

Privateering In Vineyard Sound In the Revolutionary War

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Soon after a Lexington farmer had fired “the shot heard round the world,” another shot, though not as famed nor presumably heard so far, was fired in Vineyard Sound. This shot was fired from one of the three swivels mounted on the whaleboat of an intrepid Vineyarder named Benjamin Smith. It was the signal for the opening of an engagement that ought to rank as the first sea battle of the American Revolution. That distinction is generally awarded to the sloop *Unity*, commanded by Jeremiah O'Brien, which captured the British armed schooner *Margaretta* off Machias, Maine.¹ In fact, the affair in Vineyard Sound, although hardly a major action, does qualify as the first armed combat of the war on the sea.

The Sound was the major channel for ships bound to and from New York, and the privateersmen of Martha's Vineyard and Naushon took the opportunity to prey on the passing British vessels. British men of war responded in several incidents of aggressive action against the privateers, and that in turn led to retaliatory action on the part of the islanders.

One such incident happened in the spring of 1775 when the *Falcon*, a British Sloop, took two vessels in the Sound “on some frivolous pretence...on which the people fitted out two other vessels in the Vineyard Sound, went in pursuit of them, retook and brought both into a Harbour and sent the Prisoners to Taunton Gaol.”² In this case it seems that the small vessels so fitted out were small sloops rather than the more usual whaleboats.

All privateering in Vineyard Sound during the Revolutionary War was sporadic, opportunistic and

mainly the result of individual action rather than a coordinated program under the Continental Congress or the Massachusetts government. The isolated, exposed position of Martha's Vineyard, Naushon, and the other Elizabeth Islands made any coordinated military effort difficult. Much of the privateering in Vineyard Sound was carried on in vessels that were not regularly commissioned, with little official cognizance other than that of selectmen, committees of safety and other local authorities.

This was all the authority that Captain Smith had when he sallied forth in a whaleboat with a small crew of volunteers to undertake the capture of the armed British schooner *Volante*, tender of the British cruiser *Scarborough*. Though there was a great disparity between the two vessels, Smith made up in daring what he lacked in ordinance, boarded and soon brought the prize into safe harbor.³

The inhabitants of Naushon also engaged in some whaleboat privateering, but despite the fine harbor at Tarpaulin Cove which had earlier sheltered pirates and other illicit raiders of commerce, the activities of this small island were soon curtailed by the “sloop *Falcon*, commanded by Captain Linzey.”⁴ This vessel anchored at Tarpaulin Cove in early June, 1775, and sent in a landing party. After securing a major part of the supplies, the men stove in all of the whaleboats beached on the shore. The inhabitants of Naushon Island were handicapped by the fact that although they were on the route of supply ships, they were also very vulnerable to the raids of British men of war that were based at Newport and ranged constantly in the area.

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On December 11, 1775, the selectmen of Falmouth tried to get the government to use Tarpaulin Cove as a base for privateering operations. In a petition to the Honorable Council and House of Representatives in General Court assembled, they stated that “in the Island of Naushon is a very commodious harbor much used by all vessels and where a small ship of war and two or three tenders might interrupt and even destroy all the unarmed vessels passing through the sd. Sound.”⁵

Little was or could be done to follow this advice, beyond sending a few whaleboats and some small

cannon to be mounted on them. These were completely ineffective as the British kept close watch upon the island. Whatever captures were made by these boats were minor and not mentioned in the records of the prize courts of the Southeastern district.

In June of 1776, Barachiah Bassett petitioned the council of the House of Representatives of the Massachusetts Bay to maintain some military and naval force for the defense of the islands. Ten whaleboats were allotted “for the protection of Tarpolan Cove and Martha's Vineyard” with the added hope that



Painting done in the 1930s by Franklin Lewis Gifford of the English raid on Woods Hole on April 1, 1779. Courtesy Woods Hole Library. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

This painting portrays a typical forage by the British in Revolutionary times. Early in the morning of April 1, 1779, the British landed on the shores of Little Harbor in Woods Hole and proceeded to steal twelve head of cattle from nearby farms. They drove them down to the shore and knocked them on the head. The British were about to load the carcasses aboard their boats when they were fired upon by some of the Minutemen who had arrived to repulse this foraging party. So fierce was the fire of the Americans that the British had to abandon their loot and sailed off empty-handed.

