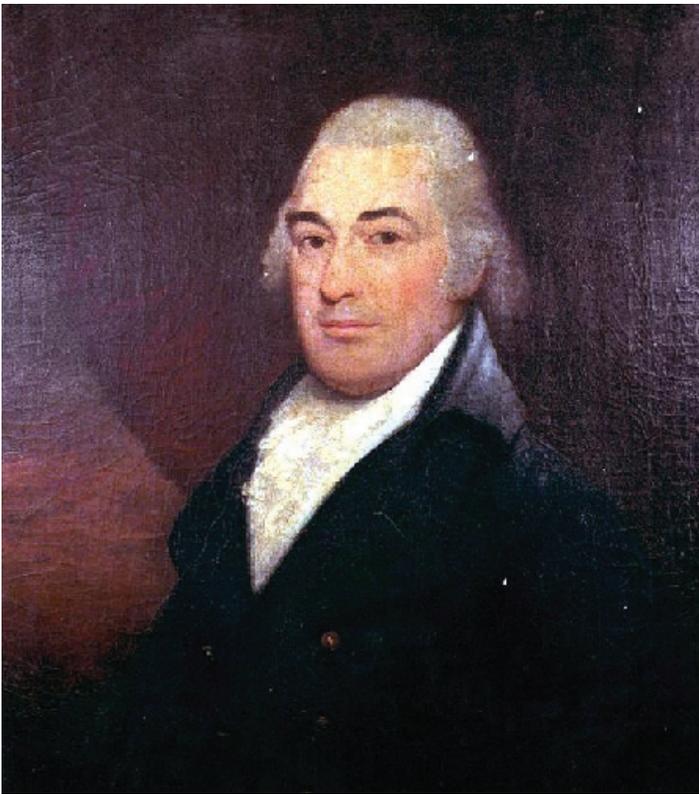


FIGHTING FOR THEIR LIVELIHOOD

The Distinctive Nature of American Privateering Culture During the War of 1812

During the War of 1812, the United States employed a variety of temporary military forces to supplement their regular troops. While many of these temporary forces were absorbed into the regular body of the United States military, privateers found themselves isolated from other types of service, by both physical distance and a lack of social cohesion. This paper examines the root causes of separable American privateering culture during the War of 1812, contrasting it with the experience of American militiamen during the same war.

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US Secretary of Navy William Jones (1813-1814)

Source: Wikimedia Commons

In August of 1813, the United States privateer schooner *Monkey* was captured by a British naval vessel, and its crew loaded onto a prison ship destined for the British Isles. Low on fresh water, food, and adequate living space, the prisoners were subject to conditions that left them on death's door. Joseph Valpey, a low-ranking sailor from the *Monkey*, remembered the ordeal as being on "the brink of my watery grave." Describing his living situation, Valpey opines that

We had not enough Highth enough for to set on our Back sides but to eat Drink and Sleep we must lay too if I had

been in this situation but a few days with my fellow prisoners who I was taken down sick with a slow fever and in the course of on week there was fifteen seven taken down with the same deseas and every day there was more or less paid the debt of nature no mother for to nurse them no Friends nor Relation to mourn for them

Wartime privateering was a risky business that exposed its participants to mortal risks. As a result, only those serious about the potential rewards were willing to put their lives on the line for its practice. In the early nineteenth century, American privateering became a speculative exercise, with the prospect of exorbitant profits as the main justification for its continuance.¹

The business of privateering was not new to the United States during the War of 1812. American privateering extended well back into the early seventeenth century, when independently owned sloops were employed to augment the scant English navy in its various wars of North American colonialism against other European powers, and as escorts on merchant trading voyages.² As the practice became more regulated in the eighteenth century, legal and economic strictures on privateering came into force. The latter held far more weight, as government enforcement power was limited. While the Crown attempted to control colonial privateers for its own purposes, economic considerations frequently outweighed political ones. Wartime brought with it convergent interests for enterprising privateers and militant governments. For example, in the Seven Years' War, England hired privateers to harass French ships off the coast of Acadia, who were all too happy to reap the benefits of these valuable prizes. Privateering fulfilled the symbiotic objectives of abundant profit and supplementary military force, but was at its heart an economic institution.³

This paper will focus on how the organization, structure, and common practices of American privateers during the War of 1812 were distinct from the other temporary military force,

the militia, and how they speak to a separate wartime experience for privateer sailors. American coastal ports were well accustomed to wartime privateering, since they had operated as licensed military launching posts for decades. Merchants quickly mobilized their vessels for armed conflict as soon as war was declared in the Seven Years' War, the American Revolution, and with increased hostility in the Quasi-War with France. To the merchant communities of the American Atlantic, national loyalty mattered less than financial gain. The practices of privateering saw few consequential changes following the American Revolution; privateers continued to exercise effective control over their own affairs, with general directives provided by the American Department of the Navy.⁴ In this capacity, American privateers were semi-official temporary military vessels for the depleted American navy. When the United States declared war in 1812, it had fewer than forty operational naval vessels in its fleet. Mostly, this was due to reluctant support for the American navy under former President Thomas Jefferson, who sought to reverse course from the expansionist military policy of his predecessor and political rival, John Adams. Privateers were therefore an indispensable component of any competent defense against the (by this time) vast number of British ships. Though they were not fully integrated into the American military complex, privateers were nonetheless vital to the overall American war strategy.⁵

