

Queen Anne's County link to the start of the War of 1812

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Commodore James Barron went aboard the *Chesapeake* at Hampton Roads on June 21st; it was now to be his flagship. He had orders as the Commander of the American Fleet in the Mediterranean. He was coming aboard just one day before his flagship was to sail. The *Chesapeake* had recently been in mothballs and was not completely ready.

Along with the other formalities, James Barron was informed there were escaped impressed seamen aboard, Americans who had made a daring getaway from their British ship the *Melampus*. Still, with so many issues to consider while taking over the *Chesapeake*, no one apparently made mention that two of the impressed seamen were Marylanders, one was from Massachusetts and one was British, calling himself an American.

It was late June of 1807. The British *Melampus* had been lying off Hampton Roads with orders to shadow a French ship that was hiding somewhere up the Chesapeake Bay. Two of the Americans who had been impressed on the *Melampus*, one from Massachusetts, Daniel Martin, and one from Maryland, William Ware, had been taken from the brig *Neptune* in the Bay of Biscay and had served 15 months on board the *Melampus*. Another Marylander, John Strachan, as he was known on board the *Melampus*, was taken off a British Guineaman on its way to Africa for slaves. He was taken onto the *Melampus* off Cape Finnestaire, on the Atlantic coast of Spain. He had been on board the *Melampus* for two years, promising himself to return to his own country at the first chance of escape.

That chance came in February of 1807 when the men noticed that only the commanding officer's gig was tied up to the ship, in the water. All other boats to go ashore were stashed aboard and it would take time to get them into the water. Additionally, there was entertainment going on aboard, giving the Americans a real chance to sneak over the side and make their escape.....just what John Strachan had wanted. In spite of being fired upon from the *Melampus* as they rowed away, the men reached shore, pulled the boat up above high tide mark and made for safety until they could determine their next course of action....which ultimately led to their signing onto the *Chesapeake*.

At 6 A.M. on June 22, 1807 the *Chesapeake* weighed anchor and set out to sea. As it sailed from Hampton Roads in calm waters that morning it passed the British ships the *Bellona* and the *Melampus*, each waiting for provisions to be brought aboard from shore. Their colors were flying and they presented no threat. Late in the afternoon, about four o'clock, one of the two line of the battle British ships that were further out came within what was called "hailing distance".....close enough to be heard aboard the *Chesapeake*, aided by the effort of the *Chesapeake* as it hove to. The British ship was the *Leopard*, commanded by an upwardly aspiring officer by the name of S. P. Humphreys. He sent an officer on board with a message from Vice Admiral Berkley, commander of all British ships "on the North American

station" insisting that deserters were aboard the *Chesapeake* and that they must be returned..

Barron's message was plain and simple, albeit not totally true: "I know of no such men as you describe." The message explained further it was not the position of the American government to allow impressed men to serve aboard American ships. It ended tersely but politely: "It is my disposition to preserve harmony, and I hope this answer to your despatch (sic) may prove satisfactory."

Humphreys was obviously not satisfied with Barron's answer because he then fired three broadsides into the *Chesapeake*. Given the close range of the two ships, the damage was enormous: three men killed, including the ship's carpenter Mr. Shackley, eight badly wounded, one of whom would die within the week, ten slightly wounded. All the sails had been shot through multiple times, and masts were damaged, most to a significant extent.

Humphreys then sent one of his officers on board and the so-called deserters were taken off the *Chesapeake* and put aboard the *Leopard*. Commodore Barron also surrendered his ship to the *Leopard*, but Humphreys was not interested. He knew that would amount to an act of war without provocation, and he had no authority for it. Of course the action he did take was an act of war as well, but he did not see it that way since his orders from Berkley were to take deserters by force if it came to that.

Yet it was precisely his actions that did set the anger in motion throughout much of the new country, especially in every town and city in the vicinity of the Chesapeake Bay. Everyone immediately pulled together citizen committees to write resolutions that were published in all papers in the region, read at public protest meetings, and sent to the President. Even in Centreville and Easton, as well as at Annapolis and Richmond, there were resolutions written and published. What did not happen however was concern for the men whose presence caused the incident in the first place. Tremendous concern was shown for the men killed and wounded, and for the damaged ship. The so-called deserters were taken to Halifax on the *Leopard* to the British prison on Melville Island in Halifax. The American government did what it could to try to gain information about, and release of the Americans. The one man who pretended to be American but was actually British, was hung once the *Leopard* arrived in Halifax.

Two of the Americans, the Marylanders, had their "protections" still with them, the documents listing some kind of proof they were natives of America. The third and youngest, Daniel Martin, from Westport, Massachusetts, had had his papers taken but still our government made the effort to take all the possible depositions. It is those depositions that give us a real look at the reality and personal stories of Americans as impressed seamen. More importantly, the local depositions give us the

absolute proof in detail that we need to prove it was one of our own Queen Anne's County men who was one of the impressed seamen.

