

**AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY. THE MOST
SUCCESSFUL
AMERICAN PRIVATEER, AN
EPISODE OF THE WAR OF 1812**

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American Antiquarian Society. The Most Successful American Privateer, an Episode of the War of 1812 by Wilfred Harold Munro

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American Antiquarian Society

THE MOST SUCCESSFUL
AMERICAN PRIVATEER
An Episode of the War of 1812

BY
WILFRED HAROLD MUNRO

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THE MOST SUCCESSFUL AMERICAN PRIVATEER

AN EPISODE OF THE WAR OF 1812

The most successful American Privateer was the *Yankee*. She sailed from Bristol, Rhode Island, a town whose citizens had already, for a hundred years, been actively interested in the business of privateering.

In 1680, four years after the death of the Indian "King Philip" the lands of the conquered sachem were by grant of the English king, Charles II, conferred upon his colony of Plymouth. In that year a town was founded to which the name Bristol was given. For one hundred and fifty years after its foundation this town carried on a commerce that was entirely disproportionate to its size. It was a very important commercial center in the days when a large proportion of the commerce of the American colonies and states was carried on by the vessels that hailed from Narragansett Bay. Its commerce was at first mainly with the West India islands. Then a brisk trade was built up with the "Coast of Africa"—a trade that was especially profitable in the early years of the nineteenth century. In 1804 the first cargo was imported from China. A profitable business with the "Northwest Coast" naturally followed.

The year 1812 saw the town at the zenith of its commercial prosperity. It could then have numbered not more than 2,800 people, of whom 2,600 were white. (The blacks for many years constituted from six to seven per cent of the population, possibly because of the voyages to Africa.) The leading merchant of the town was James DeWolf, a man of extraordinary business ability,

who was afterward chosen to represent Rhode Island in the United States Senate. His business had suffered largely at the hands of the British war vessels and he had kept an accurate account of his losses. When the Declaration of War was proclaimed, June 19, 1812, he felt that his day of retaliation had come. Eleven days after the proclamation he sent to the Secretary of War this letter.

BRISTOL, R. I., June 30, 1812.

The Honorable WILLIAM EUSTIS,
Secretary of War:—

Sir; I have purchased and now ready for sea, an armed brig, (one of the most suitable in this country for a privateer) of one hundred and sixty tons burden, mounting eighteen guns, and carries one hundred and twenty men, called the *Yankee*, commanded by Oliver Wilson. Being desirous that she should be on her cruise as soon as possible, I beg that you will cause a commission to be forwarded as soon as practicable to the Collector of the District, that this vessel may not be detained.

I am very respectfully, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

JAMES DE WOLF.

The commission of the *Yankee* was issued July 13, 1812. Her owners were James DeWolf and John Smith, the latter owning but one quarter of the vessel. Her officers were Oliver Wilson, Captain; Manly Sweet, James Usher, 2d, and Thomas H. Russell, Lieutenants. Captain Wilson was only twenty-six years old. The Articles of Agreement under which the privateer sailed were as follows:—

ARTICLES OF AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE OWNERS, OFFICERS
AND COMPANY OF THE PRIVATE ARMED VESSEL OF
WAR, "YANKEE."

1st. It is agreed by the parties that the Owners fit the Vessel for sea and provide her with great guns, small arms, powder, shot and all other warlike stores, also with suitable medicines and every other thing necessary for such a vessel and her cruise for all of which no deduction is to be made from the shares, for which the Owners or their substitutes shall receive or draw One Half the nett proceeds of all such Prizes or prize as may be taken, and the other half shall be the prop-

erty of the Vessel's Company to be divided in proportions as mentioned in the 15th article, except the cabin-stores and furniture which belong to the Captain.

2d. That for preserving due decorum on board said vessel, no man is to quit or go out of her on board any other vessel, or on shore without having first obtained leave of the Commanding officer on board, under the penalty of such punishment or fine as shall be decreed by the Captain and Officers.

3d. That the Cruise shall be where the Owners or the major part of them shall direct.

4th. If any person shall be found a RINGLEADER of any Mutiny, or causing disturbance, or refuse to obey the Captain, or any Officer, behave with Cowardice, or get drunk in time of action, he or they shall forfeit his or their shares of any dividend, or be otherwise punished at the discretion of the Captain and Officers.

5th. If any person shall steal or convert to his own use any part of a prize or prizes, or be found pilfering any money or other things belonging to this Vessel, her Officers, or Company, and be thereof convicted by her Officers, he shall be punished and forfeit as aforesaid.

6th. That whoever first spies a prize or sail, that proves worth 100 dollars a share, shall receive Fifty Dollars from the gross sum; and if orders are given for boarding, the first man on the deck of the Enemy shall receive Half a share to be deducted from the gross sum of prize-money.

7th. That if any one of the said Company shall in time of action lose an eye or a joint, he shall receive Fifty Dollars, and if he lose a leg or an arm, he shall receive Three Hundred Dollars to be deducted out of the Gross sum of Prize-money.

8th. That if any of said Company shall strike or assault any male prisoner, or rudely treat any female prisoner, he shall be punished or fined as the Officers shall decree.

9th. That if any of the said Company shall die or be killed in the voyage, and any prizes be taken before or during the action in which he is so killed, his share or shares shall be paid to his legal representatives.

10th. That whoever deserts the said Vessel, within the time hereinafter mentioned, shall forfeit his Prize-money to the Owners and Company of the said Vessel, his debts to any person on board being first paid out of it, provided it does not amount to more than one half the same.