Privateering was quite different from the American militia, an organization which was highly structured in its organization, but largely superfluous in its effects. Though the militia was similarly temporary, it was organized, regulated, and controlled by the regular body of the American army. In pursuit of superior troop strength against British armies in Canada, Congress authorized the War Department to enlist all able-bodied men into the militia, and to call them into service if circumstances required. Service in the militia, thereby, created a very different cultural atmosphere than that aboard privateers. Mainly, this split was based on attitudes toward service. The militia was a compulsory institution, but one in which militiamen were able to serve with their peers, and were not expected to create much change in the war's outcome. Conversely, privateering was elective, and bore real weight on American strategic objectives at sea.⁶

While both the land-based militia and seafaring privateers experienced the usual hardships of war, the necessity of extended periods away from land, self-motivated employment practices of contracted privateer military force, and the solitude of frequent changes in employment prevented these sailors from forming the social bonds that existed amongst the American militia during the War of 1812. Section II will examine differences in privateer and militia nutrition and health. Section III will look at their organization and leadership, with Section IV extending this study by focusing on employment practices. Section V will shift to looking at the friendships and personal bonds (or lack thereof) that re-

sulted from temporary military service. Section VI will look at differences in the practices of combat between the militia and privateers. Finally, Section VII will discuss how wartime culture impacted the institution of privateering after the war.

NUTRITION AND HEALTH

Privateer Nutrition and Health

Sailors aboard the dozens of American privateer vessels that littered the Atlantic Coast faced uniquely bleak health conditions which set their experience apart from other forms of military service. Chief among these concerns was the so called "sailor's sickness," or scurvy. Though by the early nineteenth century scurvy was widely known and its causes, effects, and remedies well-documented, fighting its consequences on privateering boats was still a significant obstacle to the regular operations of a privateer.⁷ Particularly, the long distances away from fresh food, combined with the high population density, proved troublesome for maintaining sanitary living space, and made these small ships hotbeds for disease. As one privateer sailor put it, after four months at sea "our privateer [was] by this time getting foul" and that in order to mitigate the low levels of fresh food and swampy conditions, "we touched at Santa Crista for water and fresh provisions." Potatoes, as a recently discovered source of the potassium which prevented such disease, were a vital asset, the crew collecting "forty hogshead of water and sixty bushels of potatoes." These resupplying missions served the dual purpose of lifting sailor morale after long stretches away from land, and supplying resources that combated the unique health challenges of months at sea. However, the fact that they were necessary in the first place speaks to the unique stresses of everyday life aboard privateers.⁸

In contrast to the fresh rations normally available to regular American forces on military stipend, privateers were privately operated ventures by definition, and were forced to supply their own crew with provisions. Under pressure from investors and crew members to maximize prize winnings, profit was the main goal for any privateering crew, and so it stands to reason that both the quantity and quality of provisions for nutrition and health were secondary concerns. Often, these privateer vessels would sail for months on end with little recourse for the grueling conditions at sea, choosing instead to continue pursuing trading vessels that crossed their path off the coast of the United States, Africa, or South America. As a result, it was rare for vessels to have fewer than two men sick or injured at any one time, even on the best supplied and prepared ships. Sickness, whether manifested through minor concerns such as seasickness, or major ones such as scurvy or venereal disease, was endemic aboard privateer vessels throughout the War of 1812.⁹

Relatedly, of note are the injuries sustained by crew members. Whether acquired in battle or as an occupational hazard, privateer crew members often hurt themselves in the fulfillment of their duties. Sailing in the nineteenth century,

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despite technological improvements, was still an unpredictable endeavor that required constant vigilance of weather conditions, infrastructural wear, and crew cooperation. Were any of these conditions to fail, it could result in disaster for any and all on board. On the privateer Schooner *Monkey*, which cruised the coast of North America for several months in the summer of 1813, sailors frequently forgot to warn each other of the boom when shifting it to come about, and suffered broken ribs on several occasions.¹⁰ Similarly, though not accidental, the privateer *Yankee* was prone to a litany of sore thumbs from rigging the sails over and over again. Sore thumbs may seem like a minor concern, but journals from the *Yankee's* voyage show that this condition bore serious weight on sailor morale and working capability.¹¹

Less obvious from surgeons' logs, yet still important for understanding the particularisms of privateer experience, is the matter of sailors' mental health. It is clear from the journals of early nineteenth century privateer vessels that extended periods away from port made privateers in the War of 1812 susceptible to disease and malnutrition. An added factor, however, was the mental stresses of confined living space and non-varied human interaction. Living for months on end with the same crew of one hundred men, or in most cases far fewer, had pernicious effects on the cognitive and emotional stability of the crew. For example, the American privateer vessel *David Porter* was commissioned in October of 1812, under Captain George Coggeshall, to sail for Northern Europe and troll the Atlantic for British trading vessels. After several months in port, waiting on the boat for the arrival of British ships and pining for the comforts of home, Coggeshall grew increasingly more desperate for action. The situation came to a head in January 1813, when Coggeshall took drastic actions against his own crew. Though the weather conditions were horrid and embarking risked shipwreck, he insisted upon sailing for the United States. According to reports from the crew, "Captain Coggeshall seized a loaded pistol, held it to the pilot's head, and declared that he would shoot if the latter did not take the ship over the [sand] bar."¹² Although mental health was not as intensely scrutinized or treated as it is in the twenty-first century, privateers clearly suffered from the consequences of prolonged mental stress induced by lengthy trips at sea.

Militia Nutrition and Health

Though the American militia was hardly free of disease or injury during the War of 1812, the threat of constant illness did not weigh as heavily on militiamen as it did on privateers. Even when maladies did arise in camp, they had less of an impact on soldier experience. With more opportunities to seek out alternative treatment for nutrition-related disease (i.e. rapidly decreased threat of scurvy) and find new food sources, nutrition did not cause as many issues for the militia. In general, a relative bill of health fueled more optimistic viewpoints on military life.

