* surrendered off Cape Clear with a full complement of one hundred and twenty officers and men.⁶¹

The captured American seamen were taken to Cork harbor at the beginning of October. From there they were disembarked and forced

to march to Kinsale Prison, about seven miles distant. The makeshift prison was considerably overcrowded with many detainees from other belligerent nations. It was also poorly provisioned, a breeding-ground for sickness, and unmercifully disciplined by an Anglo-Irishman named John How. As a consequence of this morbid situation, seventeen crewmen from *Wexford* had died by January 25, 1782.⁶² Shortly afterward, Rathbun and Lieutenant Samuel Phillips were placed on large old prison ships (hulks) along with prisoners-of-war from other nations. Lieutenant Phillips was able, with outside help, to escape from one such hulk and eventually made his way to his North Kingstown home. However, Rathbun and several other prisoners were dispatched on February 7, 1782 to Mill (Old Mill, Milbay) Prison in England, which was located in Devon between Plymouth and Devonport.⁶³

Rathbun was likely already ill when he was incarcerated at Mill Prison. Like his previous detention sites, Mill Prison was overcrowded, poorly ventilated, contained generally insufficient heating, was pestilence prone, had insufficient provisioning and substandard medical care. The foreboding prison, not far from the uncongenial moors, and with one steep side overlooking Mill Bay, was long known for its cruel treatment of detainees, and its unsavory reputation continued throughout the years of the American Revolution. One Yankee detainee described it as "this horrid place," and Samuel Hubbard, another *Wexford* detainee, had his grievances passed on to Benjamin Franklin, then residing in Paris.⁶⁴ The prison, constructed near the end of the seventeenth century, was surrounded by high, double stone walls twenty feet apart, an iron gate at the center of the outside wall, and wooden gates in the interior walls. William Cowdry (Cowdray), its keeper, was detested by the inmates; they correctly claimed that he was indifferent to their needs. When one of the American internees denounced Cowdry to the visiting Duke

of Richmond as, "a very dirty fellow," the duke reportedly responded, "Government keeps dirty fellows to do their dirty work."⁶⁵

William Russell, formerly a Boston schoolmaster, kept a diary that covered his long period of incarceration at Mill Prison. He knew Rathbun and recorded the renowned forty-six-year old *Wexford* captain's final days:

[1782]—June 15th—Capt. Jno. [John] Rathbun is dangerously ill.

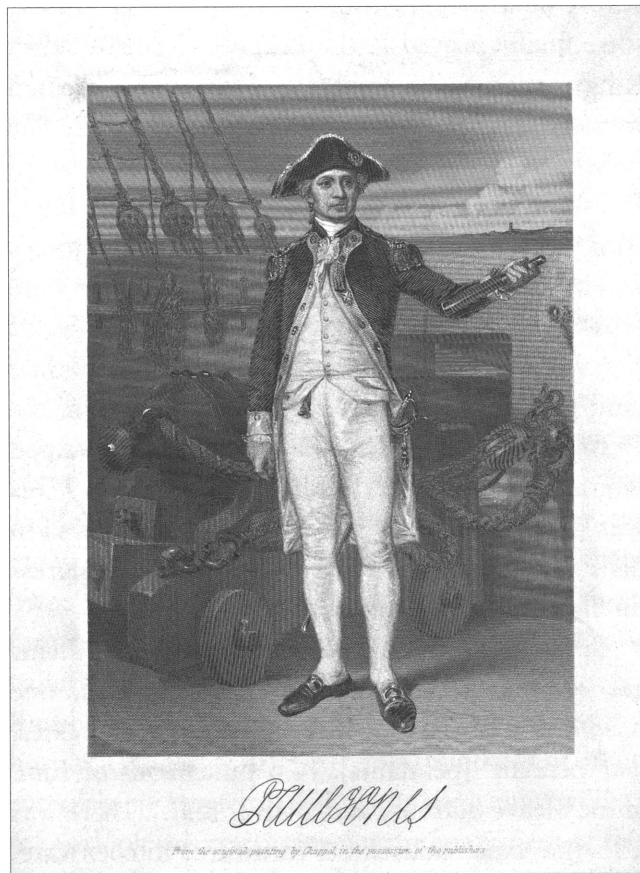
[1782]—June 20th—Capt. John Peck Rathbun died this morning in the hospital.⁶⁶

