

Privateers:  
The Licensed Pirates  
Of Colonial America

By Alex Sturbaum

Wars have always been fought with one hand on the sword and one hand on the wallet, and the wars of Great Britain in the colonial days were no exception. While the British navy was undoubtedly the most powerful force on the seas at that time, there was always a need for extra firepower. Much of this firepower was found in the colonies of America, in the form of privateers.

A privateer was essentially a licensed pirate, who was issued either a letter of marque or a privateering license. The only great difference between privateers and pirates lay in the legality of the venture. Piracy was illegal theft at sea; privateering was the same as piracy in practice, but a privateer's plundering was legal and restricted by nationality, location and whether his employer was at war or not. Furthermore, when the privateer attacked, he had papers to show that he was allowed to do what he was doing. The issuer of these papers might be at war with a certain country or countries, and the privateer would attack this country's enemy's merchant vessels, taking prizes. While this would be impossible in a land war, the sea had no laws, as it was not ruled by anybody. This allowed a privateer, after seizing a ship, to take any and all cargo the ship was carrying, be it molasses, rum, or gunpowder. This cargo then had to be brought to a vice-admiralty court, where it was libeled and officially given to the privateer. The privateer then had to sell the cargo on his own account. (Chidsey)

So how did colonial America give rise to privateering? Americans before the Revolution (and for a good length of time after it) were a seagoing people. Furthermore, they had wood in almost unlimited quantities, especially in contrast to Britain, where the forests had been cut greatly and lumber was expensive. Soon, shipbuilding had become one of colonial America's main industries. While Americans were still short of many supplies necessary to complete ships, and had to import them from England and other nations, American vessels soon were identical in quality to English-made ships, though scarcely more than one-third of the cost. In addition to the growth of the shipbuilding industries, most colonists would build their own boats if they had need of them. There were many farmers, living near the shore, who would fish during the season in these homemade boats. American ships, in general,

were smaller and faster than English vessels-in fact, it was in America that the first schooners-sailing ships that changed the course of history- were built. (Chidsey)

It is no wonder that when Great Britain called upon its colonists to help it in the Dutch War of 1672-1674, the colonists converted a large number of small but speedy vessels with which to assist the mother country. Privateering took off during King William's War (1689-1697), and continued during the War of the Spanish Succession (1702), the 'War of Jenkin's Ear' (1739-1748), the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748), and finally the Seven Years War. The demand for privateering was certainly there, and American colonists had perhaps more in the way of opportunity than most, due to their familiarity with the sea. So what was the incentive?

Privateering was a popular pursuit because it was so often a lucrative one. Work was fairly light (often a privateer would carry an outside crew to man captured vessels), and if a privateering ship had a successful voyage, it could make the fortunes of everyone aboard-to say nothing of the owners. Furthermore, privateering promised adventure, and for the farmers and fisherman of the colonies, this was a great opportunity. Colonists flocked in droves to join up with privateering crews, and investors scrambled for a chance of some of the future profit. (Chidsey)

To assemble a privateering voyage, an owner would first have to apply for either a privateer's license or a letter of marque at a vice-admiralty court. A letter of marque allowed a merchant to protect himself if attacked; a privateering license was, as the name implies, issued to someone who planned on attacking other vessels. Next, a captain would raise a crew, picking out his men without consulting the owner. There was no shortage of men; as previously stated, the lure of privateering drew them from far and wide. Usually a privateer would take many more men than needed to crew. This served two purposes: First, a large and hostile-looking crew could intimidate a potential prize into a peaceful surrender, and second, privateers would occasionally take a ship as well as its cargo, and extra men would be needed to crew that ship. (Chidsey)

Privateering captains, however, had to be able to do more than command men and fight naval

battles; a privateer had to have a savvy business sense. Getting rich from privateering was not as easy as seizing the prize; the prize then had to be officially condemned and sold. A successful privateering captain needed business correspondents, warehouse facilities, and market information (Swanson). In fact, privateers often listed their official occupation as 'merchantman'.

