



Sailing Off To Serve

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I. Plymouth in the Revolution

The Town of Plymouth has always focused on the waterfront - and it was no different during the Revolutionary War! While many Plymoutheans marched off to war, many more sailed off to serve the Patriot cause.

Ships sailing in and out of the Plymouth area fell into two categories, official vessels and privateers. The official vessels included the schooners of George Washington's first tiny navy. Organized in 1775 as an auxiliary arm of the Continental Army, this fleet of eight small ships was outfitted at Continental expense and reported to Washington himself. The activities associated with these ships, and the Continental naval agents who supplied them, are well documented in the papers of George Washington at the Library of Congress, available online through the American Memory project. (The Continental Navy was not officially organized as an independent branch of the military until 1776; this later navy was never active in the Plymouth area.)

The other official ships were those ships outfitted by (and reporting to) the Massachusetts Provincial Congress. Among the 15 ships of the Massachusetts Colonial Navy was the brigantine ***Independence***, built in Kingston in 1776, captained by Simeon Sampson of Plymouth.

The second category of ships was comprised of privateers. These were privately-owned vessels authorized either by the Continental Congress, or one of the individual American colonies, to seize enemy vessels carrying troops or supplies - particularly those carrying the ammunition so desperately needed by the Continental forces. Because of the small size of the Continental Navy (only 64 vessels over the entire course of the war), the contributions of the approximately 2,600 authorized privateers were essential to the successful prosecution of the war. According to Lloyds of London, privateers captured 2,087 British ships, while the Continental Navy captured 196 ships. The U.S. Merchant Marine estimates that about 55,000 American seamen served aboard privateers, intercepting British shipping in the Atlantic, Caribbean, and even between Ireland and England.

The costs of outfitting a ship for privateering were high. So were the potential financial rewards. Owners, captain and crew shared in the profits of captured cargoes. The risks of privateering were also high, however. Many of the privateers would never return home.

Nevertheless, Plymoutheans owned privateers, they outfitted and provisioned privateers, they sailed on privateers. As James Warren wrote to Samuel Adams at the beginning of the war in 1776:

The spirit of privateering prevails here greatly. The success of those that have before engaged in that business has been sufficient to make a whole country privateering mad. (W-AL)

The "spirit of privateering" did not diminish as the war continued, and privateers continued to be built and outfitted into the 1780s. The privateer **Rattlesnake** was built at Plymouth in 1780. Designed for speed by naval architect John Peck of Boston, she captured a million dollars worth of British goods on her first (and only) cruise.

Whether Continental, Provincial or privateer, colonial naval activity generally focused on taking "prizes." American vessels were often too small and lightly armed to confront English men-of-war. They were skilled, however, at intercepting British transport and supply ships and diverting them as prizes into American ports. The ships, their fittings and their cargoes would then be used to further the Continental cause.

Each American port had a naval agent, responsible for fitting out and supplying Continental ships as well as disposing of British prizes. The rules for disposal were strict and recognized internationally. Any ship taken had to be proved to have been actively involved in supporting the enemy's military activities. A charge was brought, called a "libel," and a trial was held in a maritime court. If the charge could not be proved and the activities of the captured vessel were deemed to be purely mercantile, the prize was returned to its owner. Neither the vessel nor any cargo taken could be allocated to Continental use until the vessel was judged to be a true prize. As befit a new nation anxious to win support of established European powers, George Washington's naval agents followed the rules of privateering scrupulously.

James Warren nominated William Watson as Plymouth's naval agent:

I took the liberty yesterday to mention your name to the General [Washington] as a suitable person to supply 50 men with provisions and to take care of any prizes that may be carried into Plymouth... I have such confidence in your honor and fidelity as to presume your conduct will make my recommendation respectable and give full satisfaction to the General. (PSA)

Watson was duly appointed. He served his country and his new commander-in-chief well. As commander-in-chief, George Washington's first task was to drive the British out of Boston. In order to accomplish this, Washington had to disrupt the British maritime supply lines as well as to obtain badly-needed ammunition for Continental troops. On his own authority, he acquired eight small schooners and asked for volunteers from the Continental Army. Manned by New Englanders with considerable sea experience, Washington's schooners operated primarily in New England waters.