The most oft-suffered conditions according to contemporary soldier accounts were temporary hunger, measles, dysentery, and the common cold. Though not trivial, their effects could be remedied or isolated much more easily than the diseases at sea. Asa Grant, a militiaman stationed in New York, explains in a letter to his parents that "We have a number of men unwell and excused from duty. They mostly go out and stay with the Inhabitants." Moving the sickly away from the main body of the company prevented or slowed the spread of disease, and provided a change of scenery, two advantages of militia life that were impossible within the confines of a privateer. As Grant writes in his correspondence, the men were "generally in good health and good spirits" for much of his time in the service, save for occasional bouts of upset stomach or cold-induced fever.¹³ Further, the illness sustained in the armed service was not at unusual levels for the time period in general; illness and epidemic were routine for New Yorkers in the early nineteenth century, and militia service did little to magnify its impact. These conditions break sharply from privateer life, where simply stepping aboard brought with it inherent added risk of illness.¹⁴

Mental health also held up more consistently for militiamen than for privateers, which contributed to a more favorable and cohesive experience between them. As Col. George Hunt wrote in a letter to Gen. George Gibson from northern Ohio, the troops were frequently "in health and the highest of spirits" throughout the campaign.¹⁵ The men in Hunt's company benefitted from good health in that they were able to create more cohesive social bonds. Without the added nagging stress of injury or sickness, militiamen had energy with which to interact with, and get to know each other. In the militia, even when health conditions were less than ideal, there was usually hope of a reversal in fortune. As Grant explained in a letter from camp, "the company are well, except for two or three, and they are getting better...spirits are high," a sentiment he frequently echoed. Holistically, health was among the most crucial components of military experience in the War of 1812, and the militia fared far better than privateers.¹⁶

ORGANIZATION AND LEADERSHIP

Privateer Organization and Leadership

Though privateering was by and large an independent venture, there was some degree of regulation and oversight by the U.S. Department of the Navy. Privateers acquired their license to conduct raids on enemy ships via a device called a *letter of marque*. In essence, these letters issued by the Navy Department (with tacit approval of the President) allowed for legal piracy against British vessels throughout the Atlantic basin. By hiring out private vessels to do the bidding of the American military, the federal government was able to extend its offensives to the outer reaches of British supply networks.¹⁷

Accordingly, the operations of privateering vessels were scrutinized from time to time by naval operations boards,



Artist's Conception of the *Liverpool Packet*, a British Privateer Schooner, which the *Commodore Hull* pursued

Source: "War of 1812 *Liverpool Packet*" by Thomas Hayhurst, Queens County Museum, Liverpool, Nova Scotia. c. 1930

especially in cases of disorderly conduct or insubordination. Privateering captains were in charge of enforcing the naval code of conduct set forth by the Department. Yet in practice, charges were not filed with the Navy except for the most egregious of offenses. In addition, the Navy was permitted to file charges against a privateer for disorderly conduct or insubordination if observed in person. A well-publicized example of this type of dispute took place between the U.S. Brig *Commodore Hull* and the privateer *Anaconda* in January of 1812. Though war had yet to be declared, the threat of British impressment and aggression on the seas put American ships on high alert. The commander of the vessel, Captain Nathan Shaler, was absent when the first lieutenant George Burbank encountered the U.S. Brig *Commodore Hull* off the coast of Massachusetts. After failing to determine the ship's country of loyalty, Burbank assumed it to be a British vessel and ordered a broadside shot. The cannon hit the *Commodore Hull* and injured three, including the commanding officer, Lieutenant Newcomb. Soon after, Commodore John Rodgers, the coordinating officer for Newcomb's vessel, wrote to the Secretary of the Navy requesting a court martial for Burbank. His purpose was to assess his Burbank's role in, and responsibility for the incident. According to Newcomb, Burbank "insult[ed] the Flag of the United States, and [intended] to wound and main her said officer and Seamen without any justifiable cause whatever..."¹⁸

Though an attack like this appears damning, there was a larger picture to consider in events such as these; frequently, missteps by privateer vessels were a result of miscommunication between the navy and their loosely affiliated privateer forces. As it turns out, both the *Commodore Hull* and the *Anaconda* were in hot pursuit of a third ship, since "the coasting Trade between [Boston] and Martha's Vineyard had of late sustained great injury by the depredations of a certain British privateer Schooner called the *Liverpool Packet*." Each ship not wanting to tip the hand of the other, both refused to identify themselves, leading to Burbank's order to fire.¹⁹

Privateers were given freedom to conduct raids on British ships, which offered more flexibility and independent action than was possible within the stolid naval structure. However, this also meant that privateer actions were obscured by opposing directives. On one hand, privateers could set their own terms of attack and plan out their own strategy for dealing with unknown ships. In the case of the *Monkey*, the captain frequently chose to fly the British colors when approaching a British vessel. Though it constituted a breach of typical wartime behavior between naval vessels, the *Monkey* could do so because it operated outside of the jurisdiction of a standing naval flotilla. Privateering offered flexibility, secrecy, and deniability in fulfilling federal strategy by any means necessary.²⁰

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On the other hand, naval supremacy over privateering, though muddled, was still in place; privateers were functionally independent, yet were technically required to uphold the same standards of conduct as naval vessels. If they failed to do so, they could be subjected to a court martial and sentenced to jail time or death. For officers like Burbank, this level of accountability was nefarious for a ship normally given so much discretion. Burbank knew little about the signaling practices of naval brigs, and so he attempted to communicate with the *Commander Hull* in the manner he would normally contact a ship of its kind. When the *Commander Hull* did not respond as expected, he assumed that it could not be an American ship since it did not follow the practices to which he was accustomed. The divergence in signaling shows that there was a larger epistemological issue between privateers and their naval superiors over customs of the sea.