News of John Rathbun's death reached Rhode Island later in the summer of 1782.⁶⁷ His wife, Mary, had died the previous May. The terms of a will, which he had signed on February 2, 1779, before he assumed command of *Queen of France*, were finally proved in the Probate Court of South Kingstown on September 9, 1782 and presented to judicial officials in October and November. The heirs were designated as the nieces and nephews of Rathbun's then deceased sisters: Margaret Phillips, Ann Case, and Mary Potter. And since the nieces and nephews were all minors, male guardians were selected to act as their trustees until adulthood.⁶⁸ The value of Rathbun's individual assets excluding land properties, initially totaled £457-11-7 in the October inventory and \$1522.28 in the valued amount declared the following November. (This was also exclusive of the over \$1500 that was in his 1780 petition to Congress and which Congress finally paid his heirs in 1795.)⁶⁹

Some of Rathbun's personal inventoried items are of interest: "silver mounted decanters, one 'Cedar powdering tub,' silk shoes and silk buckles, 'ear pendals' [pendants], two puncheons of rum, Stone Sleeve buttons, and a silver seal." There was also the usual household furniture, kitchenware, damasks, Bibles, a saddle, silver mounted decanters, and curtains. In all, the benefactions were not an enormous legacy for that time, but they were

nonetheless a reflection of one particular man and the life he had led.⁷⁰

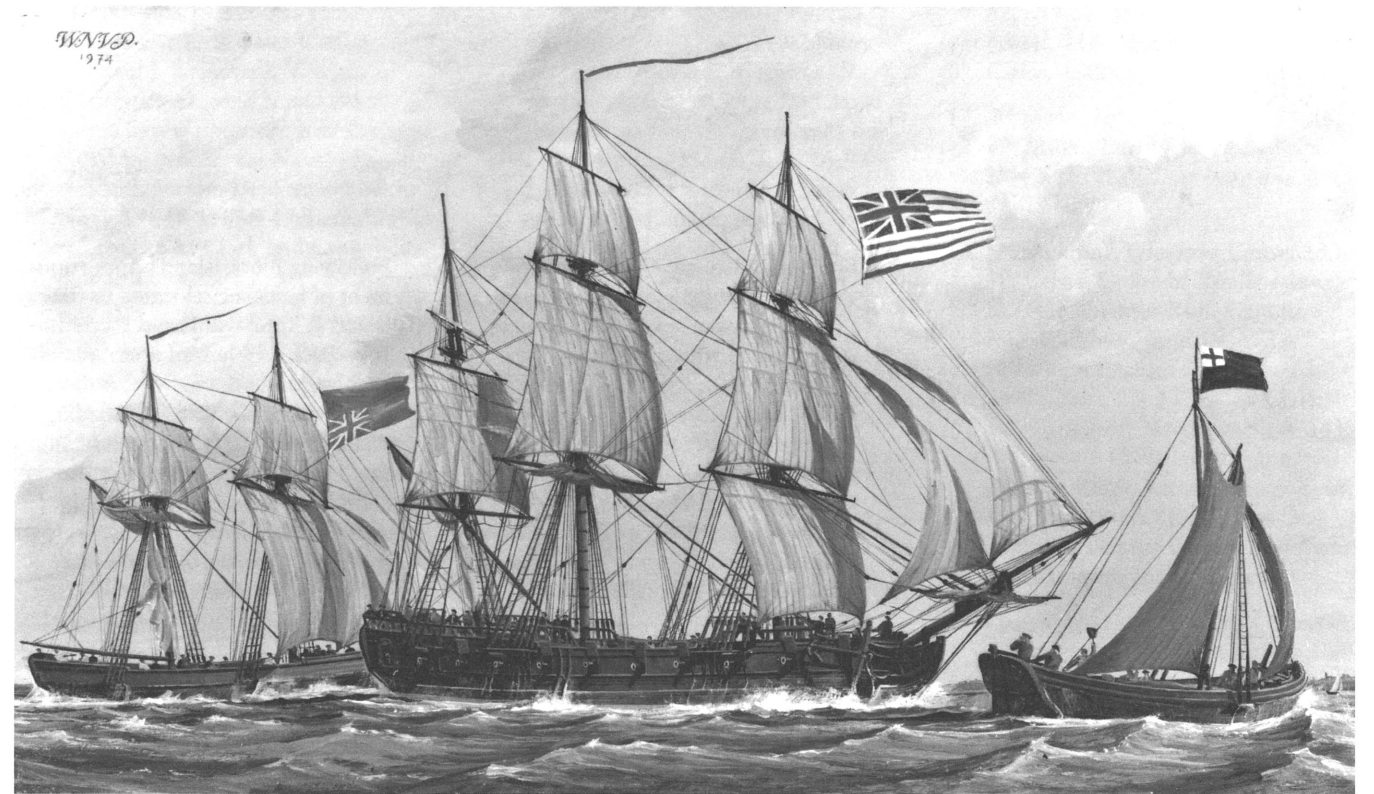
Aside from his will and testament, Captain John Rathbun did leave his name in diverse forms to future generations of Americans. During the nineteenth century, his audacious exploits were cited in Samuel G. Arnold's two-volume history of Rhode Island. In addition, the famed writer, James Fenimore Cooper, singled out Rathbun's New Providence raid in January 1778 for special mention in his history of the United States Navy.⁷¹ In several Rhode Island communities one can find Rathbun streets, and he does have a listing in the Sons of the American Revolution records. He is listed in