Two of the schooners, the **Washington** and the **Harrison**, were outfitted from Plymouth. Their flag was a green pine tree on a white field, with the motto "Appeal to Heaven." Their mission was to search for vessels bound to or from Boston in the service of the British Army and to seize any that were carrying soldiers, arms, ammunition or provisions, sailing the captured ship to the nearest American port. Instructions to the captains note:

You are particularly charged to avoid any engagement with any armed vessel of the enemy, though you may be equal in strength or may have some small advantage; the design of this enterprise being to intercept the supplies of the enemy which will be defeated by your running into unnecessary engagements. (LC)

The **Washington** was a 160-ton schooner, rigged as a brigantine, with 10 guns and a crew of 74, captained by Sion Martindale of Rhode Island. The second ship, the **Harrison**, was a 64-ton topsail schooner built in 1761 and carrying four guns, captained by William Coit.

Coit, arriving in Plymouth on October 25, 1775, was considerably dismayed with his antiquated little vessel but gamely set sail the next day. Unacquainted with Plymouth harbor, he ran aground on a sandbar. After two further collisions with sandbars, he finally cleared the harbor on November 6. Almost immediately, he captured two British ships with geese, chicken, sheep, cattle and hogs on board, heading from Nova Scotia to supply the British troops stationed in Boston. Coit's triumphant return with his prizes to Plymouth was reported in the *Pennsylvania Journal* of November 29, 1775

Captain Coit (a humorous genius) made the prisoners land upon the same rock our ancestors first trod when they landed in America, where they gave three cheers, and wished success to American arms. (NDAR)

After having its weak mainmast replaced, the *Harrison* sailed again on November 12 and was chased by British vessels into Barnstable harbor. Leaving Barnstable on November 29, she took two more prizes : a schooner, which turned out to be American-owned and was therefore returned to her owner, and another schooner with a very valuable cargo - four Loyalist pilots who were to guide British transports safely into Boston harbor.

In January of 1776, the command of the *Harrison* was given to Plymouthean Charles Dyer. The *Harrison* and Captain Dyer made a short cruise but, upon further consideration, the vessel was deemed unseaworthy and retired from the service.

The *Washington*, under Sion Martindale, was far less successful. Martindale sent request after request for expensive additional sails, guns, ammunition and crew and showed no sign of ever sailing, although letters from headquarters urged him on in more and more explicit terms. When he finally did sail, very late in the season, he brought in only one small sloop before being captured after he, against direct orders, had confronted a British man-of-war. A more detailed account of the *Washington* and Sion Martindale is given in Part II of this article. George Washington's most successful captain, and America's first naval hero, was John Manley, a Boston sea captain. Plymouth was one of his provisioning ports. Manley brought a number of British prizes (including the 120-ton ship *Norfolk* and the 130-ton ship *Happy Return*) into Plymouth, where naval agent William Watson was charged with libeling the ships and bringing them to trial. George Washington's aide-de-camp Stephen Moylan wrote to Watson:

the sooner they are brought to trial, the more agreeable it will be to the General. You will please to take notice, that the private property of the captains & crews are to be carefully guarded for them (PSA)

Manley found safe haven in Plymouth Harbor on one memorable occasion when the British were forced to evacuate Boston in March of 1776. They left by sea, burning their barracks behind them. The departing troops were loaded onto transport ships and, escorted by men-of-war, sailed south along the New England coast. Manley, who had been waiting outside of Boston Harbor for possible prize ships, was almost caught up in the evacuation. He and several other privateers managed, however, to duck into Plymouth Harbor just ahead of the huge British fleet.

Seeing flames in the distance and ships within the Gurnet, Plymouthans thought the British were invading and had the fright of their lives!