Confusion over which standards and which commanders to follow inhibited the sailors on privateers from creating a cohesive social culture. When sailors were preoccupied with figuring out who to obey, they could not focus on getting to know their fellow sailors and forming social ties. Further, concentric obligations to different leaders meant that sailors owed different allegiances from ship to ship, and even on the same ship, depending on whom they pledged their terms of service; the privateer workforce was fluid, and so commanders were more invested in naval obedience than their transient and temporary subordinates. Divergent loyalty was rampant, and hierarchy jumbled.

Militia Organization and Leadership

In contrast to the foggy federal sovereignty over American privateering, the American militia was highly integrated into the national military structure. As per the Militia Act of 1792, in the event of war “it shall be lawful for the President of the United States, to call forth such number of the militia of the state or states most convenient to the place of danger or scene of action as he may judge necessary.” In effect, the Militia Act gave the federal government strict control over state forces in wartime; though like privateers, these units were temporary employment of civilians for militant purposes, the Army more assertively brought these temporary vestiges of federal power into their organization structure. Militiamen reported directly up the chain of command to the regular commanders of the American army, and took orders from the general strategy of that branch. Additionally, their pay, uniforms, and conduct were in conformity with those of the army, and they were organized into regiments. There was no independent enterprise within the militia that resembled the cavalier privateering enterprises; commands were to be followed strictly to the letter, and largely by the means dictated by superiors.²¹

As a result, militia culture was predisposed to uniformity. The men of each regiment had similar stresses, similar fears, and similar duties. One such militiaman was John Pendleton Kennedy, stationed in Baltimore as an infantryman in the

5th Maryland Regiment. Kennedy had just recently graduated from law school, but his penchant for higher education and legal justice did little to blunt his enthusiasm for the war and the like companionship of his fellow soldiers. In his autobiography, Kennedy remembers Baltimore in the wartime:

We had some five thousand volunteers and militia always on foot, and as the regular resources of the Federal Government were sadly deficient, the militia was called into service, or at least the volunteers offered themselves and were received to do garrison and other duties in the forts around us... to me it was a delightful stimulus to live in the midst of so many excitements...No one can adequately imagine the vividness and the pleasure of these excitements who has not experienced them. Baltimore, as in fact the whole country, became a camp.

Kennedy pays particular attention to the uniformity of experience between the citizens of Baltimore, and the need for every man to participate in the war effort. Whereas wartime privateering under the navy was an uneven, semi-regulated gamble for a select few men trained in seafaring, the temporary militia under the army was a structured, more predictable assignment. Accordingly, soldiers expressed more “excitements” and “delight” in their experience as militiamen than as privateers. Though war was never pleasant for any participant, the organizational structure of privateering made it much more difficult to find moments of levity amidst the turmoil.²²

EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES

Privateer Employment Practices

The majority of American privateer sailors were men who already worked on merchant vessels along the Atlantic coast. At its root, the practices of privateering required the same skills as could be found on any ship of the day. For Atlantic seamen in the period, the acquisition of maritime skills was a function of experience. Any sailor who had a working knowledge of rigging, keeping watch, making repairs, and basic navigation skills could find a place on the numerous vessels that set sail from the United States. The theoretical (and largely class-dependent) knowledge of battle tactics obtained from a classical or military education held little practical value on a privateer. In most ways, privateering was more meritocratic than either the navy or the militia: those that could prove their worth were allowed to earn their keep.²³

Sailors in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century could develop these maritime skills on the hundreds of merchant vessels making transatlantic voyages to Britain, the West Indies, or to Africa. In some sense, Atlantic trading vessels were a career ladder to climb; with more voyages completed, a common man could rise from landsmen to the lower ranks of a petty officer and establish his value on the market.²⁴ Oftentimes, young men would also apprentice themselves out to an older sailor as a way to gain practical knowledge of the craft.



Drawing of the U.S. Capitol following British attempts to burn the building (1814)

Source: Artist George Munger, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs division

Privateering, though a militant type of employment, was centrally focused on sailing skills, and not military skills. The perils of sea travel while conducting privateer raids brought with them an entirely unique set of requirements for its participants. Though knowing how to fire a weapon may have had practical use on a privateer, it was crucial to the very survival of everyone aboard that the common sailors were proficient and confident in the operations of the ship. Privateer cruises could take sailors away from port for several months. In order to cope with the frequent struggles of weather and deprivation, sailors had to have applicable familiarity with maritime practices. For instance, on the *Yankee*, though it engaged in hundreds of skirmishes with British ships, the elements themselves almost proved its undoing. As captain's clerk Noah Jones put it:

There has been a continual succession of gales of wind from all parts of the compass, attended with torrents of rain, squalls, whirlwinds...a tremendous sea frequently breaking on board and occasioning considerable damage; carrying away several spars and staving the arm-chests. Indeed it may be said that our vessel has sailed thus far under but no over the Atlantic Ocean.

