

Privateers and Mariners in the Revolutionary War

The 13 Colonies, having declared their Independence, had only 31 ships comprising the Continental Navy. To add to this, they issued **Letters of Marque** to privately owned, armed merchant ships and Commissions for **privateers**, which were outfitted as warships to prey on enemy merchant ships. Merchant seamen who manned these ships contributed to the very birth and founding of our Republic.

Comparison of Navy vs. Privateers in Revolutionary War

	Continental Navy	Privateers
Total ships	64	1,697
Total guns on ships	1,242	14,872
Enemy ships captured	196	2,283
Ships captured by enemy	?	1,323

Excerpt from: <http://www.usmm.org/revolution.html>

Privateers

Because of British policy regarding import of gunpowder, the colonists did not have enough to repel the third British charge at **Bunker Hill**. A survey by **George Washington** at the time showed army stockpiles were sufficient for **9 rounds per man**. By 1777, the privateers and merchantmen brought in over **2 million pounds of gunpowder and saltpeter**. A typical New England privateer carried two or three African-Americans who had long found employment in the fishing industry. The **General Putnam** from New London, Connecticut, had 4 blacks on board; the **Aurora** had 3. In Salem, Massachusetts, **Titus**, a slave owned by Mrs. John Cabot, ran a successful business recruiting blacks as privateers.

Privateer **John Manley** captured the **Nancy**, supplying the American army with 2,000 muskets, 31 tons of musket shot, 7,000 round-shot for cannon, and other ammunition. Captain **Jonathan Haraden** from Salem, Massachusetts, who captured 1,000 British cannon, was considered one of the best sea-fighters, successfully taking on three armed British ships at the same time. Privateers captured countless British reinforcements and over 10,000 seamen, keeping them out of the British Navy.

In 1777 George Washington's armies totaled about 11,000 men. At the same time there were 11,000 privateers at sea intercepting British shipping in the Atlantic, Caribbean, and even between Ireland and England.

Together, the Continental Navy and privateers captured **16,000 British prisoners**, a substantial contribution in comparison with the 15,000 prisoners taken by the entire Continental Army before the surrender at Yorktown. The crew of the privateers were well paid for their hazardous work, earning as much as \$1,000 for one voyage, while average pay at the time was \$9 per month.

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Privateers in the American Revolution

by John Frayler, Salem Maritime National Historic Site

When the American colonies declared their independence from Great Britain, the infant nation was in no position to defy British rule of the seas. Britain's navy in 1776 was the world's most powerful. States individually outfitted vessels of war and Congress established a navy, but it was a slow beginning. At no point in the conflict did the American naval forces have adequate resources to confront the Royal Navy on its own terms. The Royal Navy—once the protector of American shipping—now made every effort to suppress and destroy it. The Americans responded to the situation with the time-honored practice of privateering. American privateering activity during the American Revolution became an industry born of necessity that encouraged patriotic private citizens to harass British shipping while risking their lives and resources for financial gain.

European governments regularly issued documents known as Letters of Marque and Reprisal to legitimize privately outfitted men-of-war. In a tradition dating back to the Middle Ages, under highly regulated conditions, these documents authorized private parties to attack enemy vessels. Without the documentation, these same activities were considered acts of piracy and subject to prosecution. If a privateer captured an enemy ship (known as a prize), an admiralty prize court had to approve the seizure. Then, the proceeds from the sale of the prize and its cargo were shared among the owners and crew of the privateer according to a pre-arranged contract.

Privateering encompassed two levels of participation. A Letter of Marque authorized armed merchant ships to challenge any likely enemy vessel that crossed its path during the course of a commercial voyage. A Privateer Commission was issued to vessels, called privateers or cruisers, whose primary objective was to disrupt enemy shipping. The ideal target was an unarmed, or lightly armed, commercial ship.

With the passage of an act on March 23, 1776, the Continental Congress formalized the commissioning process, and uniform rules of conduct were established. Owners of privateers had to post monetary bonds to ensure their proper conduct under the regulations.

Although the documentation is incomplete, about 1,700 Letters of Marque, issued on a per-voyage basis, were granted during the American Revolution. Nearly 800 vessels were commissioned as privateers and are credited with capturing or destroying about 600 British ships.

Vessels of every size and description were pressed into service as privateers. At the upper end of the scale was the 600-ton, 26-gun ship *Caesar* of Boston. At the other end was the 8-ton boat *Defense* of Falmouth, Massachusetts. Crews ranged from a few men in a whaleboat to more than 200 aboard a large, fully equipped privateer. Two-masted schooners and brigantines were most often used in privateering, reflecting the kind of vessels available to American seamen.

Home ports for vessels operating as privateers and Letters of Marque included Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Boston, Salem, Beverly and Newburyport in Massachusetts; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Baltimore, Maryland; New London, New Haven, Norwich and Wethersfield, Connecticut; Providence, Rhode Island; and Richmond, Virginia.

Privateers achieved the best results if they could bluff an opponent into believing opposition was futile. When this failed the result was often vicious combat with unpredictable results. Many privateers were captured or sunk when the odds were against them. In spite of all the risks and hazards, the overall effort to cripple Britain's commercial fleet was highly effective, and fortunes destined to finance the new republic were made. It is estimated that the total damage to British shipping by American privateers was about \$18 million by the end of the war, or just over \$302 million in today's dollars.