Frustrated and infuriated, the British determined on revenge. They decided to sail the fleet down from Tarpaulin Cove to Falmouth on April 3 and burn the town down.

they might be used for the preying on the commerce of the enemy that passed without.⁶

These whaleboats were authorized by the Council eleven days later. These whaleboats provided the Islanders with the nucleus of a small privateering fleet. Mainly through the initiative of two captains of the Seacoast companies, Nathan and Benjamin Smith, this fleet remained active until the companies were disbanded.

Whaleboats made excellent privateer vessels in the waters of Vineyard Sound. Manned by anywhere from eight to fifteen men and armed with one or more swivel guns, a whaleboat could slip up to the side of an enemy vessel under cover of darkness, board and secure the ship before the crew had been alerted to the fact that they were being attacked.

Such action would seem almost comparable to piracy since these small vessels carried no commission, but they were sent out principally by authority of the selectmen of the town. A further stamp of legality was put upon the capture by having the prize "libelled" by one of the several courts set up for this purpose by the government of Massachusetts. In the case of captures in Vineyard Sound, prizes would be taken before the Court of the Southeastern district located at Barnstable. This is what happened when the schooner *Bedford* was captured on March 23, 1776, by the Seacoast Company of Tisbury under the direction of Captain Nathan Smith. The schooner had been carrying a cargo of provisions for the British fleet and army, and in this case the court allowed the company to take two thirds of the contents of the vessel."

Violent disputes in the prize courts were precipitated when a vessel was captured by more than one priva-

teer. The custom of the courts was to divide such prizes according to the number of carriage guns on the participating privateers. Since whaleboats carried no such weapons, and the guns they did have were generally of little use in small actions of this sort, some new method had to be devised. It was finally decided to divide the prize in proportion to the number of men in each vessel.⁸

Other than whaleboats, the only vessels used by the Vineyarders for privateering in the Sound were small sloops such as the craft fitted out for the express purpose of recapturing the prizes of H.M.S. *Falcon*. The only regularly commissioned privateer based on Martha's Vineyard was the sloop *Liberty*.⁹ She was commissioned by the Massachusetts government, although there is no record of the usual bond being required of the master or owner.

Liberty was under the command of Captain Benjamin Smith and manned by members of his Vineyard Seacoast Company. Her mission was to capture the transport *Harriot*, Weymuse Orrack, Master, that was loaded with "Cole, Porter, and Potatoes bound for Boston."¹⁰ The transport was engaged in early March 1776 and brought into the harbor.¹¹ This was another example of the intrepid seamanship and courage of Captain Smith and his company, for the *Harriot* was a large ship of two hundred fifty tons burthen and the *Liberty* was but a small sloop. In this case the verdict of the Court was not as generous. The captain and company petitioned the court seeking more than the one thud share that they had been awarded.¹² The petition was disallowed.

Privateering in the Sound was not wholly the province of the Patriots. From the beginning of the war, local trade through the Sound was bothered by the

depredations of small boats similar to those used against the British. The local inhabitants called them 'Picaroons' and found them a source of great annoyance. They were based in harbors protected by larger British vessels and were manned by Tories. The Tories called themselves British belligerents, but they acted like little more than pirates, robbing friend and foe alike whenever the opportunity presented itself. There were no commissions, bonds, or other records with which to document the activities of these marauders.

Grey's raid in 1778 destroyed twenty-six whaleboats and two sloops at the Vineyard and deprived Naushon of most of its remaining sustenance. The raid ended the Patriot privateering in these parts for a time. In its stead, the British began to use the harbor at Tarpaulin Cove as a base for their own privateers.

Early in May 1779, a ship was returning from the Connecticut River with corn for Woods Hole. Corn was then selling at \$3.00 per bushel, attesting the efficiency of the British blockade. The ship was intercepted by a British privateer as she entered the Sound, captured, and taken to the anchorage at the Cove. Later in the night, Col. Dimmick proceeded silently to the Cove with members of the Falmouth militia in three of the armed whaleboats then at Woods Hole. They arrived just before daybreak and were fired on by both vessels. They managed to board the prize, secure it, and run for safety behind the reefs of Martha's Vineyard. Here they beached the vessel until the tide turned, then refloated her and sailed to Woods Hole. At that time there were seven enemy privateers in the harbor at Tarpaulin Cove according to an order issued by the Board of War and the Naval Board to the frigate *Providence*.