Without men aboard who could competently restore the *Yankee* to sailing shape, it very well may have sunk to the ocean floor. Prevention of disaster went hand-in-hand with relevant experience. Storms like the one the *Yankee* faced were frequent on the Atlantic, and hardened seamen were uniquely disposed to deal with its impact on the voyage.²⁵

During the war, privateers frequently contracted out these trained sailors to man their private enterprises. Oftentimes,

a crew would be rapidly assembled at port, with any qualified and able-bodied sailor given the chance to share in the profits of the vessel. After a captain was issued a letter of marque by the federal government, he could choose to divvy up the ship's profits in whatever manner he saw fit, granted he drew up an agreement with his crew members. The *Yankee's* records show that profits were shared fairly evenly, with relatively little inequality compared to American society at large. The ships contract states that the captain and lieutenants would receive sixteen and nine shares, respectively. As the men who assumed most of the financial risk for the voyage, it stands to reason that they received a larger share of the profits. From that point, wages steadily decreased down the organizational ladder, from masters who received six shares to the seamen and landsmen, who received one share each.²⁶ The distribution of incomes to different positions on privateers closely modeled the class-based income breakdown of the eastern states at that period of time, suggesting that privateering embraced the spirit of economic opportunity brought forth by the Revolution.^{27 28}

Valpey's account of the *Monkey* shows that in practice, the privateer workforce was fluid and prone to frequent shifts in both composition and structure. As he remembers about his own employment, he joined the crew of the *Monkey* on somewhat of a whim. Valpey had been employed as a deck hand in Salem, Massachusetts prior to his time on the *Monkey*, but it is clear from his writing that he both had a knowledge and a penchant for life at sea. Having spent several months away from the sea, he wrote in mid-February 1813 that "not wishing for to stay on shore any longer and eager to get to sea again and try my luck I went on Board and joined the ship's crew on Sunday morning it being on the twenty first at ten in the forenoon." Straight from the loading docks to a position on a privateer, Valpey's experience demonstrates the ease with which a sailor could find employment during this period of rapid militarization.²⁹ Though his experience cannot speak for every sailor seeking employment, it certainly falls in line with the sheer number of privateers that embarked during those years. The crews of these privateers, as a consequence, were not cogent groups of bonded men, but in reality more closely resembled a hodgepodge collection of semi-skilled laborers. If there was a common bond within the American privateer experience, it was that of thrill-seeking or relatively open economic opportunity. Such influences naturally made sailor experience more individualistic and motivated by profit, not friendship or common culture.³⁰

Militia Employment Practices

Inversely, the pull of service in the American militia carried with it notions of patriotic grandeur and a thirst for glory. Though quickly transitioning culturally in the decades following the Revolution, the United States was still very much an "honor society" during the era of the War of 1812. American social and political culture emphasized the glory that could be won in battle as a way to prove social worth and

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status. As the army had more ready-made opportunities for participation in armed conflict, the fervor for militia employment was much stronger.³¹ As Kennedy writes in his memoir, “I had fully made up my mind, a year before the war was declared, that I would endeavor to get into the army, and in this hope had applied myself to all kinds of military studies.” Though he had training as a lawyer and security in his profession as a well-connected gentleman, the pull of military service was strong. As Kennedy puts it, “Law and the Camp both [put] forth their attractions for a boy whose imagination was most susceptible to each—[tam] marte quam mercurio.”³² Military service was engrained in the male ethic of the early republic; young men like Kennedy were frequently and publically compelled to follow it.

In comparison to privateering, the infrastructure of the militia made opportunities for martial honor possible, if not compulsory. The Militia Acts of 1792 and 1795 made service

A young man like Pendleton could not simply step aboard a privateer and expect ready employment. These jobs required the knowledge that came with experience. Most privateer sailors were men that were invested in the maritime way of life. As Paul Gilje argues in *Liberty on the Waterfront*, there was more at stake for privateers than honor or patriotism—it some cases, men aboard privateering ships worked for the welfare, reputation, and existence of their profession as a whole. Such conditions were hardly hospitable to a quick boost in social status that was the objective of most of the men who would join the militia. In this way, privateer service was assortative. Only those with an appreciation, or at minimum a knowledge of the sea were inclined to participate in its institutions. Though there is room to consider these bonds as social bonds, because they were organized around interpersonal communication, it is more likely that the men aboard privateers considered their bonds to be occupation-based, and not socially based like in the militia.³⁶

“Baltimoreans emphasized the ‘value’ of privateering, indicating it was a moneymaking venture above all else.”

in the state militia obligatory for able bodied men, generally between the ages of sixteen and forty-five, for at least three months. Of course, men could also volunteer for service, as did Duncan McArthur, a local Ohio politician. As a civil government official, McArthur held immunity under the Acts from service in the militia. However, the forces of patriotism were strong in this period, and McArthur forwent a career in local politics to serve in the militia, citing a desire “to do a favor to the state” by serving his country.³³ Social pressures influenced young men to pursue glory in the armed service, and the militia empowered a manifestation of these desires.³⁴

It is difficult to compare the romanticism of war that influenced men to join the American militia, to the economic pragmatism held by temporary seamen, who manned American privateers during the War of 1812. Certainly, these characteristics are broad and do not capture the entirety of sentiments expressed by the participants in these institutions. Yet, it appears that in general, there were more appeals to honor and glory by militiamen than the sailors aboard privateers. Due to the social underpinnings that promoted martial valor and defense of honor, the army was a much more obvious way to extend one’s lust for fame than the relatively more obscure and specialized naval pursuits, particularly those aboard a disorganized and less publicized privateer vessel. The merchant maritime communities, while providing a relatively easy flow of labor, were specialized and largely insular. It was difficult for the outside world to participate in nautical institutions because a majority of those who held a vested interest were those who already worked at sea.³⁵