11th. That on the death of the Captain, the command to devolve on the next in command and so in rotation.

12th. That no one of said company shall sell any more than one half his share or right of claim thereto of any prize previous to her being taken.

13th. That the Captain and Officers shall appoint an agent of said Vessel's company for and during the term of the said cruise.

14th. That all and everyone of said Company do agree to serve on board of said Vessel for the term of four months, conformable to the terms herein mentioned, beginning the said term at the time of her departure from the harbour of Bristol.

15th. That One Half of the Nett proceeds of all prizes taken by the said Vessel which is appropriated to the Vessel's Company shall be divided among them in the following manner (viz) To the Captain sixteen Shares and all such privileges and freedoms as are allowed to the Captains of Private armed Vessels of War from this Port.

To the First Lieutenant nine Shares. To the 2d and 3d Lieutenants and Surgeon eight Shares each. Prize masters and Master's Mate and Captain of Marines six Shares each; Carpenter, Boatswain and Gunner four Shares each. Boatswain's Mates two and one half Shares each. The residue to be divided among the Company in equal Shares excepting Landsmen or raw hands who draw one and one half Shares each, and boys who draw one Share each. Ten Shares to be reserved to the order of the Captain to be distributed by him to such as he may deem deserving among the Vessel's Company."

The *Yankee* was immediately and immensely successful. In this respect she was unlike the other privateers of the "War of 1812." It is a mistake to suppose that the business of privateering was, as a rule, a successful one. Most of the vessels engaged in it barely paid their expenses. To very many the cruise resulted only in a loss. Much depended on the sailing qualities of the ship, and the way in which she was handled; but much more depended upon sheer luck. The privateers, as a rule, did an enormous amount of damage to the shipping of the enemy without reaping any corresponding advantage themselves. The *Yankee*, however, not only inflicted enormous damage upon the enemy but was also enormously profitable to her owners.

Her officers on her first cruise were Oliver Wilson, Captain, and Manly Sweet, James Usher, 2d, and Thomas H. Russell, Lieutenants. She carried a crew of 115

men (they must have been packed like sardines), and made for the coast of Nova Scotia. One of her first prizes was the *Royal Bounty*, a full rigged ship of 658 tons (about four times the size of the *Yankee*, but manned by a crew of only 25 men). The *Bounty* was taken after a running fight in which three Americans were wounded, while two of the English were killed and seven wounded. The boldness of Captain Wilson in attacking a vessel so much larger than his own was remarkable, but the end justified his conduct. As a rule the privateers avoided engagements with ships of superior size, remembering that, primarily, their object was not to fight battles for the glory of the flag, but to capture ships for their own pecuniary advantage. They could and did fight bravely and successfully upon occasion, but, ordinarily, deemed it wiser to show their heels to a superior foe. Nine other prizes were taken on the first cruise of less than three months, the most valuable of which was the ship *Francis* whose cargo netted more than \$200,000 to her captors. That first cruise paid for the brigantine several times over, and resulted in a dividend of more than \$700 per share.

Small wonder then that the Bristol sailors almost fought for a place on her decks for her second cruise, when she sailed again from the harbor on the fifteenth of October. The Journal of that second cruise is published in full as a part of this paper. Captain Wilson's instructions this time were to scour the west coast of Africa and to come home in the track of vessels sailing to Europe from Brazil and the West Indies. After a hundred and fifteen days the *Yankee* came sailing back into her harbor with a prize on each side. The dividend for each share in the second cruise was \$338.40.

On the 10th of May 1813, the brigantine was commissioned for her third cruise. Elisha Snow was her Captain. The Lieutenants were Thomas Jones, Samuel Barton and George A. Bruce. British war vessels were swarming along the coast. Captain Snow learned that a frigate and a fourteen-gun brig were waiting for him

near Block Island. Choosing his time with care he sailed from Newport on the 20th of May and steered joyfully for British waters. His instructions were to "take enough prizes to make up a handsome cruise, calculating one-half the prizes to be retaken." Three months later he was again lying at anchor in Bristol harbor. Seven prizes were taken on this cruise but most of them were recaptured. The most important of them was the ship *Thames*, of 312 tons burden, with 287 bales of cotton on board. Vessel and cargo were valued at \$110,000. The prize money for each share was \$173.54.

The fourth cruise was almost a failure. A new set of officers was on board. They were Thomas Jones, Captain, and Thomas Milton, George Eddy and Sampson Gullifer, Lieutenants. All told there were 109 persons on the ship. Among the crew we still see the names of Jack Jibsheet and Cuffee Cockroach enumerated as cabin boys. They seem to have been steadily attached to the vessel. Almost all the names of the ship's company were British. It is very likely, however, that the two cabin boys, notwithstanding their pure Anglo-Saxon names, may have been of African lineage. The instructions this time were to cruise "on the track of homeward bound vessels near the Grand Banks." Prizes were to make for Nantucket Shoals and to get into the first port on the Vineyard Sound, avoiding Boston. But two prizes reached port, and the dividend for each share was only \$17.29.

There was no competition for berths on the fifth cruise. Indeed, some of the sailors swam ashore before the privateer left the harbor of Bristol. All the probabilities seemed to point rather to a prison in England than a profit in America. Elisha Snow was again in command. His Lieutenants were Samuel Barton, John Smith and Francis Elliott. Thomas Jones, the Captain of the voyage before, was 2d Captain. The cruise was not finished as planned because the *Yankee* was driven into New Bedford by an English man-of-war and the crew deserted almost to a man. Four prizes only were taken,