During the war, Rathbun gained accolades when he served as John Paul Jones's second-in-command. Portrait of John Paul Jones, print, John Frye & Co., 1861. Rhode Island Historical Society Collections (RHi X3 2397).

the Society of the Cincinnati as well as the Sons of the American Revolution for the state of Rhode Island. In Britain, in 1998, a memorial plaque was placed at the site of Mill Gaol which held so many American patriots during that conflict. A Block Island genealogical society has given Rathbun some notice in their publications, and there are a few historical markers in Rhode Island that refer to him.⁷² During World War II, a destroyer escort named for Rathbun (incorrectly spelled "Rathburn"), served meritoriously in combat. Years later, in May 1969, a frigate, *USS Rathburn* (FF-1057) was launched in Seattle, Washington. Her service to the navy, however, did not last very long; she was decommissioned on February 14, 1992, and sunk as a target during American fleet training exercises on July 5, 2002.⁷³

The story of Rhode Islander John Peck Rathbun is one of determination, expert seamanship and devotion to the cause of independence for the American colonies. A sincere patriot, John Peck Rathbun joined the American naval effort at the first possible opportunity in 1775. He then demonstrated bravery and leadership aboard the *Providence* as the subordinate of John Paul Jones. Rathbun's skill and competence were affirmed when he was appointed a captain in the American Navy in April, 1777. As Samuel Eliot Morison wrote in his biography of Jones, "Of Lieutenant John P. Rathbun. . . Commodore [Esek] Hopkins had written to John Hancock that most of Jones's success. . . was due to Rathbun's 'Valour and Conduct'; and that Rathbun's later career in the Navy indicates that this estimate of his ability was correct."⁷⁴ After assuming command of the *Providence*, Rathbun oversaw a daring and successful raid on the British island of New Providence. He accepted a very difficult assignment in 1778 when he was given command of an aged vessel, *Queen of France*. Nevertheless, Rathbun supervised the rehabilitation of the ship and, in its first voyage, made a brilliant capture of



Rathbun was an officer on the armed ship, *Columbus*, during the war. From an oil painting by W. Nowland Van Powell. (Photograph courtesy of the U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, #NH85 210-KN.tif).

British prizes in an action off Newfoundland. In December 1778, Rathbun captained his inadequate ship in the unsuccessful American attempt to prevent the British from taking Charleston, S.C. When his ship was scuttled, Rathbun joined the army on shore as an artilleryman. He was captured and paroled. Although technically prevented from fighting in the American armed forces, Rathbun returned to sea at the helm of an American privateer in the waters off Ireland in August 1781. Captured and imprisoned

in Ireland and then England, Rathbun died in prison in June, 1782, fifteen months before hostilities between England and America ceased. Although he has not received the notice of some of his more celebrated Rhode Island peers, Rathbun's unceasing labors and the sacrifice of his life to the cause of American independence have earned him a place in the pantheon of Rhode Island naval heroes of the American Revolution.

