

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Salem, Massachusetts



Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions

Historical Musings from Salem Maritime NHS



Two Frigates Engaged in a Sea Battle. Painting by Thomas Freeman.

Everybody Wants To Get In On the Act

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American privateering activity during the American Revolution became a major industry that made room for anyone who had the right frame of mind and access to a vessel that could be used to harass British shipping.

In a tradition dating back to the Middle Ages, Letters of Marque and Reprisal and Privateering Commissions were issued by governments authorizing private individuals to conduct acts of aggression at sea against a declared enemy. Without the official governmental sanction, this activity was regarded as piracy, and the participants were treated as criminals rather than prisoners of war. Privateering provided a patriotic, if risky, means of enriching oneself at enemy expense by attempting to capture valuable vessels and cargoes and auctioning the prize while interfering with the conduct of the opponent's normal trading activity.

Letters of Marque and Reprisal permitted armed merchant vessels engaged in commercial trading to attack enemy shipping as opportunities arose, and Privateer Commissions were issued to vessels specifically intended to prey on enemy shipping. The terms were used almost interchangeably by the time of the Revolutionary War. Those that held a Letter of Marque were participants in the privateering game but the vessel was referred to as a Letter of Marque. Vessels serving under Privateer Commissions were frequently referred to as cruisers, or privateers. The blanket term privateering covered both options.

Initially, individual states enacted legislation to encourage and legitimize privateering. With the passage of the act of March 23, 1776 by the Continental Congress, the commissioning process and uniform regulations of conduct were formalized. Bonds to insure proper conduct under the regulations were required by the states and Congress. Massachusetts bonds are noted ranging from 500 to 4,000 pounds. Continental bonds were posted in the amounts of \$5,000, \$10,000, and after August 1780, \$20,000.¹

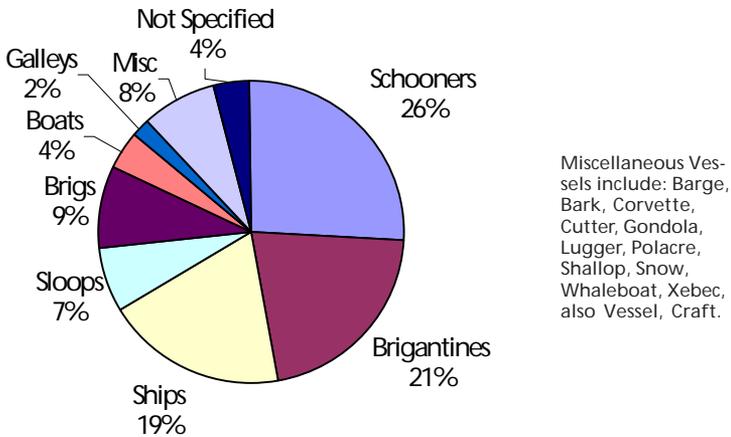
Sometimes the same vessel operated as an unarmed trader on one voyage and as a private armed vessel on the next. The reasons for these decisions are not always clear from the information available, but must have been based on calculated risk determined by distance and destination, probability of interdiction by the Royal Navy and British or Loyalist privateers, sailing qualities of individual vessels, politics, urgency of mission, and finding willing investors, captains and crews. Nearly seventeen hundred Letters of Marque were issued, but surviving records do not even begin to tell us the total number of vessels engaged in American commerce at the time.² The great number of Letters of Marque issued gives the impression that a large percentage of the overall available tonnage was pressed into the service of opportunity at one time or other. The Letters or

Commissions were issued on a voyage or venture basis and the same vessel is frequently listed more than once, often under different principal owners within an existing partnership and, in other cases, completely different owners.

Descriptions of American vessels engaged in privateering reflect the diversity of shipping generally. Some were actually of a class purpose-built as privateers, in the European tradition of small frigates carrying twenty to thirty carriage guns. Others were merchant vessels of all kinds converted to carry guns. At the upper end of the scale, records indicate the Boston-owned *Caesar* of 600 tons and twenty-six guns, while the smallest recorded tonnage noted so far is the boat *Defense* of Falmouth, Massachusetts, at 8 tons. Undoubtedly, others were even smaller. Some carried only muskets, swords, or small swivel guns. Crews ranged from more than two hundred to as few as three!