FRATERNAL BONDS

Privateer Fraternity and Shipboard Culture

The employment of American privateers during the War of 1812 was not necessarily solitary, but it was certainly individual. Most privateers were opportunists over anything else, favoring wealth or sustenance over forming shipboard communities. For a large majority of sailors, privateering was a means to an end, or an easy way to convert maritime skills into quick payouts. Coastal ports along the Atlantic were accustomed to the escalation of privateering activity during wartime, and were well set up for a rapid employment of privateering vessels immediately after a declaration of war was made. In the minds of American coastal maritime seamen, a declaration of war went hand in hand with newfound profitability on the Atlantic.³⁷ For instance, Baltimore had a long tradition of profiting off wartime prizes, extending back to the Seven Years’ War and the American Revolution. In some ways, privateering was the city’s own cottage industry; during the War of 1812, up to 20% of its residents had some financial stake in the enterprise. A mere few days after war was declared in June 1812, the Baltimore-based newspaper *American and Commercial Advertiser* began openly calling for the employment of seamen as privateers that “preparations for privateering were progressing,” and that “in a few days several clegant, valuable, and fast-sailing schooners will be ready for sea.”³⁸ Baltimoreans emphasized the “value” of privateering, indicating that it was a moneymaking venture above all else.

Additionally, quick assembly of crews meant that most men were unlikely to know each other before signing on to a privateer, much less were they likely to find pre-existing friendships on the ship. What they shared in common was their similarly singular pursuit of financial gain. In fact, naval officers stationed in Baltimore during the early war had a hard time outfitting their crews, because privateering was so popular among the seamen at that port. One such captain, Charles Gordon, was instructed to purchase schooners for use as naval vessels, but found that local sailors were frequently uninterested in the restrictions of naval employment. As Johnson explained in a letter to naval command, "A great number of the sailors now in port are still attach'd to the Letters of Marque laying here with there Cargo's in which deprives us the use of those fine Schooners well fitted, and the series of those men; Still I hope, in a few days, we shall procure a sufficiency..."³⁹ Privateering was a way to escape the strict hierarchy of the American navy and still employ one's maritime skills in the pursuit of personal wealth. As an account of the *David Porter* notes, it was when "the men [were] well fed" and "with a prospect of large dividends" that they "worked with a will." Profits trumped motivation from the captain or a desire to promote the welfare of their fellow men.⁴⁰

Accounts from sailors aboard privateers during the war seem to corroborate these sentiments. When captains attempted to implement restrictions on privateer activities, they were met with assertive resistance. Joseph Valpey, in a journal entry from November of 1813, records an instance when he and a fellow sailor rebelled against the strictures of their captain. Though the schooner *Monkey* had not yet set sail from Salem, Captain John Groves wanted to keep all of his men on board the ship so the ship could quickly sail when conditions were more favorable. Valpey, a Salem native, had no such intentions; he and his fellow crew were restless after weeks aboard the ship. As he recalls:

We asked permission from our Captain...to which he refused to do replying that if favorable wind we should start in the afternoon. [On his] answer we made ourselves contented that high on the next morning it being pleasant we made ourselves...until after dinner when John Williams of Abbot and myself took over bags and beading up on with the intention to leave the Monkey... and Captain upon hearing this he enquiring what we was going to do, we answered him that we was going to leave the schooner if would not have the Liberty to [leave].

In due course, both men did leave the ship, returning a few days later without punishment. Though sailors who signed on to privateering voyages were nominally under the control of their captains, accounts like these show that insubordination was if not accepted, at least tolerated in a system of looser governance over sailor conduct.⁴¹

The hierarchal structure of the militia encouraged like experience and community between the men it employed, but

aboard a ship where money was the object, little time was spent on enriching sailor experience. There were few opportunities to relax and enjoy each other's company; partly because vessels were perpetually chasing their next prize. Exceptions, of course did exist, such as when the *Monkey* took time off the celebrate American Independence, taking "all sail for to celebrate the day at eleven in the fore noon all hands was called for to split the main brace at Noon we fixed a salute of seventeen guns and then we went to drinking the Remainder of the Day..." However, the next day, the crew was right back to work, in quick pursuit of a British privateer. Other occasions for celebration included Christmas, such as when the *Yankee* "Killed the fatted calf, or more properly the fatted goat, gave the crew a pudding with extra allowance of grog, to keep a Merry Christmas." In addition, the *Yankee* also practiced some more frivolous activities, like a tribute to the rites of King Neptune. Jones relates a remembrance of the festivities:

At 1pm the crew of the *Yankee* preparing to celebrate Old Neptune's ceremonies on passing the Tropics. The Old Sea God...dressed in the most fantastic manner...came on board, were received with a salute and three cheers... After which Neptune and his companions went forward and regularly initiated about one fourth of our crew into all the curious forms requisite to make them sure sons of the ocean...The remainder of the day and evening were devoted to fencing, boxing, wrestling, singing, drinking, laughing, and every species of mirth and fun.

Though it is clear there were celebrations, drinking, merriment, and moments of fraternity on privateers, these celebrations are quite evidently the exception rather than the rule. Most of Jones's journal speaks of "low spirits" and discord between the men. On one occasion, Jones mentions that the *Yankee* came across another privateer, the *Ariadne*, that was forced to return to port when the crew mutinied over the difficulties in having a short-handed crew. Collective association aboard privateers was focused on occupational objectives, not on community bonds.⁴² As a result, sailors rarely expressed common cause or like experience with their fellow crewmembers. Most of the journals left by American privateers emphasize their prizes and hardships, not the bonds that they formed with other men aboard the ship.

Militia Fraternal Bonds and Camp Culture

While accounts from the American militia during the war likely overstate the communal bonds that these men formed during their service, they nonetheless give a general picture of the relationships that were formed between temporary servicemen under the Army's jurisdiction. Many personal diaries from militiamen serving on the American side speak effusively of the comforts of companionship in the American militia. What shines through in their accounts is the notion that militia service not only encouraged collective association tacitly, but that some men actually signed up for military service *because* of these bonds. Unlike privateering, militiamen describe military service as a fraternity of sorts, a place

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where young men of a similar background could come together in common pursuit of patriotic ideals and a defense of their country.

