

**A BRIEF SKETCH OF  
COMMODORE  
SAMUEL TUCKER**

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A Brief Sketch of Commodore Samuel Tucker by John H. Sheppard

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*Samuel Tucker ~*

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COMMODORE SAMUEL TUCKER.

BY

JOHN H. SHEPPARD, A.M.,

Author of the "Life of Samuel Tucker, Commodore in the American Revolution."

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## COMMODORE SAMUEL TUCKER.

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SAMUEL TUCKER was born in Marblehead, Mass., Nov. 1, 1747, as appears on a leaf in the old family-bible, and was christened in the First Church of Christ in Marblehead, Nov. 8th, of the same year, according to the record of said church. He was the third child of Andrew and Mary Tucker, who had eight children, viz.: Andrew, Mary, Samuel, William, Nathaniel and Elizabeth, twins, and Sarah.

Andrew Tucker, his father, according to tradition, was one of three brothers, who emigrated together from Dundee, Scotland, when young men, one of whom settled in South Carolina, one in Virginia, and one, Andrew, in Marblehead; but this tradition is probably incorrect, as there was an Andrew Tucker at Marblehead as early as 1663. His mother's maiden name was Mary Belcher,—an English lady, handsome, fashionable and of a refined education. She was fond of social life. Her figure was tall and majestic, and from her style of dress, stately appearance, and winning manners, she was called "The Lady Mary." This maternal gaiety descended to Samuel, as a precious heirloom, which he cherished during a long life.

His father followed the sea; was a skilful shipmaster, and much respected. Before the revolution, he was in affluent circumstances and lived in style. The house which he built more than a hundred years ago, on Rowland Hill, near the bay in Marblehead, is still standing, changed from a gable roof to the modern fashion. He is said to have laid out much cost on this building, and decorated his rooms with rich paper-hangings imported from France.

Here the writer saw some fragments of this paper, thick as cloth and figured with vermilion and black stripes. This house must have been stylish in its day, and is still a substantial and convenient tenement.

Of the boyhood and education of Samuel, we only know that at an early period he was sent to school, and was well grounded in reading, writing and arithmetic. His father seeing that he was a bright boy and apt to learn, wished to send him to college, but the youth had no taste for the groves of the academy: his element was the sea, and to so great a degree was his soul kindled by the songs and stories of the Marblehead mariners, who seemed like descendants of the ancient sea-kings, that at eleven years of age he ran away and embarked on board of the *Royal George*, an English sloop-of-war, which was bound on a cruise to Louisbourg. He was afterward apprenticed to the captain by his forgiving and prudent father. It was there he acquired much nautical knowledge, and became acquainted with British signals,—a source of great value to him in his future career.

At seventeen, he enlisted as second mate on board of a vessel from Salem, of which his brother was first mate. When she was within a few hours' sail of Lisbon, she was pursued by two Algerine corsairs. The captain was frightened, as he gazed at them from the companion way; and to quiet his fears he retreated to his bottle, and hid himself in the cabin. Samuel's brother was at the helm, and becoming also alarmed, gave it up to our young hero, who, as night was approaching, boldly sailed toward the pirates, as in token of surrendering. Darkness came on, he put out the lights, crowded sail, and in the morning arrived safely in Lisbon. The base captain, ashamed of his cowardice, put Samuel out of sight on board an English frigate; but the story of this daring escape, it is said, got wind, and Samuel was then promoted to the berth of midshipman. How long he continued in this frigate, is unknown,—probably for a short period; for he was afterward mate of a vessel in the merchant service, and subsequently master of a ship.

He was married Dec. 21, 1768, soon after he became of age. His wife was Mary, daughter of Samuel and Ann Gatchell, of Marblehead. Mr. Gatchell was deacon of the Congregational Church of that place,—a worthy and estimable man. On his marriage, Capt. Tucker took part of his father-in-law's house, which was a double one, and afterward moved to his father's on Rowland Hill, in order to take care of him, now old and a victim of disease. The latter who had been unfortunate, and was now reduced in



property, must have died during the war with England, as the son refers in a future letter to taking care of his mother, "who had no other to look up to for either succor or aid in the least, during more than thirty years." This venerable widow died in Bristol, Maine, at her son's house, in 1808, over ninety-one years old,—an example of maternal love and filial affection ever sacred and ever honorable. She is said to have been a woman of strong and superior mind.

In 1774, he commanded the brig *Young Phenix*, on a voyage to Bilbao, Spain, where amidst breakers and great peril he saved the vessel. But we must pass over his voyages and accompany him to London when the revolutionary war was breaking out. He was there urged by a recruiter to enlist as an officer in the king's service, and in his haste he cursed "his most gracious majesty." This hard-shelled patriotism exposed him to trouble and danger of imprisonment, and he was obliged to leave London secretly, and making his escape by the aid of friends, he obtained a passage in a ship belonging to the celebrated financier and patriot, Robert Morris, of Philadelphia. On the voyage a furious storm arose, and the preservation of the ship was due to the skill and coolness of Capt. Tucker. This incident made Mr. Morris an efficient and permanent friend, who was instrumental in procuring the notice and patronage of Gen. Washington for the brave seaman. From his tent at Cambridge the General sent him a commission as captain of the armed schooner *Franklyn*. It was dated Jan. 20, 1776. This was one of the earliest commissions issued by the commander-in-chief on the formation of an infant navy. Capt. Tucker was then at home in Marblehead, and his interview with the officer who announced to him the honor, has come down to us as a tradition, well authenticated and full of humor. His armed vessel lay at Beverly, and the next day Tucker was on board of her and scouring the seas.