James Thacher, in his *History of Plymouth*, describes the scene :

All was confusion and alarm, military music was heard in the streets, the minute-men were summoned to arms... soon the town was filled with armed men, who crowded into private houses, claiming to be fed as the defenders of the town.

The pandemonium in the streets with armed men flocking in from the countryside was exacerbated by panic-stricken citizens pushing in the opposite direction, trying to "send off many of their women and children and as much furniture as they could get away." The eventual outcome was described by Sarah Sever of Kingston, as Plymoutheans

in the morning, to their great joy, found that the fleet which had thrown them into such a panic was Captain Manley with four other privateers who were drove into the harbor by a large man of war - and so ended this mighty affair. (PSA)

After the evacuation of Boston, Washington's fleet also moved south and, eventually, Congress authorized the formation of a larger independent Continental Navy. Naval activities in Plymouth did not cease, however. New England waters were still patrolled by the Massachusetts Provincial Navy and privateers owned and manned by Plymoutheans continued to sail in the Patriot cause.

II. The voyage of the Washington

One of George Washington's ships that sailed from Plymouth was named the ***Washington***, captained by Sion Martindale of Rhode Island.

There were worries about Martindale from the beginning. Although his original instructions included the caution:

You are to be extremely careful and frugal of your ammunition - by no means to waste any of it in salutes or for any purpose but what is absolutely necessary,

the Continental naval agents were apprehensive of Martindale's militant intentions. Martindale was reminded again and again that his mission was not to challenge British armed vessels, but "to intercept the enemy's supplies."

The agents also worried about Martindale's extravagance. After receiving repeated requests from Martindale for additional sails, for additional guns, for additional crew, George Washington's aide-de-camp responded to the final request for a drum and fife, with

I don't know the use of a drum & fife on board, nor do I imagine that any of the other vessels have got them, but if it will give Captain Martindale any pleasure he shall be indulged with them.

As Martindale's requests streamed into the Continental headquarters outside of Boston, the sailing season of 1775 was fast winding to a close. Having poured every available cent into his little fleet, George Washington was anxious to see results. Worries over Martindale's extravagance were now combined with worries over Martindale's tardiness. Washington's aide-de-camp asked on November 16:

Shall we ever hear of Captain Martindale's departure?

Just as it seemed that Martindale and the **Washington** were finally on their way, one more problem erupted. On November 28, Martindale and the **Washington** had left Plymouth, but promptly returned with a tiny prize in tow. The 80-ton sloop **Britannia**, loaded with provisions for the English troops in Boston, had been disabled by a lightning strike and was limping towards a landfall on the Gurnet when she was intercepted by the **Washington**. A dispute arose, however, between Martindale and his crew over the distribution of the anticipated prize money and, on November 29, it was reported that

the people on board the brigantine Washington are in general discontented & have agreed to do no duty on board said vessel & say that they enlisted to serve in the Army & not as marines.

The response from George Washington's headquarters was swift and stern. If Captain Martindale could not keep his crew, he was to be replaced with any captain who could, because the ship

being detained in port now may be of the utmost prejudice to the American cause.

The threat of losing his vessel jolted Captain Martindale into action. The **Washington** sailed from Plymouth on December 2, 1775.

The next day, December 3, the **Washington** was spotted and chased by the 20-gun **HMS Fowey**, an English man-of-war of frigate build. Martindale surrendered without having fired a shot. The **Washington** was sailed into Boston harbor with her crew as prisoners. News that the **Washington** had been captured was greeted in Plymouth with dismay. Sally Sever, visiting relatives in Plymouth, wrote:

Manley [George Washington's most successful sea captain, who sometimes used Plymouth as a provisioning port] seems to be in a fine way of making a fortune, if he does not get catch'd as has been the unfortunate Captain Martindale... Mr. Howland's family are inconsolable, on account of their brother, who they look upon as lost to them. There was three Plymouth men on board that vessel.

Of those three Plymoutheans who sailed with Captain Martindale on board the **Washington**, two can be identified, the ship's master Consider Howland and master's mate Jacob Taylor.