Kennedy's memoir certainly speaks to this factor in lavish detail. As a recent law graduate, it is possible that he was seeking a new community of young men with which to associate, and believed that the militia would meet those desires. Speaking of his time in camp just outside Baltimore in mid-1812, Kennedy remembers that "to tell stories and laugh as healthy and light-hearted boys only can laugh in such scenes, were to me enjoyments that never waned in interest and never lost their zest in repetition." Militia camps concentrated men who were in similar life circumstances and from a similar region into one central locality, while giving them little in the way of actual responsibility. These conditions were conducive to the bonds that Kennedy describes.^{43 44}

Militia life was an especially enticing proposition for those living on the western frontier. For Duncan McArthur, a militia commander in Ohio as a part of the North West Army, service in the militia afforded him a chance for community in an otherwise lonely quarter of the United States. As he explained in a letter to his superior officer from Upper Sandusky in January 1813, he "disliked a solitary life" that he found at home in civilian life, and "I have none but austerity to it. You will be assured anything that will give me a trifling competency at [solitude] will not only at this time not be acknowledged, but now be mediated from my memory." To McArthur, the militia was not only an occupation, but also a form of fraternity. Community with his adoptive brothers in the militia offered an escape from the solitude of life on the frontier, and the cutthroat nature of early political association. Militia life promoted the closest living quarters and most human contact that one could expect in the Northwest Territory, where population density paled in comparison to the urban localities of privateer sailors on the Eastern Seaboard.⁴⁵

Militia life offered community that otherwise may not have been available to young men who were eager to form social bonds with others. This type of community ethic differed widely from that found on privateers. Privateering, in contrast, was occupational and individualistic. Its practices occupied a very different niche within the lives of its participants than the encompassing sociality of the similarly temporary militia.

COMBAT

Privateer Combat

Combat at sea, on the whole, differed widely from that on land. Where the armies of the United States and Britain typically engaged in monolithic campaigns over the same small stretches of territory, naval battles could span one bay, a large lake, or the entire Atlantic basin. Battle tactics were also less regulated; though many American captains followed the na-

val strategies exemplified by Admiral Nelson of the British Royal Navy at Trafalgar in 1805, norms about naval warfare were shifting at the time, and were not as predetermined as for the army.⁴⁶ On a structural level, the American Navy was rethinking best practices for taking on the British Navy in the Atlantic. Instead of taking on the full force of the British fleet in direct confrontation, the Navy Department intended to pick off British brigs one by one, in lightning attacks that minimized risk and maximized impact. As Secretary of the Navy William Jones wrote to Congressmen Burwell Bassett on the future strategy of the Navy, the naval objectives of the United States relied on a "species of force of vast importance for short Coasting Convoys as well as for the annoyance of the enemy. I mean Corvettes such as the *Hornet*... of this valuable class of vessels we are almost destitute." Conversations between high-ranking officials in the Department of the Navy indicate that small, quick-moving vessels which could attack independently were integral to the American strategy, but were lacking in sufficient numbers to adequately accomplish these tasks.⁴⁷

As a way cover the deficit between naval goals and naval realities, privateers were an efficient way to carry out these short, quick attacks on British ships. A privateer did not require extensive strategizing, supply lines, reinforcements, or auxiliary support: these were all the responsibility of the privateer captain, who incurred every risk that similarly constructed vessels would have had to take on as regular naval ships. In return, privateers were promised the profits from their British prizes. Privateers essentially worked as temporary navy, but unlike the militia, was not involved in the directly coordinated strategy of the federal military establishment. Instead, these vessels were generally tasked with the harassment of British naval vessels, and only required to uphold a few stipulations. In "An Act Concerning Letters of Marque, Prizes, and Prize Goods," the U.S. Congress outlined the regulation of privateer engagements with British ships. It merely requires that captains "state in writing the force and tonnage of the vessel," submit a bond to the United States Congress as collateral (along with other nominal licensing fees), and keep a journal of all prizes taken. In regards to naval oversight, it only remarks that "all offences committed by Offences on any officer or seaman on board any such vessel, having letters of marque... shall be tried and punished in such manner as the like offences are or may be tried and punished when committed by any person belonging to the public ships of war of the United States." While the navy had control over privateer discipline, it in reality had little control over privateer military actions, which were coordinated privately.⁴⁸

The journals kept by these privateers shows that engagement with the British was frequent and fast-paced. Oftentimes, situations for battle would arise without warning, save a lookout who would catch sight of a sail on the horizon. In an entry from August 15, 1813, Valpey remembers that

at day light in the morning we discovered two frigates



The Signing of the Treaty of Ghent, Christmas Eve (1814)

Source: Smithsonian American Art Museum

within three gunshots of us we soon had all hands up and crowded all sail but our enemy was in a cloud of sail in a few minuets and soon Commenced firing with there bow chasers upon us but to no purpose until on of them out sailing the other came up with us so that her shot reached then we began for to play upon her with our stern chasers until she came with in musquet shot.

