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Citizen sailors plunder British ships



The Pride of Baltimore II is a modern re-creation of a typical early United States privateering vessel. Civilians who took up privateering could hope to gain huge wealth while wreaking havoc on English commerce.

By Paul N. Herbert

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Ill winds swept through Revolutionary War America, with conditions, to borrow a phrase, better imagined than described. As the formidable British armada cut through

ocean waves, sending currents of shock and misery through the Colonies, beleaguered troops funded by worthless currency, led by a weak Congress and sabotaged by way too many Loyalists, valiantly fought on land just to survive.

Things were different at sea. War and commerce came together to form a splendid storm called privateering. Private citizens, at their own risk and peril, appetites whetted by the thrill of the hunt for lucrative rewards, gorged on the plunder of British resupply vessels, fattening coastal seafaring towns with rich harvests of cargo.

"Thousands of schemes for privateering are afloat in American imaginations," [John Adams](#) wrote, and from these, "many fruitless and some profitable projects will grow." They grew to phenomenal levels after March 1776, when Congress authorized privateering. There was money to be had. Lots of it.

One unidentified scribe provided this description of the excitement:

"Oh, what prizes these cruisers brought into port! There are no items in the newspapers of that day ... [except] lists of prizes. When these half-pirates came in, cannon were fired, the whole town turned out, and the taverns were filled with rejoicings. The names of the ships and their captains were household words. The captured cargoes were carried ashore; inventories were posted in the taprooms, and often the goods were sold within the welcoming tavern doors."

Advertisements screamed along the waterfronts, recruiters barked promises of riches, and slogans and poems cleverly persuaded:

Come all you young fellows of courage so bold, --- Enter on board and we will clothe you with gold. --- --- All you that have bad masters, --- And cannot get your due, --- Come, come, my brave boys, --- And join our ship's crew.

A single cruise could result in anything or everything. There were money and gold and "lumber, spars, pitch and tar. There were hogsheads of sugar and molasses and puncheons of Jamaican rum. There were cider and wine, London porter, Bristol ale and casks of vinegar and oil. There were indigo and flaxseed, oats and wheat, flour, kegs of bread, bags of coffee, cocoa, and boxes of tea. From the holds, too, came barrels of pork, cheeses, oysters, almonds, lemons, figs, ceramics, glassware, linens and dry goods."

Revolutionary War moneyman Robert Morris spoke of privateers making huge fortunes "in a most rapid manner." Many young and inexperienced boys, some who "could not find a rope in the night," became very wealthy, including one 14-year old who from a single voyage received 1 ton of sugar, 30 to 40 gallons of rum, 20 pounds of cotton, 20 pounds of ginger and about \$700.

Residents of some seafaring towns were said to have spent almost all their time just dividing up the prizes. The end of the war brought sadness to many who had benefited

from the privateers' spoils. A popular poem honoring famed privateer John Manley included these verses:

Brave Manley he is stout, and his men have proved true, ---- By taking those English ships, he makes their Jacks to rue; ---- To our ports he sends their ships and men, let's give a hearty cheer, ---- To him and all those valiant souls who go in privateers. ---- ---- Then cheer up, all my hearty souls, to glory let us run, ---- Where cannon balls do rattle with sounding of the drum; ---- For who would cowards prove, or even stoop to fear, ---- When Manley he commands us in our bold privateer.

Privateering had been around for centuries and was an internationally accepted practice. The goal: Capture an enemy vessel and obtain a predetermined and contractually agreed upon share of the "prize."

The pursued ship was "the chase." A single voyage (or cruise) usually lasted six weeks. Privateers had to have a commission, provided by the states or Congress, after posting a \$5,000 bond. Many vessels were off-limits, including, as [Thomas Jefferson](#) noted, "fisherman, husbandmen, citizens unarmed and following their occupations in unfortified places."

The pursuer could use deception during the chase, including flying false flags, no flags or even the flag of the chase. The first man sighting the chase received double prize money; the first to board got triple. The capturing vessel determined to which port to take the prize. Cargo could be opened only if perishable or in case of emergency. Violations of rules could lead to the loss of the seized ship and cargo, monetary fines, loss of bond and the loss of the commission.

The privateer did not formally obtain the spoils until a court legally condemned the ship and cargo. George Washington originally handled condemnation cases, but the states eventually established their own courts. Some states were deluged with cases; others had few. Thomas Jefferson remarked that in Virginia, "a British prize would be a more rare phenomenon than a comet."

If more than one vessel was involved in the capture, the prize would be split among all ships in sight at the time of capture. Numerous lawsuits occurred to resolve whether a ship was actually in sight at the critical moment. Privateering investors bought and sold shares and partial shares, betting on the success of an upcoming cruise. Like studying a business before investing in its stock, they gambled on the likelihood of success by considering factors such as the crew's competence, the ship's guns, and the captain's track record.

Privateer successes, however, came with one drawback. The American Navy lost a lot of likely recruits. Men who would have enlisted and served on Navy vessels chose instead the much more lucrative privateering. One historian tabulated that between 1778 and 1782 the number of privateers increased from 115 to 323 while in the same period commissioned ships in the Continental Navy dropped from 21 to seven.

Risks of being captured or killed by the enemy or the sea lurked everywhere. These bold seafarers dared nevertheless, and in the process, they lined their own pockets and provided a desperately needed war boost. In all, more than 2,000 privateers filled the oceans, "eat[ing] out," as Thomas Jefferson said, "the vitals of British commerce." It was "the dagger which strikes at the heart of their enemy."

While in Europe, Benjamin Franklin issued commissions for three vessels, French-owned and staffed mostly by Irish smugglers, which in one 18-month period captured 114 British vessels. A British citizen in the West Indies observed 82 captured English ships in port. The General Mifflin captured six prizes in the Irish Sea, and the Pilgrim took eight prizes in one cruise off the Irish coast. All in all, as John Adams happily remarked, it was "a short, easy and infallible method of humbling the English ... and bringing the war to a conclusion."

The privateers swarmed enemy ships, veritable floating treasure chests of sweets, like bees to honey. As an example of their impact, consider that in the winter of 1775-76, just eight of the 40 transport ships sent by England to Boston made it to their destination.

"Had it not been for our privateers," one historian opined, "the Stars and Stripes would have been completely swept from the seas." It may have been the most important factor in finally ending the war.

These "piratical sea-dogs" proved to be like a Brinks money truck backing up to the gates of the British Treasury, convincing merchants the war cost more than it was worth, and eventually forced Parliament to end its American war. That very plan had been spelled out in August 1776 in the Continental Congress' Committee of Secret Correspondence: "We expect to make ... their merchants sick of a contest in which so much is risked and nothing gained."

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