While privateers were hired by Britain to fight wars, and indeed served a similar function as the navy, the sailors, captains and owners themselves were separate from and quite unconcerned with the reasons the wars were being fought. After all, they were driven by a desire for personal gain, not patriotism; whoever the British were fighting at the time were unconcerned with the American colonies, and British politics did not concern the average colonist. It was the idea of adventure and easy riches that kindled the fire of privateering in the blood. (Chidsey)

This is not, however, to say that all Americans were intent on privateering; in fact, many detested privateering on moral grounds, thinking it contemptible and similar to piracy. A good portion of the privateer crews were young men and boys who had left their parents, sometimes secretly, to escape family conflicts and seek adventure. Many letters were received from anxious parents, desperate for news of their children, who they believed had stolen away and shipped on board privateering vessels. A good portion of these newcomers had never been on sea before, and had to contend with powerful seasickness and well as adaptation to life on board a ship. The crews were motley, with a mixture of young men, Indians, blacks, and veteran fisherman and sailors. All were drawn to the idea of privateering. (Morse)

They rarely were drawn far. All the major ports in British North America and the West Indies fitted out privateering vessels. Privateering was a major industry, a potential source of wealth, and indeed many colonial authority figures spoke of nothing else. Alexander Hamilton himself toured the Atlantic seaboard in 1744, and found discussion of privateering so constant as to be tiresome. (Swanson) Newspapers published advertisements for positions on privateering crews, and descriptions and reports of privateering victories, as well as descriptions of the prizes taken (incidentally, reports of privateering

defeats were rarely mentioned).

New York and Newport were major privateering stations. They possessed not only numerous vessels and sailors to man them, but also a merchant class who was willing to invest in the speculation that was privateering. Interestingly, neither port was the largest or most active in its part of the colonies: Boston dominated New England trade, while Philadelphia was the largest port of the Middle Colonies. However, these larger ports were much more reluctant to involve themselves in the practice, due to its speculative nature. The rich merchants of the successful ports saw no reason to gamble their fortunes by investing in a ship that could be sunk as easily as it could take prizes. Also, in Philadelphia, Quakerism was widely followed. Many Quakers chose to shun privateering ventures, reducing Philadelphia's role in the prize war substantially. (Swanson) However, some of the most active American privateering ports were not located in America at all. These were, of course, the British West Indies. The Indies were a hotspot for international trade, with the commerce of Mexico, Louisiana, Central and South America, and Asia passing through them; French and Spanish merchant vessels' trade routes usually brought them to these islands. There they were easy prey for a privateer; understandably, these ports were very popular. Another factor was the fact that much West Indian cargo was extremely valuable, including sugar, molasses, cocoa, coffee, indigo and logwood. And while they were rare, the allure of Spanish treasure ships was extremely enticing. (Swanson)

American privateering began to take off in 1739, when King George III authorized privateering against Spain. This proclamation was met with great celebration by Americans, and sixteen privateers entered the war in 1739, followed by thirty-three more in 1740. Many of these enjoyed great success early on; a certain Captain Charles Hall, for example, was so successful that "Capt. Hall's Owners design to have his Statue cut out of a block of Marble to stand upon a handsome Pedestal with each Foot upon a Spaniard's neck" (Swanson). However, privateering began to slacken off in the next two years; Spanish trade was not prevalent enough to support the growing number of privateers which the colonies were churning out. In 1744, France entered the war, and the practice was revitalized. However, French

and Spanish vessels could not continue to yield prizes forever, and the French had designed a convoy system that was very efficient in protecting them from American vessels. By 1748, privateering activity had declined by fifty percent. (Swanson)

This does not impugn the effectiveness of privateers; indeed, one needs only look at the figures from this particular war to see the devastation caused by swarms of American privateering vessels in the Atlantic and the Caribbean. During King George's War, French trade with the West Indies declined by fifty percent; Granville, a French port for the Newfoundland fishery, went from dispatching seventy-six vessels every year to dispatching five. Exports to Quebec dropped by 39 percent. Spain as well stopped all official trade with the Americas, detailing their cargo to 'register ships' (individual merchantmen carrying registered cargo). However, nearly sixty percent of these vessels were captured. (Swanson)

It might be foolish to believe that the British could not have won their many wars without the aid of the privateers from the colonies-after all, at that time the British navy was unparalleled in its might. However, it would be more foolish still to claim that their aid was not substantial. The privateers were not a lethal force in the wars, but they were distracting, irritating, and caused serious difficulty, inconvenience, and worry among the enemies of Great Britain. And, unbeknownst to Britain, when the time came for Revolution, it was privateering that had showed the Americans how to fight at sea.

Warfare has changed much since the days of colonial America; privateers are a thing of the past, and naval battles appear to be going in the same direction. The days of sloops, frigates, brigs and schooners have long since faded into obscurity; steam displaced them over a century ago, and gasoline eventually ousted steam. However, America was once a maritime nation; and when there were wars to be fought on the seas, it was Americans who built the ships, manned them, and sailed them. We must not forget the privateers, for as long as we are Americans, privateering is in our history, our culture, and our very blood.

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