William Watson, the Continental naval agent in Plymouth, made a special plea to George Washington on behalf of Jacob Taylor, who

has a large family & in poor circumstances which must suffer much unless some way can be devised for his redemption. I am very unwilling to give Your Excellency trouble and must ask your pardon when I at the very earnest request of Taylor's friends & unhappy family ask Your Excellency whether it ain't possible to exchange Mr. Curtis the midshipman for Taylor and when I entreat Your Excellency to interpose in behalf of this miserable family & of an unhappy man who has conducted with dignity & has been very active in the public cause in which we are engaged from the beginning.

Washington's aide replied that a proposal for a prisoner exchange had been sent to the British General Howe with no response received, but that "Jacob Taylor will not be forgot." No special plea was made for Consider Howland, who was well-connected and well-loved but had no dependents.

After eight days, the men of the **Washington** were deported as prisoners to England on board the frigate **HMS Tartar**, along with Ethan Allen and some of the Green Mountain Boys who had been captured in the American attack on Quebec.

The prisoners arrived in England in poor health. An outbreak of smallpox resulted in the death of half. Approximately 15 members of the surviving crew were removed from prison and impressed (or persuaded) into service with the British Navy. In February of 1776, only 21 of the original 74 crew remained alive and in prison. Among this small number were Sion Martindale, Consider Howland, and Jacob Taylor. These 21 Americans were shipped on board the **HMS Greyhound** to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to be exchanged for English prisoners.

Martindale, Howland, Taylor, and 11 other prisoners escaped from the Halifax jail. Martindale reached Maine successfully. Howland and Taylor, however, were recaptured and returned to Halifax. In September of 1776 the **Connecticut Courant** published a list of American prisoners "still confined in one room at Halifax, among felons, thieves, robbers." The names include Consider Howland and Jacob Taylor, four veterans of Bunker Hill, and Colonel Ethan Allen. Later that autumn, Howland and Taylor were moved to a prison ship in New York Harbor.

All 18th century prisons were inhumane but the British prison ships were among the worst. Prisoners were badly fed, exposed to disease and weakened by lack of ventilation and sanitation. Over 12,000 men died on the prison vessels in New York Harbor. Miraculously, both Howland and Taylor survived and returned to Plymouth.

The exact details of Taylor's release are not known. We know, however, that Howland was released on parole on December 25, 1776 in exchange for a British officer who - in the confusion of wartime - had already been exchanged for another prisoner, making the exchange void. Nevertheless, Consider Howland was allowed to remain at large and return to Plymouth. Finally, in September of 1777, after nine months of freedom, Howland's status was regularized and he was officially exchanged for his own first cousin - Captain Gideon White, a Loyalist from Plymouth, captured while sailing on a ship provisioning the British army.

Howland returned to sea, first as master of the privateer **Nancy**, commanded by Captain Corban Barnes of Plymouth, then as first lieutenant of the sloop **America**, a privateer fitted out in Plymouth by Ephraim Spooner and William Watson. In July of 1780, he was given command of the privateering schooner **Phoenix**. Consider never returned from that voyage. He is memorialized on his brother's tombstone on Plymouth's Burial Hill.



Angel on Howland tombstone

**Consider Howland, born 1745,
died October 1780, lost at sea, age 35.**

Jacob Taylor, after being reunited with his wife and eight children, also returned to sea and continued to serve the Patriot cause by transporting supplies to the Continental troops. Captain Jacob Taylor died in 1788, aged 59; his grave is on Plymouth's Burial Hill.

Jacob Taylor had two sons, Jacob and Edward. Both drowned. Edward, however, left two sons who did not follow their father and grandfather to the sea. Jacob and Abner S. Taylor became stonemasons. Their best known monument is Pilgrim Hall Museum



III. Charles Dyer in the American Revolution

The ordinary American seaman served in obscurity. His vital, but mundane, task was to intercept British transport ships, to disrupt British trade, to divert British ammunition and supplies to the Continental forces. The risks in this endeavor were high but the contributions of the individual were seldom acknowledged or even remembered. It is only through rare happenstance - the paths of the ordinary crossing with those of the great, or a serendipitous record being created and preserved - that an ordinary seaman such as Charles Dyer was occasionally, momentarily, highlighted for history.