John Strachan had changed his name from that March 20th, 1802 day when, at 17 years and ten months old, he stood in the Orphan's Court in Centreville and paid 30 pounds Maryland money to become indentured to Greenbury Griffin, listed then as a Talbot county waterman. John Strachan was actually John Strahan or Strawhan, the son of Samuel Strawhan. Changing names, even slightly, was often done by impressed seamen in order to protect themselves for future work once they returned to their own country. Also the names were sometimes used by the seamen to try to make life easier for themselves. In this case, John Strachan used his name for both purposes. It was a name close enough to his real one so it was easily remembered. More importantly, the commanding officer, the admiral of the fleet in which the *Melampus* was sailing at the time he was impressed, was named Sir Richard Strachan. The names were close enough that it was an easy exchange. How much protection it really gave our man we do not know. That part of the story has yet to be discovered, but it will be found.

By the fourth of August of 1807 each person in Queen Anne's County whose name had been given by John Strachan knew what they had to do. They arrived at the Queen Anne's County Courthouse that day to provide their depositions. As presented in the documents of the United States government, it was 37 year old Greenbury Griffin who first gave his deposition regarding the 1802 indenture of John Strahan to him. From other documents it is clear that Mr. Griffin, who ran a packet boat out of Queenstown at the start of the century was now engaged in business between Queen Anne's County and the West Indies. John Strahan sailed with him aboard the schooner the *Eagle* out of Norfolk to St. Bart's. While John Strahan's term of indenture beginning in 1802 was for three years and two months, he obviously did not keep to that, leaving Griffin and sailing back to Norfolk from Trinidad with Capt. John Kemp. From Norfolk John Strahan sailed on board the brig *Martha Bland* to Dublin and then on to Liverpool. There he left the ship and signed onto a British Guineaman headed to Africa for slaves. The *Melampus* caught up with his ship off of Cape Finnestaire in Spain's Atlantic waters in 1805 and it was then he was impressed. It would be later that the other two Americans, William Ware, Mulatto, and Daniel Martin, Negro, would be impressed from their ship in the Bay of Biscay onto *Melampus*.

Other depositions given that August fourth day were from John Roe Pratt, 45 years old and listed as being of Queen Anne's County, from John Price, age 41 and listed as being from Kent Island. Thomas Lynch, age 47 testified that he knew the young man and his father, that young John had been born at the tanyard on William Tilghman's property, and that he was a man of fair complexion and sandy hair.

Last, but not least came the deposition of Samuel Strawhan, John's father, who preferred his spelling of the family name. He testified to John's birth on April fourteenth, 1784, and he recalled the apprenticeship of John to Greenbury Griffin who he said was in the West Indies business. He must have testified with some sadness that he had neither seen nor heard from his son since he left in 1802.

While these depositions, as well as ones for Ware and Martin were taken within months of what quickly became known as the *Chesapeake-Leopard* Affair, nothing happened to release the men from their prison in Halifax. It was a brutal place and many Americans died there, if not from the floggings, then from the cold and deprivation and illnesses that were rampant. The prison was notorious, housing over 10,000 prisoners from various ships before, during and after the War of 1812. Efforts are now underway to determine where the prison records are. The Maryland newspapers did not do a follow up on the fate of either Ware or Strahan. One modern day historian of the 1812 period says that Americans during the run up to the War of 1812 had great ambivalence towards American seamen who were impressed. It was not until 1811 that the attitudes began to change. Concerns about the fate of Halifax prisoners came front and center in 1812 in letters between Secretary of State Monroe and British representative Augustus Foster when Commodore John Rodgers on the American frigate the *USS President* blasted the British sloop of war *Little Belt* off Cape Hatteras. The sternness of Monroe's letters to Foster make fascinating reading, in part because it is the first time that the British offered reparations for Humphreys' actions against the *Chesapeake*, and addressed the issue of the prisoners, almost five years to the month of the *Chesapeake-Leopard* Affair. The British saw Rodger's actions against *Little Belt* as retaliation for Humphreys' actions against the *Chesapeake*, and frankly so did many Americans, including here on the Eastern Shore.

On January 28th, 1812 before the *Little Belt* incident, the Easton papers published an article from the Lexington Reporter which publicly challenged the status of our two Marylanders and Daniel Martin. They stated the following: "If we recollect right, four men were impressed of those we believe

One was *hung* at Halifax,

Another was flogged to death,

Another died soon after being flogged,

The other--put out of the way no doubt by this time."

Sadly, in those days, there were few reporters of the kind we have today, thus no investigation regarding the real end of our Marylanders. As for what happened to some of the other "players" as related to Queen Anne's County: hounded by creditors in 1811, Greenbury Griffin was in court in May of that year and must have made out well, since the Queenstown assessment list for 1833 shows him as owning a one acre lot and house for which he was taxed at \$150. His schooner the *Eagle* became a Revenue cutter, but not under him, and was blown ashore on James Island near Norfolk in a hurricane in 1806. The Shackley family of the deceased Chesapeake's carpenter asked for and was denied US reparations or pension by the 1833 Congress.

Our story is not entirely ended. There are still some clues that it was likely John Strahan who survived. Another report in 1812 stated that "the men were released on condition they signed on to other British ships"---but at this point there is no proof of that. The clues will be followed up however, so that the "rest of the story" may be told. Nevertheless, as we prepare for the commemoration of the War of 1812, it is a matter of the heritage of Queen Anne's County that we acknowledge and commemorate that it was one of our own in one of the major incidents that caused the War of 1812.