Notes

1. Sheldon S. Cohen, *Commodore Abraham Whipple of the Continental Navy; Privateer, Patriot, Pioneer* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), xxi-233; Thomas F. Woodstrup, *Captain Benjamin Page, A Forgotten Hero of the American Revolution, Rediscovered in Sycamore Illinois*, 2nd ed. (Sycamore, Ill.:priv. ptd., 1998), ii-178; Edward Field, *Esek Hopkins, Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Navy during the American Revolution* (Providence, R.I.: Preston & Rounds Co., 1898), ix-290.
2. [Frank H. Rathbun], "John Peck Rathbun, Merchant Skipper Becomes Officer in the Continental Navy," in *Rathbun—Rathbone—Rathburn Family Historian*, newsletter, vol. 2, no. 4, October 1982, pp. 52-54, at <http://www.michaelrathbun.org/02-1982/02-004.pdf>, accessed June 3, 2014; James N. Arnold, ed., *Vital Records of Rhode Island, 1636-1850* (Providence, R. I.: Narragansett Historical Publishing Co., 1864): 5: 25, "Town of Exeter, Births, 25, Marriages, 55." The surname, Rathbun, had several variants, i.e., Rathburn, Rathburne, Rathbon, and Rathbone, with its origins going back to England in the Middle Ages. (The noted British actor, Basil Rathbone had ancestral connections to this surname.) Later, the Rathbun name, sometimes with different spellings, was associated with the English seaport city of Liverpool. The first Rathbun from that maritime community to migrate to New England was Colonel Richard Rathbun. One of his descendents, John Rathbun, became one of sixteen Massachusetts men who purchased lands on Block Island.

Following Block Island's apportionment of lands, he relocated to the island in 1662. Nathaniel Rathbun, John Peck Rathbun's father, was his grandson. Martha S. Dale, *Index to the Rathbun Genealogy* (Arcadia, Calif., 1966), 637; Samuel Rathbun and Lydia Sparks, eds., *A Genealogical Record of the Descendants and Ancestors of Henry Rathbun* ---(pvt. pt., 1937), 1-6, 8-10; Amelia Inge Atkinson, "Captain Rathbun's Last Voyage," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register*, CXVI (July, 1961): 164; Frank H. Rathbun, *Rathbun, Rathbone, Rathburn Family Historian; Rathbun Family Association* (Fairfax, Va.: Rathbun Family Association, 1981); John C. Cooley, *Genealogy, Rathbun Genealogy* (Syracuse, N. Y. : Rathbun Family Association, 1898), 2: 451. Colonel Richard Rathbun married Mary Annys [Marian] Whipple in about 1595. Their arrival in Massachusetts Bay was recorded in 1628. There the Rathbuns lived initially in Taunton in the Bay Colony, but in 1658 moved to Rhode Island. John O. Austin, *The Genealogical Dictionary of Rhode Island* (Albany, N.Y.: J. Munsell's Sons, 1877), 158; Arnold, *Vital Records of Rhode Island*, vol. 5; "Town of Exeter, Births," 25; Sparks, *A Genealogical Recd of Rathbun Descendants*, 9-13. (Note: North Kingstown, South Kingstown, and Exeter are all located within Washington County, Rhode Island.)

3. [F. Rathbun], "John Peck Rathbun, Merchant Skipper," 52.
4. [F. Rathbun], "John Peck Rathbun, Merchant Skipper," 52.

5. "Deposition of Thomas Flin," William B. Clark, William J. Morgan, Michael J. Crawford, William S. Dudley, et. al., eds., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*. (Washington, D. C.: Naval Historical Division, Department of the Navy 1964), 1: 848-49; hereafter referred to as Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs*.
6. Russell Leigh Jackson, "Benjamin Leigh and Some of his Descendants," *New England Historical & Genealogical Register*, XCIV (January 1940): 61; *Register, Boston Marriages, 1752-1808* (Boston, Mass.: Boston Municipal Printing Office, 1903), 402; Arnold, *Vital Records of Rhode Island, Marriages and Deaths*, vols. 11-12.
7. See [F. Rathbun], "John Peck Rathbun, Merchant Skipper," 53. On South Kingstown documents related to Rathbun's death, see footnote number 70, below.
8. John F. Millar, *Early American Ships* (Williamsburg, Va.: Thirteen Colony Press, 1968), 164-65; William M. Fowler, *Rebels Under Sail, The Continental Navy During the Revolution* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 55-57; Nathan Miller, *Sea of Glory: A Naval History of the American Revolution* (New York: D. McKay, 1974), 4-39.
9. Hope S. Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft, Being the Adventures of the Continental Sloop Providence, 1775-1779* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1977), 8-10, 18-22, 34-36, 51; "Nicholas Cooke to Abraham Whipple," Nov. 12, 1775, and "John Adams, List of Persons Suitable for Naval Commands," Nov. 27, 1775, in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 2: 249-56, 647, 748-49, 857-58, 1162-63; Fowler, *Rebels Under Sail*, 96-98; Cohen, *Commodore Abraham Whipple*, 57-60.
10. Samuel E. Morison, *John Paul Jones; A Sailor's Biography* (Boston: Little Brown Co., 1959), 43-49, 60-61; William J. Morgan, *Captains*