Our knowledge of Dyer is due to such a double happenstance.

His service record was preserved thanks to a veteran's pension law passed by the United States Congress in 1836. Charles Dyer, by then, had been dead for 50 years. His widow Bethiah, however, was still living and, at age 86, she promptly applied for benefits as the widow of a veteran. Her pension application, outlining her husband's naval activity, is still in the National Archives.

The second spotlight to shine fleetingly on Charles Dyer emanates from the correspondence of George Washington, now preserved at the Library of Congress and available online through the American Memory project.

In 1775, George Washington had asked for volunteers to man a fledgling fleet whose mission would be to intercept supply ships sailing in and out of the British-held port of Boston.

Washington took a deep personal interest in his tiny experimental navy. Charles Dyer was among the volunteers to step forward at Washington's request. He thereby, briefly, stepped into Washington's correspondence.

Charles Dyer was born in Plymouth in 1738, son of Charles and Lucy Cotton Dyer. In 1773, he married his first cousin Bethiah Cotton, the daughter of Theophilus Cotton who, in 1774, would lead Plymouth's Sons of Liberty in moving Plymouth Rock to Town Square as a symbol of the Patriot movement.

Bethiah testified in her pension application that, in the autumn of 1775, Dyer served under Captain William Coit on the **Harrison**, a small, elderly vessel sailing out of Plymouth as part of Washington's tiny fleet. When Coit relinquished command of the **Harrison** in January of 1776, William Watson, the naval agent in Plymouth, sent Dyer to Washington's headquarters in Cambridge with a letter recommending that he be given the command of the **Harrison** :

Captain Dyer, the bearer of this, won't at first interview appear to Your Excellency to advantage. He is no orator & seems rather softly but his character is high as a good officer & as an active smart sailor.

Washington's response was positive:

His Excellency is well pleased that the schooner Harrison is yet good & fit for service & from the character you have given Captain Dyer is willing you should give him the command of her and to indulge such men as may offer their service to enlist only for six months.

Dyer was prevented from sailing immediately by severe winter weather.

The Harrison, Captain Dyer, is now in the ice, has lost anchor & cable, but we hope to find them again; we are now cutting the ice & hope to get him out without further damage.

Dyer was eventually able to sail and the **Harrison** served the Continental forces until early summer of 1776, often venturing out in company with the privateer **Yankee**, of which fellow Plymouthean Corban Barnes was master.

When the **Harrison's** age and poor condition rendered her absolutely unseaworthy, Dyer had hopes for a commission on another of Washington's ships and informed

His Excellency that he has enlisted 36 men for the sea service and will wait on His Excellency for orders respecting them.

When a response was not forthcoming, Dyer accepted a commission in the Massachusetts Provincial Navy, as First Lieutenant on board the brigantine **Independence**, commanded by Simeon Sampson of Kingston and Plymouth. The **Independence** was captured by the British and carried into Halifax; Dyer was a prisoner there for about seven months. After his release, he served as First Lieutenant on board the brigantine **Hazard**, also Massachusetts Provincial Navy, and again under the command of Simeon Sampson, until May of 1778.

Charles Dyer survived his hazardous Revolutionary naval service. He and Bethiah and their growing family occupied a home on the corner of Court Street and South Russell Street in the center of Plymouth. Dyer continued, in peacetime, to sail as captain of merchant ships. In 1786, his vessel, the **Polly**, bound homeward for Plymouth from the West Indies was wrecked at Bermuda and all the hands except one perished. Charles Dyer died at sea in March of 1786, aged 46.

Bethiah Dyer survived her husband by 51 years. She died June 8, 1837, aged 87, not long after she submitted her pension request and recorded her husband's history. She is buried on Plymouth's Burial Hill. Her memorial stone is next to the stone of her Patriot father Theophilus Cotton. It is inscribed with both her name and the name of Charles Dyer.