There was little cohesion or effective direction to the activities of the privateers in Vineyard Sound; the privateering was sporadic, occurred early in the war and had no noticeable effect upon the outcome of the war. The privateers fought no major battles, nor did any of their actions greatly advance the cause of Independence. Their story is one of individual action in the immediate defense and for the immediate benefit of exposed settlements that were largely a liability to the patriot cause.

However, the privateers did their part in a small way for independence and did remain a thorn in the side of the British fleet. The Vineyarders certainly did not deserve the comments of Col. Beriah Norton. An early leader of the revolt, Norton spent the later years of his life attempting to gain restitution for the damage done by Grey's raid. In a petition to the Admiralty Board in England he made the following amazing statement: "It is truly astonishing that these inhabitants should be accused of fitting out Privateers and Rowboats and taking many prizes into port, when it is incontestably true that no privateer or row-boat was ever fitted out from the island nor any part of one owned by any inhabitant of it."

Suffice it to say that the absurdity of this report is apparent. Norton's statement was obviously designed to extract money from the British and is disproved by the records. Such talk as this must have seemed little short of treason to such men as Benjamin and Nathan Smith and the other hardy Yankees who sallied forth in flimsy ill-armed whaleboats to do battle with armed British men of war.

William I. Munson is a loyal Harvard alumnus. His long and distinguished service as Trustee of the Falmouth Public Library culminated recently when the Town declared a Bill Munson Day with a ceremony in his honor at the main library. Mr. Munson is a respected Falmouth attorney.



Painting done in the 1930s by Franklin Lewis Gifford, "Falmouth Militia Repels British Invasion." Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society. Photo by Paul Ferris Smith.

This painting shows the British retaliation for the repulse of their raiders at Woods Hole on April 1, 1779. On April 3, a fleet of ten schooners and sloops carrying 200 British sympathizers from Plymouth and Newport arrived off Surf Drive Beach to invade the town of Falmouth and burn it down. Col. Joseph Dimmick of Falmouth is portrayed in this painting as pacing the breastworks along the beach while bullets and cannon balls fly around him. He refused pleas that he protect himself in the trench. Col. Dimmick was made general after the war. During the war, he was also responsible for preventing British use of Nantucket as a supply base.

The story of how Falmouth was warned about this attack is told by Judith Stetson in *Woods Hole Reflections*, edited by Mary Lou Smith, published by the Woods Hole Historical Collection, 1983, p. 22. :

"Some officers of the fleet spent the evening of the 2nd enjoying a frolic at the house of John Slocum, a renowned Tory living on the island of Pasque near Tarpaulin Cove. Slocum overheard their plan and could not bear to have the town destroyed without a warning. He sent his son running down the islands to tow across to Woods Hole and warn the village. When the English arrived at 9 the next morning off Surf Drive beach, they found Major Dimmick with two Falmouth companies and two Sandwich companies ready to beat them off. After some skirmishing during which the cannonballs buried themselves harmlessly in the April slush instead of rebounding into the defenders, the fleet sailed away."

Mr. Munson consulted archives at the New England Historical Society and Widener Library in the course of researching his paper.

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Notes

1. G.W. Allen in his preface to *Massachusetts Privateers of the Revolution* gives credit to Machias as location of the first action of the war, but says there were reports of "some" action near Martha's Vineyard, but on what "authority" these were reported he does not know. Authority for the authenticity of this action was found in the records by Dr. Charles E. Banks and appear in his manuscript for his *History of Martha's Vineyard*. Emmons *Statistical History of the U.S. Navy* contains record of this action.
2. *New England Chronicle*, May 18, 1775.
3. Emmons, *Statistical History of the U.S. Navy*.
4. The manuscript reference called this "the sloop *Faulkland*" but there is no record of any British sloop by that name being in these waters. However there are constant references in other sources to the activities of the *Falcon* in Tarpaulin Cove.
5. Amelia Forbes Emerson, *Early History of Naushon Island*, p. 266.
6. Tarpolan Cove, June 11, 1776. Letter of Barachiah Bassen to the Council of the House of Representatives of the Massachusetts Bay. Massachusetts Archives CCIX, 315.
7. Massachusetts Archives, Council Records.
8. Timothy Pickering, Philadelphia, to Messrs. Andrew and Ward, 21 February 1779; Pickering Papers (Massachusetts Historical Society) V, 137.
9. Allen, *Massachusetts Privateering*, 205.
10. *Massachusetts Archives* CXCIV, 281. (handwritten comment?)
11. Letter to James Otis by Bcriah Norron, March 7, 1776.
12. *Massachusetts Archives* CLXXXI, 78.