to the Northward; New England Captains in the Continental Navy (Barre, Mass.: Barre Gazette, 1959), 42-43; "Journal of John Trevett, March 4-6, 1776," "Manifesto of Esek Hopkins, March 3, 1776," and "Governor Montforte Brown to Lord Dartmouth, March 17, 1776," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 3: 249-50, 386-88, 496-97, 748-50, 857-58, 1162-1163; 4: 152; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 59-60; Fowler, *Rebels Under Sail*, 57-59; Miller, *Sea of Glory*, 112-13.

11. "Andrea Doria, Journal of Nicholas Biddle, April 1776," "Captain James Wallace to Vice Admiral Molyneux Shuldhham, April 10, 1776," "Journal HMS Glasgow, April 6, 1776," "John Hancock to Esek Hopkins, April 17, 1776," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 4: 446-47, 669, 680-81, 735-36, 868; Fowler, *Rebels Under Sail*, 98-100; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 72-73; Cohen, *Commodore Abraham Whipple*, 61-64; Morgan, *Captains to the Northward*, 43-48.
12. "John Paul Jones to Continental Marine Committee, Sept. 4, 1776," and "John Paul Jones to Continental Marine Committee, Sept. 7, 1776" in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 6: 684-87, 745-46; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 84-86; Morison, *John Paul Jones*, 67-69.
13. Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 94-101; Morison, *John Paul Jones*, 71-77; Millar, *Early American Ships*, 37-38.
14. Morison, *John Paul Jones*, 77-90; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 84-85.
15. Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 77, 85-91; Morison, *John Paul Jones*, 76-80, 91-92.
16. "Vice Admiral Lord Richard Hawke, Commodore Sir Peter Parker, Fleet for the Rhode Island Expedition, Nov. 25, 1776," "Narrative of General Sir Henry Clinton, Nov. 21- Dec. 8, 1776," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 7:256-62, 657-58; James, *Colonial Rhode Island*, 314; Middlekauff, *Glorious Cause*, 430.
17. Morison, *John Paul Jones*, 79-85, 89; Millar, *Early American Ships*, 39-42; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 94, 124-27.
18. Middlekauff, *Glorious Cause*, 333-58; James, *Colonial Rhode Island*, 315-21; "Muster Roll, Captain John Rathbun, June 19, 1777," and "John Bradford to Leonard Jarvis, June 26, 1777," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 9: 141, 171; James, *Colonial Rhode Island*, 315-21; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 124-26, 129-32. (Jarvis was then serving as Deputy Continental Agent in Dartmouth Massachusetts.)
19. *Providence [Rhode Island] Gazette*, August 16, 1777; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 130-32.
20. "Navy Board of the Eastern Dept. to Captain John Rathbun, Nov. 13, 15, 1777," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 10: 476, 495-96; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 129-30, 134-35.
21. *The South Carolina [Charleston] and American Gazette*, Dec. 25, 1777.
22. Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 133-35.
23. "Journal of Marine Captain John Trevett, November-December 1777," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 11: 1170-71; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 136-38.
24. Frank H. Rathbun, "Rathbun's Raid on Nassau," *Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute*, vol. 91, no. 11 (November, 1970): 40-42. (Frank H. Rathbun was a descendant of the Rhode Island Rathbun family. His short but worthy article lacks many details which appeared in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, volume eleven, published several years later.) *South Carolina and American Gazette*, Feb. 26, 1778; "John Trevett Jnl.," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 11: 1169; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 142-44.