IV. Simeon Sampson and the Massachusetts Provincial Navy

At the outbreak of hostilities with England, the individual American colonies authorized armed vessels to be built at public expense to support the Patriot cause. Massachusetts established its own navy on December 29, 1775. One of the colony's first ships was the brigantine **Independence**, built in Kingston in 1776. The **Independence** was placed under the command

of Simeon Sampson.

Sampson was a descendant of both Myles Standish and John Alden through their mutual granddaughter Lydia Standish. Born in 1736, he became a seafaring man at an early age. James Thacher recounts in his ***History of Plymouth*** the story of a Plymouth merchant ship captured by the French in 1762 during the Seven Years War (known in America as the French & Indian War). Sampson was serving on board the captured ship. A ransom amount for the ship was agreed upon and Sampson left as hostage for that amount, while the ship was sailed back to Plymouth.

From this imprisonment he escaped by assuming the dress of a female, and was soon restored to his family in Plymouth.

As already noted, Sampson again found himself involved in a war at sea more than a decade later. The mission of his vessel, the ***Independence***, was to travel the seas between the New England coast and the Caribbean, intercepting British shipping and diverting military supplies from the British forces to the Continental army. The rules for naval warfare were strict. Action could be taken only against official navy vessels or against vessels carrying troops or cargo in aid of the British forces. British merchant vessels whose cargoes were not in support of the military were not fair targets. Before a captured ship or its cargo could be disposed of, a court had to rule that the ship taken was a legitimate target. Sampson's task was twofold : he had to first find and capture British vessels, then he had to prove that the vessels captured were specifically aiding British military operations.

The ***Independence*** met with success soon after sailing in the summer of 1776. In a letter now in the Archives of Pilgrim Hall Museum, Henry Goodwin, captain's clerk on the brigantine, described the taking of a British vessel in August of 1776. After putting into the port of Falmouth, Maine, the ***Independence***

wooded and watered and put out - directing our course for the southward of Bermuda. In our way we gave chase to several sails, but spoke with none until this morning. A sail appear'd ahead, we gave her chase and in 6 hours came up with her. The Captain hailed her and found her to be a sloop from Jamaica bound to Halifax. Captain Sampson ordered her to strike to the standard of the United States of America which, after a short time, they did.

The captain of the English vessel was seen to be throwing papers overboard.

The Captain [Sampson], seeing that, spoke to him through the trumpet and said if he threw over any more, he would fire upon him. He return'd, they were the ship's papers and ceased throwing them over.

The Americans retrieved the soggy papers and received confirmation that the ship was indeed fair game, since the papers proved the English captain

to have been aiding and assisting the army & navy employed against the United states. His name is Thomas Ludlow, a native of York. He values the sloop & cargo at 2500 pounds sterling, the cargo chiefly consists of rum and sugar.

Later that year, the ***Independence*** captured a British supply ship sailing out of Nova Scotia.

Sampson must have been shocked and surprised to come face-to-face with the captain of that vessel : Gideon White, Plymouth-born Loyalist. (White was sent back to Plymouth as a prisoner. Eventually released, he joined the British army in New York and ultimately settled in Nova Scotia.)

On 25 November 1776, Sampson's luck ran out. The ***Independence*** met with the British sloop-of-war ***Hope***, commanded by George Dawson, a Lieutenant in the Royal Navy. Battle ensued. Sampson and his ship were captured, some of the crew were killed. Sampson's conduct was so valiant that, when he did surrender his sword to Dawson, Dawson returned it to him in recognition of his courage. James Warren also noted Sampson's valor in a letter written (March 23, 1777) to John Adams

Captain Simeon Sampson, who was lately taken in the service of this State, I have a very good opinion of as a seaman. A man of judgment, prudence, activity and courage, he behaved like a hero in the action, but the force against him was so superior to his that he had no chance.

