

**National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior**

**Salem Maritime National Historic Site  
Salem, Massachusetts**



## FURIOUSLY IN PURSUIT OF PROFIT

By John Frayler, Historian

∞ Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions ∞  
Historical musings from Salem Maritime NHS  
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Salem is widely known for its participation in privateering during the American Revolution, with the foundation of many fortunes, and the amassing of capital later used to catapult Salem into the world of international trade as a major player. It must be recognized, however, that Salem was not the only city engaged in privateering, and even with her traditionally recognized 158 vessels in the business and 445 enemy prizes taken, Salem was not the largest participant in the activity. That distinction belonged to Philadelphia, with Boston next in line.

The business of operating privately financed armed vessels sanctioned by government has a long and interesting history. Commonly called privateering, this practice is based on laws dating back to the middle ages for obtaining satisfaction for wrongs suffered by a private party due to actions taken by the subjects of another country and efforts at

litigation failed. The granting of official permission allowing individuals to seek satisfaction for damages was known as a Letter of Reprisal or Letter of Marque.

By the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century, the process had become less personal, the "marked man" concept carried over in a limited way to warfare conducted at sea. It had long been the accepted practice among European powers to augment their navies with armed commercial vessels under contract and the issuance of Letters of Marque to any investors bold enough to take the ultimate risk of life and limb.

The Letter of Marque (and the privateering commission) were the accepted practices in use at the time of the American Revolution. Although the terms were used almost interchangeably, the Letter of Marque permitted commercial vessels to arm and

attack enemy vessels while in the course of everyday business. The privateering commissions were a little different. They were specifically issued to allow and encourage individuals to fit out armed vessels of any and all descriptions, ranging from small boats to miniature frigates, as predators to prey on enemy shipping in any favorable circumstance which presented itself.

Another category of operation became available to American ship owners to protect their vessels from the activities of French privateers during the naval Quasi-War with France (1798-1801). The United States Government issued commissions to operate private armed ships, similar to Letters of Marque but restricted to prevent interference with French commercial shipping. The objective was to reduce the impact of the French privateers on American shipping while dancing on the political tightrope which was

eventually to draw the United States into the War of 1812.

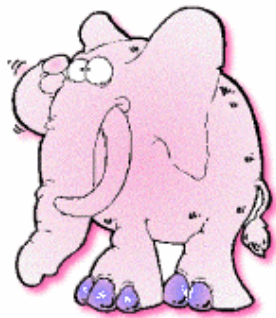
Hundreds of privateering ventures were conducted during the Revolutionary War, with a similar but smaller effort during the War of 1812. There is some confusion between the number of ventures and the actual number of vessels in the process. A closer look at the information frequently points to the same ship being outfitted again and again, often changing ownership and being refitted with a different rig in the process. Thus, a brig of a given name may appear as the brigantine X, and again as the schooner X, sometimes registered to a different state or port or even a foreign owner.

This confusing information is currently being sorted out by the erstwhile SAMA historian. The goal is to positively identify the vessels and their data, and

make the information available to interested persons as an interactive database. It is hoped that information not in the conventional sources may be added in the future to clarify points of confusion or duplication.

Although privateering went out of favor in the United States at the end of the War of 1812, it was not until 1856 that an international attempt to disallow the practice was made. At the conference that produced the Declaration of Paris, the United States was one of four nations who declined to accept the terms as they were felt to be unconstitutional. The authority granted to Congress to issue letters of marque and reprisals still remains in effect under the United States Constitution.





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