25. *South Carolina and American Gazette*, Feb. 26, 1778; "John Trevett Jnl.," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 11: 1170-71; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 130, 147.
26. *South Carolina and American Gazette*, Feb. 26, 1778; "John Trevett Jnl.," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 11: 1170 -71; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 147; Rathbun, "Rathbun's Raid," 42-43. The initial vessel that the American invaders of New Providence saw was the sloop *Mary*. The invaders landed near James Gould's "plantation" on New Providence Island. In his article on this raid, Frank Rathbun alleges that the Newport, Rhode Island-born merchant Gould was a sympathizer for the insurgent cause, p. 44.
27. *South Carolina and American Gazette*, Feb. 26, 1778; "John Trevett Jnl.," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 11: 1170-71; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 145-47.
28. *South Carolina and American Gazette*, Feb. 26, 1778; "John Trevett Jnl.," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 11: 1171-1172; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 150-52; Morgan, *Captains to the Northward*, 165-67.
29. *South Carolina and American Gazette*, Feb. 26, 1778; "John Trevett Jnl.," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 11:1171; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 151-52. See also "Muster Roll of Continental Navy Sloop *Providence*, From Jan. 6, to Feb 22, 1778," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 11: 403; Rathbun, "Rathbun's Raid," 46-47.
30. Rathbun, "Rathbun's Raid," 46-47; "John Trevett Jnl., Jan. 30, 1778," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 11: 245-52, 335, 1171.
31. "John Trevett Jnl.," Mar. 1-2, 1778, in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 11: 472; *The Providence Gazette and Country Journal*, March 7, 1778; "Libel of the Ship *Mary* in Massachusetts Maritime Court," March 3, 1778, in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 11: 495-96; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 160-61.
32. John Trevett Jnl., Mar. 1-2, 1778," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, vol.11: 472, 2n; *Mary* was subsequently burned by a British raiding party on New Bedford on September 12, 1778. Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 163; Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs*, 11: 1158, n. 8.
33. Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 166.
34. The correct information concerning *Queen of France*—her purchase, her original American commanders, and her subsequent arrival in America—was generously furnished to the author on January 30, 2013, by Dr. Michael J. Crawford, Senior Historian, Naval History Command, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D. C. See also, "John Ross to American Commissioners in France, Feb. 26, 1778," in Benjamin W. Labaree, William B. Willcox, Barbara B. Oberg, Ellen R. Cohn, eds., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press 1986), 25: 629-30; "Gordon Lupton (James Van Zant) to William Eden, 15 October 1777," in Clark and Crawford, *Naval Docs.*, 10: 912-13 and 11: 1041; Jonathan Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution, 1774-1783* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986), 25: 91-99; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 175; Miller, *Sea of Glory*, 104-08.
35. Millar, *Early American Ships*, 167; Rider, *Valour Fore and Aft*, 177-94; Fowler, *Rebels Under Sail*, 111-18.
36. "John Ross to American Commissioners, 6 Feb. 1778," Labaree, et. al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, 25: 629-30; John P. Rathbun, "Boston, Statement re. Naval Affairs, Sept. 12, 1778," M247, r177, i157, p. 204, John P. Butler, compiler, *Index, Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789* (Washington, D. C., 1978), National Archives and Records

- Service, General Services Administration. The actual manuscript documents were read on microfilm and xeroxed at the Chicago, Illinois branch of the National Records and Archives Service; Miller, *Sea of Glory*, 410; Cohen, *Commodore Abraham Whipple*, 92.
37. William M. James, *The British Navy in Adversity* (London: Longman Green, 1926), 87-92; John Tilley, *The British Navy and the American Revolution* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1975), 163-180, 182-89.
38. "Navy Board of the Eastern Department to Abraham Whipple, June 12, 1779," Charles O. Paullin, *Out-Letters of the Continental Marine Committee and Board of Admiralty, August 1776-September, 1780* (New York: Printed for the Naval Historical Society by De Vinne Press, 1914), 2: 86-87; Cohen, *Commodore Abraham Whipple*, 98-99.
39. "Navy Board of the Eastern Dept. to A. Whipple, June 12, 1779," Paullin, *Out-Letters*, 2: 86-87.
40. James, *British Navy in Adversity*, 90-92; Tilley, *British Navy*, 182; Cohen, *Commodore Abraham Whipple*, 99-100.
41. Andrew Sherburne, *Memoirs of Andrew Sherburne, A Pensioner of the Navy of the American Revolution* (Providence, R. I.: H. H. Brown, 1831), 20-21; Miller, *Sea of Glory*, 411; Cohen, *Commodore Abraham Whipple*, 100.
42. Miller, *Sea of Glory*, 412-13; Sherburne, *Memoirs*, 21; Cohen, *Commodore Abraham Whipple*, 101-102.
43. Cohen, *Commodore Abraham Whipple*, 102-103; Miller, *Sea of Glory*, 413-14; Fowler, *Rebels Under Sail*, 9.
44. *Providence Gazette*, Sept. 11, 1779; Cohen, *Commodore Abraham Whipple*, 102-103; Miller, *Sea of Glory*, 414.