Sampson was sent to Nova Scotia and placed on board a prison ship, the ***Boulongua***, anchored in Halifax Harbor in the Bay of Fundy. He wrote a letter to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress describing conditions on board the ship

We are all in number on board 100 and in general in a deplorable situation, having been robbed of most of our clothing by the different ships we were taken in. One of my men was froze to death the 13th instant & there is about 40 more froze, some badly, 4 sent to the hospital, one of which so badly froze tis thought he will lose both his legs. The ship we are on board of is old, open & leaky, it is the inclemency of the season, are short of provisions and necessaries of life. Shan't think strange if many of us should not survive until the opening of spring, except some method can be taken to exchange prisoners. (NDAR)

Sampson was exchanged in the summer of 1777 after some seven months of captivity. His clerk, Henry Goodwin, also survived and was exchanged. Sampson then received a commission from Massachusetts to command the armed vessel ***Hazard***, a brigantine built in the fall of 1777 in Plymouth. After cruising the Atlantic coast, he sailed the West Indies in search of English vessels to intercept. He was forced, however, to relinquish the command in May of 1778 due to ill health brought on by his earlier captivity. Sampson later commanded the packet ***Mercury***, in which he carried Plymouthean Elkanah Watson to France with diplomatic messages.

At the end of the war, in the words of James Thacher, Sampson

retired, like most of the faithful servants of our country, with a very scanty estate, and a numerous family dependent upon him for support.

Sampson retired to a house on Middle Street in Plymouth, where he lived with his wife Deborah. The Sampsons had 12 children, five died as infants and were buried on Plymouth's Burial Hill. In 1788, Sampson purchased a farm in Plympton. He died there the next year, at the age of 53. After first being buried on his own farm, his body was moved to Plymouth's Burial Hill and laid to rest beside the graves of his children.

V. "A remarkable day": a vignette of Revolutionary Plymouth

Sally Sever turned 19 years old in 1776. A sprightly and intelligent girl, she lived with her parents, three younger brothers and a sister in a large house, built in 1768, on Kingston's Linden Street.

Sally's father, William Sever, was a wealthy merchant and shipbuilder. Active in civic affairs and a staunch Patriot, he served as Kingston's representative to the Massachusetts General Court.

William Sever's mother had been Sarah Warren of Plymouth. William's wife - Sally's mother - was another Sarah Warren of Plymouth, niece of the first Sarah Warren and William's first cousin. Born into one of Plymouth's most prominent families, this second Sarah and her brother James Warren were descended from Pilgrims Richard Warren and Edward Winslow. When William and Sarah Warren Sever's first child, a daughter, was born, she became yet another Sarah. Her name was shortened to Sally within the family.

During the turbulent 1770s, William Sever was elected to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress. He spent long weeks away from his family attending the Congress. His wife and daughter, Sarah and Sally, regularly wrote to him, and a number of their letters are in the Archives of Pilgrim Hall Museum.

Sarah's letters show a keen knowledge and strong interest in current events. She does not hesitate to express her political opinions, which are as staunchly patriotic as her husband's. She wrote to William in the early 1770s:

I thank you for the intelligence with which you have favored me regarding the proceedings of the General Court. Am sorry to hear things are in such a situation but these are some of the consequences which I apprehended from Mr. Oliver's obstinacy [Oliver was a Royal appointee]. What can such a man expect or what does he deserve, but the grossest insults from an abused & injured people?

Sarah also carried gracefully the responsibility for caring for the family's financial interests during William's absences. She informs him of goods that are scarce or extremely expensive on the South Shore and asks William to purchase these in Boston and send them to the family in Kingston. She tells her husband of her business decisions, often acknowledging, as in one letter dealing with urgent matters of both farming and maritime trade, that she

should have been glad to have known your mind upon the matter, but they [Sever's business partners] don't incline to wait, so have acted according to my best judgment, hope my conduct will meet with your approbation.