To learn more:

Donald Barr Chidsey, *The American Privateers* (New York, N.Y.: Dodd, Mead, 1962)

Edgar Stanton Maclay, *A History of American Privateers* (Freeport, N.Y., 1970)

C. Keith Wilbur, *Picture Book of the Revolution's Privateers* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1973)

The Unlikely Role of Patriot Pirates

Privateers plundered British ships and made fortunes, to boot.

By [Robert H. Patton](#), Contributor | June 27, 2008, at 4:00 p.m.

It began offhandedly in the fall of 1775. Unable to attack British-occupied Boston because of shortages of cannons and gunpowder, George Washington observed the flow of enemy supplies into Boston harbor and wondered if intercepting a British weapons ship might help replenish his meager armory and uplift his army's spirit.

Offering a percentage of the spoils as inducement to the crews, he dispatched several armed schooners to prowls Massachusetts Bay. In their hunger for loot, the schooners mistakenly snatched a number of patriot vessels before capturing a British transport carrying tons of munitions. Word spread that the seamen had made their fortunes. Yet Washington's joy at the windfall didn't change his low opinion of the colonials involved. Of the lowly shipboard "tars" and the commercial agents who outfitted the schooners, he said, "I do believe there is not on earth a more disorderly set."

The last of Washington's schooners left government service in 1777. In their place were a fledgling Continental Navy and a marauding horde of civilian privateers, essentially legalized pirates who were permitted under international law to plunder the enemy's commercial ships.

Though the Continental Navy launched only a handful of warships during the Revolution, more than 2,000 privateers sailed from colonial ports. They seized 600 ships in American waters and hundreds more in the North Atlantic, as well as in the West Indies, then a teeming marketplace for New World commodities and African slaves. In Britain, privateering caused the price of imports and maritime insurance to soar. Newspaper editorials denounced the American "pyrates," and merchants wondered, "Where is the boasted navy of our country?"

In fact, the Royal Navy captured or destroyed hundreds of American privateers in bloody mismatches of firepower and seamanship. But the payday was deemed worth the risk. One success, shrugged the Philadelphia financier Robert Morris, an avid investor, "will pay for two, three, or four losses." The crews themselves were no less bullish. One New Hampshire seaman, just 14 years old, collected a ton of sugar, 40 gallons of rum, and \$100 in gold from the proceeds of one captured ship. Although a six-week privateering jaunt turned into two years of combat and harsh imprisonment for a Connecticut teenager, he astonished his family by hopping another privateer two days after staggering home. He ended the war a wealthy man.

These ambitious mariners ultimately wore down an enemy whose military superiority was strained by the commitments of building a global empire. Benjamin Franklin, America's first emissary to France and a strong supporter of privateering, had no illusions about defeating the Royal Navy, but he aimed to prolong the sea war in order to weaken British resolve. "We expect to make their merchants sick of a contest in which so much is risked and nothing gained."

Franklin devoted himself to aiding privateersmen jailed in Britain. Their plight had become dire after Parliament voted in 1777 to deny them legal rights typically granted prisoners of war. Presaging the current controversy over the rights of detainees at Guantánamo Bay, Britain allowed rebels captured at sea to be held without trial or any prospect of exchange.

Tables turned. Parliament also legalized Britain's own privateers, and French trade ships inevitably fell prey to them. In 1776, French officials had dismissed British complaints about American privateers with amusement. "Shall we say they are pirates? They do not commit any acts of piracy against us." But by the fall of 1777, the French were the ones lodging complaints about hijacked cargoes.

Privateering's casualty toll is hard to calculate. But male populations in seaports from New Hampshire to Maryland were decimated after the war, and public records cite countless men missing at sea. Certainly, thousands died under the guns of British warships, and most of the 12,000 Americans who perished on the infamous prison ships anchored off New York were civilian mariners, their bodies thrown overboard or shoveled under the sandy banks of what is now the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

None of this detracts from the courage and sacrifice of the Continental Navy. But even the navy's most ardent commander, John Paul Jones, conceded that naval service couldn't compete with privateering's loose discipline, better pay, shorter cruises, and explicit permission to avoid tangling with enemy warships.

Indeed, the privateering industry tapped the same vein of self-interest and comradeship that had led the Colonies to seek independence in the first place. It bolstered the battered wartime economy by supporting shipbuilders as well as legal officials who settled captured prizes. It sparked wild financial speculation and created fortunes that survive to this day.

Some of the investors had already been rich and simply added privateering to their wartime portfolios. But most were lower-class hustlers who bet all on a dicey enterprise and emerged as the new nation's economic elite.

Some waterfront magnates entered the highly profitable slave trade. Many transports sent from New England to Africa to collect slaves for delivery to the American South were former privateer warships or converted prizes. Three fifths of them hailed from Rhode Island, a booming privateer center from the earliest days of the rebellion.

The key factor behind privateering's growth from a New England fad to a trans-Atlantic phenomenon, from small-time to big business, was that its lowliest seamen and richest investors pursued it for the same reason—to make money and whip the British, too. In that regard, it opens a window on Revolutionary society that is instantly recognizable to our modern sensibility, for the enterprise blended capitalism and patriotism, selfishness and public service. It was a difficult balance, whose shifts and moral accommodations constitute a basic theme of American life both in 1776 and today. 1

Patton is the author of [Patriot Pirates: The Privateer War for Freedom and Fortune in the American Revolution](#) (Pantheon, 2008).