He made several cruises in the *Franklyn*, and was so successful in taking prizes as to receive the thanks of Gen. Washington. His patriotic wife made the banner under which he fought; the field of which was white, with the figure of a pine tree in green. He captured the ship *George*, laden with troops and munitions of war. In the spring of 1776 he was transferred to the command of the armed schooner *Hancock*, in which he also made many captures. There is an interesting account of one capture in the summer of that year, which occurred in the vicinity of Marblehead, when his wife and sister stood on the top of a lofty hill in that place and

saw through a glass the smoky encounter, heard the roar of the artillery and witnessed the arrival of the prize in the harbor. The captures in 1776 were very numerous and annoying to the enemy. An English work, the "Remembrancer," speaks of 342 vessels captured; of this vast number, Capt. Tucker took very many. In his life-time he had a complete list of them, but it was lent and lost.

Such were his services and success that, on the 15th day of March, 1777, he was appointed by congress commander of the frigate Boston, by a commission, bearing the signature of John Hancock, president. In this ship he took several prizes. On one occasion the encounter was very bloody; for he boarded the enemy and lost the brave Magee, his lieutenant, who headed the marines and fell a sacrifice. Having a presentiment of his fate, this intrepid officer handed to Capt. Tucker, just before the attack, a ring, watch and miniature to be sent, if he were slain, to his only sister.

Command of the frigates and armed vessels was frequently changed; but on the 27th of December, 1777, Capt. Tucker again was appointed master of the frigate Boston; and, Feb. 10, 1778, he was ordered to convey the Hon. John Adams as envoy to France. He was authorized to fit her out for this purpose at his own discretion; and consequently he supplied her with additional spars and canvass, which it was said, were of peculiar and original construction, having reference to swift sailing. As the object of Mr. Adams's mission was important, it was so well known to the enemy that a British seventy-four and two frigates at Newport had been watching the motions of the Boston and the time of her departure. To escape a force so formidable and avoid the numerous men-of-war which infested the track across the Atlantic to France, Capt. Tucker had been selected to the command on account of his nautical skill and well-known intrepidity. So great was the confidence of Mr. Adams in this naval officer, that he committed not only himself, but his young son, the since celebrated John Quincy Adams, then eleven years old, to his charge.

On the 17th of February, 1778, at seven o'clock in the afternoon, Capt. Tucker weighed anchor at Nantasket Roads, and went to sea with colors flying, firing a salute of seven guns on the occasion.

The log-book of this momentous voyage is preserved, and has furnished material for an accurate account of this era of his life. It begins with these words in his own handwriting: "Pray God, conduct me safe to France and send me a prosperous cruise." It was a sweet memorial of the care

and influence of a pious mother, who thirty years before had offered, in baptism, her infant Samuel to the protection and guidance of the Almighty.

On the 19th of February, at 6 P.M., he saw in the east three large ships of the enemy and hauled his wind to the south. He then, on consultation with Mr. Adams and his officers, wore ship and run an hour to the northward, and saw two of these ships under his lee with short sail,—one ship of 20 guns, the other as large as his own; the third was far off. Immediately the man at mast-head cried out that there was a ship on the weather quarter. Though continually exposed to these frigates, he avoided them by frequent changes of his course,—sometimes approaching them, and sometimes distancing them, till they were diminished to the view as a mere speck. Thus he made his escape, till a furious storm arose, which drove them out of sight, and left him to fight a terrible battle with the winds and waves. The storm was gathering at 10 P.M., on the 21st, and at twelve midnight, it blew a tempest. The thunder drowned the roaring of the waves. The lightning struck the mainmast and topmast, wounding three men, and knocking down several others. Capt. Tucker remarks in his journal: “We were in great danger, the sea very cross and high.” Heavy rains came on, and they were obliged to scud before the wind. They were in north latitude  $38^{\circ} 33'$ , and longitude, west,  $60^{\circ} 30'$ . The scene on board the ship at this time must have been terrific. In the noon of night, in the “dead of darkness,”—to borrow a similitude from the awful imagery of Prospero in the Tempest,—the rattling of ropes and crackling of timbers and spars; the dread roar of the angry winds; the gleaming sheets of fire, at times flashing over the sea and sky; the sight of three wounded sailors and the fall of others by a stroke of lightning; the tall masts trembling beneath the blast; and, add to all this, the dismal echo from the pumps that there was water in the hold: these were enough to appal the boldest veteran that ever faced the cannon's mouth in battle. Well might the captain in his distress, alarmed for his anxious passengers and crew,—while before him and around him a terrible storm of rain, thunder and lightning threatened every moment to sink him and them,—well might he, in such a mass of sorrows, pour forth that short and simple prayer from his heart, which stands recorded in his journal of that day: “Pray God protect us and carry us through our various troubles.” Gladly must every serious mind contemplate such a precious example of faith, uttered by one of the noblest seamen of the revolution. What must have been the sufferings of that man at that dark hour, when he thought of