Sarah suffered a bout of ill health in 1775. It seems at this time that daughter Sally became the family's correspondent with the absent William. Sally's letters are warm and teasing, the letters of a dearly loved and indulged daughter:

I would give something handsome to be admitted into your private counsels - for a short time only - just long enough to form some idea of what so much engages the attention of that assembly, of which my Papa is a member. I don't express my inclination as expecting to have it gratified by such an honor, as I know it is not permitted. Only a little curiosity - female curiosity, that's all, Sir.

In another letter, written soon after, Sally asks for political information on her mother's behalf:

She bids me desire her love to you and requests you would take an hour from business and give her your opinion of the instructions which Philadelphia Assembly have given to their delegates and of every other material occurrence which comes within your observation.

Sally would sometimes visit her "Uncle and Aunt Warren," her mother's brother James Warren and his wife Mercy Otis Warren, in Plymouth. In a letter dated June 17, 1776, she relates to her father a noteworthy event that occurred while she was staying at the Warrens' house. In a wonderful coincidence, the very same event was described by another participant, Abigail Adams, who was visiting her friend Mrs. Warren at the same time.

Sally wrote to her father:

The company of Mrs. Adams and her agreeable sister, which we have been favored with since Wednesday last, are a great addition to the pleasures I before enjoyed. Having mentioned their being here, I cannot omit giving my dear Papa an account of a very agreeable afternoon we spent on board a Connecticut armed vessel - a privateer which put in here some days ago.

The privateer was the ***Defense***, described by Abigail Adams as "a fine brig, mounts 16 guns, 12 swivels, and carries 100 and 20 men." The ship's officers were acquainted with Dr. Lothrop of Plymouth and invited his wife to come on board with as many of her friends as she would like. Mrs. Lothrop in turn sent an invitation to Mercy Otis Warren and her guests. Sally notes that "Aunt Warren was not well and could not go," but her guests did.

Sally characterized the Captain as

a very well-behaved man, he is large & portly, has a rugged countenance, looks fit for the business. He was in the last war, in five sea engagements.

Abigail Adams was far more impressed with the Captain's management of his crew :

no private family ever appeared under better regulation than the crew. It was as still as though there had been only half a dozen, not a profane word among any of them. The Captain himself is an exemplary man, Harden his name, has been in 9 sea engagements, says if he gets a man who swears and finds he cannot reform him, he turns him on shore, yet is free to confess that it was the sin of his youth.

Once on board, the ladies toured the ship, drank tea and were entertained with a mock naval engagement with an enemy. Abigail notes that, while some of "their Jacks played very well upon the violin and German flute," the "young folks" danced. Sarah says with less detail but more natural enthusiasm:

We were entertained with some fine music a part of the time and a part we spent in dancing - yes, sir, surprising as it may seem - a part of our time was spent in that way.

Both ladies, young and mature, agreed that the parting roar from the ship's cannons as they departed at the end of the day was (in Sally's words)

a compliment I would willingly have dispensed with. The thundering of cannon is music disagreeable to my ear.

They would also have both agreed with Abigail's characterization,

June 17, 1776. A remarkable day.

Abigail Adam's subsequent life has been, of course, well chronicled. She saw the country gain its independence and form a new system of government. She was beside her husband, John, when he was inaugurated as the second President of the United States. When she died in 1818, their son John Quincy (future President of the United States) was serving as Secretary of State to James Monroe.

Sally Sever's life was far shorter. In 1784, she married Thomas Russell, an eminent Boston merchant. Their only child was born on December 1, 1786. Sally Sever Russell died on November 24, 1787, age 30.

Abbreviations used :

LC Library of Congress American Memory Project, Papers of George Washington
NDAR Naval Documents of the American Revolution
PSA Pilgrim Society Archives
W-AL Warren-Adams Letters

Source note : The exploits of Washington's fleet and the stories of Consider Howland and Jacob Taylor are documented in the Papers of George Washington at the Library of Congress, online in the American Memory project, and in the published ***Naval Documents of the American Revolution***. Sally Sever's letters are in the collections of the Pilgrim Society.