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64. Francis D. Cogliano, *American Prisoners of the Revolutionary War; The Captivity of William Russell* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 167; "Samuel Hubbard to Benjamin Franklin," Feb. 12, March 21, 1782, Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (2003), 37: 16-17; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 62-65, 87, 141-42, 172-75; Atkinson, "Capt. Rathbun's Last Voyage," 166.
65. MS Journal of William Russell, Special Collections, Peabody Essex Museum, DIA 166, Salem, Mass., entry for June 19, 1782, used by permission from the Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum; Cohen, *Yankee Sailors*, 65-67, 135-37, 168.
66. MS Journal of William Russell, June 15, 22, 1782; Atkinson, "Capt. Rathbun's Last Voyage," 166. William Russell noted in his journal that Rathbun had been stricken by an unnamed malady, "possibly influenza, brought by Americans transferred from Kinsale, Ireland [that] raced through the prison in May and June 1782." Cogliano, *American Prisoners*, 68-69.
67. Jonathan Dull, *Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*, 137-51; *Newport* [R. I.] *Mercury*, Apr. 17, Oct. 19, 1782; *Providence* [R.I.] *Gazette*, Apr. 27, 1782.
68. Atkinson, "Capt. John Rathbun's Last Voyage," 166. On May 8,

1782, Catherine Greene of Rhode Island wrote to Benjamin Franklin in Paris seeking his assistance for Samuel Hubbard, a seaman, who had been captured on *Wexford*, and, like John Rathbun, had subsequently been incarcerated at Mill. See "Catherine Greene to Benjamin Franklin, May 8, 1782," Labaree, et al., eds., *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (2003), 37: 285-87.

69. *American State Papers, Claims Department. Legislative and Executive Departments of the United States, Commencing March 4, 1787* (Washington, D.C., 1827), April 1, 1794, No. 5195, John P. Rathbun, Captain Navy. The approved federal government funds were formally paid to Rathbun's estate on June 8, 1795. (See Atkinson, "Captain Rathbun's Last Voyage," 167.)

70. Jean S. Stutz, transcriber, *South Kingstown, Rhode Island, Town Council Records*, (14 Oct., 1782), 1771-1795. (Kingston, R. I., 1988): 135-36, 142, 324; Atkinson, "Capt. Rathbun's Last Voyage," 167. Amalia I. Atkinson clarifies and adds to information concerning the Rathbun family which she had given in her previous July, 1961 article. See, "Notes," *New England*

Historical and Genealogical Register, CXVII (Jan. 1962): 78-79.

71. James Fenimore Cooper, *History of the Navy of the United States* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Lea & Blanchard, 1839), 88-91; Samuel G. Arnold, *History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (Providence, R. I. : Preston Pub., 1860), 2: 413-14.

72. Information concerning the tributes to Captain John Peck Rathbun found in Rhode Island and elsewhere in New England were kindly given to the author by Mr. Bert Lippincott of the Newport Historical Society and Ms. Lee Teverow of the Rhode Island Historical Society in Providence. (The author was unable to locate an extant likeness of Captain Rathbun for use as an illustration in this article.)

73. Data supplied to the author relating to United States Navy vessels named in honor of Captain John Rathbun, including the variants of his surname, was generously supplied to the author by Dr. Michael J. Crawford, Head, Early American Naval History, Washington Navy Yard, Washington, D. C.

74. Morison, *John Paul Jones*, 92.

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