It is probably not possible to determine exactly how many of each category of vessel was in use since terminology is exceedingly blurry. Brigs and brigantines, and brigantines and schooners tended to have similar features and a person describing a vessel may not have had the same frame of reference as another individual. Additionally, the same vessel may be often found with differing descriptions. Whether this is due to semantics or the fact that vessels frequently had the rig altered between cruises can be confusing. The approximate incidence of frequency of vessel types, based on the author's Privateer/Letter of Marque database is shown in chart 1:

PRIVATEER/LETTER OF MARQUE graphic breakdown of rigs/types in use during the American Revolution by the number of references stated (not actual number of ships) indicative of proportion of vessel types. Chart based on 4143 entries.



As indicated in the chart, the most numerous vessels engaged in private venturing were easily maneuverable two-masted schooners and brigantines, at approximately one quarter each of the total. A primary reason for this includes existing availability at the beginning of the Revolutionary War. For more than a century American colonists had been active in fishing and coastal trading with its natural extension to the West Indies. Large numbers of schooners and brigantines served this market. Another vessel type popular in this pursuit was the single masted sloop, which like schooners and brigantines, could sail into the wind with greater ease than square-rigged ships.

While square-rigged merchant ships were available, they were usually larger than what could be afforded by the small businessman. Although wealthier owners could heavily arm them, converted merchant ships were ordinarily less maneuverable and often slower than the smaller vessels, a trade off which was not necessarily in their favor. Exceptions were vessels such as Elias Hasket Derby's exceptionally successful ship *Grand Turk*, built in 1781 incorporating qualities desirable in a privateer, a perfect combination of size, speed, and firepower. Owners and shipmasters had to tailor their expectations to the limitations of the vessels that they sent in pursuit of quick profits.

Some references are more specific and mention galleys (usually a fairly large rowing boat) and whaleboats. Rowing boats were plentiful and could be heavily manned. They were effectively used in teams, just the thing for stealthy night raiding in coastal areas. Oars offered advantages over sails under certain conditions. When combined, oars and sails offered great versatility.

The two-gun open boat *Skunk* of Chestnut Neck, New Jersey was particularly lucky. After capturing nineteen prizes, the luck of Captain John Golden and his twelve-man crew took a turn for the worse. After spotting what he took to be a large British merchant ship and firing a shot at it, he found to his dismay that it was actually a 74-gun man-of-war that returned the compliment with a broadside. Captain Golden is quoted as saying "the water flew around them like ten thousand whale spouts" and "Lay low, boys. Lay low for your lives!"³

While the crew of *Skunk* managed to get away with their lives, they provide a classic example of the wrong approach to the business of privateering.

Salem's Elias Hasket Derby was somewhat different in his approach to privateering than Captain Golden. As an established merchant with a fleet of trading vessels at his command, he did not have to operate at quite such a basic level.

Derby has been positively identified as the sole or primary owner of twenty-four vessels engaged in privateering as Letters of Marque or commissioned privateers and affiliated in some capacity with many others.

The breakdown of Derby's twenty-four vessels is as follows:

Schooners (5).....20.8%

Brigantines (4).....16.7%

Ships (9).....37.5%

Brigs (3).....12.5%

Sloops (3).....12.5%

When compared with the approximate percentages of vessels involved in privateering overall, Derby seems to have felt more comfortable with, or financially able to afford, the use of full-rigged ships than the general average among his counterparts. He favored schooners and brigantines slightly less than the average and brigs and sloops slightly more.

Elias Derby, the unfortunate Captain Golden, prominent and humble men, and the hundreds of unnamed investors lumped into the "and others" category share a common bond. That was, of course, risk.

Everyone who wanted to and was able got into the act.

Notes

¹Gardner Weld Allen, *Massachusetts Privateers of the Revolution* (Cambridge, 1927), p.40.

² Charles Henry Lincoln, *Naval Records of the American Revolution 1775-1778* (Washington, 1906), pp. 9-495.

³ Arthur D. Pierce, *Smuggler's Woods* (New Jersey, 1960), pp. 53-54.

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