Given no advance warning, the men quickly scrambled into place. The most often repeated phrase in Valpey's journal is "all hands were called," a command from the captain uttered at least once a week in response to a sail on the horizon. Privateers, as a private enterprise, did have the option whether or not to engage with an opposing vessel; as Valpey explains on one instance, "all hands was then called aft for to see if they were willing for to go in chase but we being eager for to Improve our opportunity not knowing how soon that we might have our Liberty taken from us we replied that we would see her by all means in a few minuets."⁴⁹ Battles were usually elective, though many privateers were willing to take on bodily or financial risk in pursuit of the riches gained in capturing prizes. Engagements typically lasted the balance of two or more days, in which privateers were, according to accounts, inordinately successful in capturing British vessels of greater size. The tactics used by privateers more closely resembles guerilla warfare than the staid tactics of the American army as practiced on the Canadian fronts.

Militia Combat

The combative portions of militia life, while crucial to the service by definition, actually held less bearing on militia experience than most other segments of the service. Rather far from it, combat was not even the most discussed topic in the personal accounts of militiamen. Mentions of combat pale

in comparison to those of disease and malnutrition, of the desire for a return home, and of the longing for female company. In reality, military life for American militiamen was less defined by combat than by other stresses. This left plenty of time for more fraternal pursuits.

When the militia was called into service, it had far fewer successes than privateers in defeating British forces. The militia was usually used as a "first line" of sorts, clearing the way for more incisive and specific action by regular military forces. Military leadership did not typically depend on the performance of the militia, considering its commitment and skill to be unreliable.⁵⁰ Accordingly, some militia accounts take on the role of spectator, like Joseph Kennedy's description of the hostilities near Baltimore. Prone to excitement over any connection to glory, Kennedy gushingly describes the battles around him as "constant exhilaration" in the period prior to battle outside of Baltimore. When it came to actual combat, however, he recalled that "The drafted militia ran away at the first fire, and the Fifth Regiment was driven off the field with the bayonet. We made a fine scamper of it. I lost my musket in the melee while bearing off a comrade, James W. McCulloch..."⁵¹ When the militia did fight against British regulars, it usually amounted to a rout. In a report from the North West Campaign near Detroit on May 5, 1813, McArthur relays

another disaster to the Kentucky troops, not need bearing any comparison to that of the River raisin in [number] of killed and wounded, but exceeding it as to the number of prisoners...the British troops seized this place...On the succeeding night they broke ground [on the camp]...the following morning our batteries arrived upon them, and continued a partial siege the following day.

Militia combat was, from soldier accounts, usually nothing more than a show of force coordinated by the army infrastructure, which even when engaged in battle, resulted in several casualties with no territory gained. Militia combat was largely dependent and coordinated, while privateers frequently acted independently with little naval coordination. The result was that militiamen were bonded together by common circumstances of sedentary life, while privateers were isolated in their singular pursuit of individual profits and limited in their contact with the outside world. Though they fought together, privateer sailors fought for their own individual purposes.⁵²

CONCLUSIONS AND EXTENSIONS

American privateers occupied a similar category of employment as the militia, yet had unique experiences among combative military employees during the War of 1812. Inspired less by patriotism and more so by profits, the culture aboard privateering vessels diverged from other branches of the service. Instead of perpetuating a stable military institution, privateering more accurately sprung up as an opportunistic business opportunity, and quickly faded from the Atlantic maritime landscape with the Treaty of Ghent in 1814.⁵³ By the late 1810s, privateering had faded to the background of

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the seaside culture, to return only briefly during the American Civil War.

In the absence of bonding culture between the men, there was little other reason for privateer crews to remain together postwar. Consequently, ships such as the *Yankee* quickly disbanded after their letters of marque expired. Instances of these privateers continuing on as merchant vessels or otherwise sticking together are few and far between. Instead, privateering crews often show that they were nothing more than business arrangements of convenience.⁵⁴ The militia, conversely, encountered some restructuring following the War, but by and large remained an ever-present component of the army well in the first half of the nineteenth century. Privateering, in contrast, faded into the background of maritime employment, because it could not maintain relevance in an open economic market unrestricted by war.⁵⁵

American privateering during the early nineteenth century hardly embodied the romanticism of life at sea anachronistically applied in popular representations today. Instead, privateering culture was highly centered on profit and, most crucially, on survival. The practice of privateering was laborious, and every advantage had to be earned. As Noah Jones quotes in the conclusion of his journal from the *Yankee*, “Honor and shame from no condition rise/ Act well your part, there all the Honor lies.” With each man “acting the part” in the sober fulfillment of duties, the men aboard privateers shared in the honors of profit. Though privateering was not a unifying mode of service, its sailors temporarily shared common purpose.⁵⁶ 

Endnotes

[1] Joseph Valpey, *Journal of Joseph Valpey Jr. of Salem, Mass., on board the Letter of Marque Schooner Monkey, and While in Dartmouth Prison, 1813-1815*, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan, 37-38.

[2] Jerome Garitee, *The Republic's Private Navy: The American Privateering Business as Practiced by Baltimore during the War of 1812* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1929), 5-8.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Ibid.*, 10.

[5] William S. Dudley, *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History, vol. II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1992), 19.

[6] U.S.C. 2 Chapter 28, *An Act to provide for calling forth the Militia to execute the laws of the Union, suppress insurrections and repel invasion*, 2 May 1792, sec. 4.

[7] Kenneth J. Carpenter, *The History of Scurvy and Vitamin C* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 100-102.

- [8] Valpey, *Journal*, 28.
- [9] Noah Jones, *Journal of the Private Armed Brigantine Yankee, Oliver Wilson Commander*, in Wilfred Harold Munro, "The Most Successful American Privateer," (American Antiquarian Society, Apr. 1913), 24-42.
- [10] Valpey, *Journal*, 4-5.
- [11] Jones, *Yankee*, 21.
- [12] Edgar Stanton Maclay, *A History of American Privateers* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1899), 343.
- [13] Asa Grant, Sacketts Harbor, New York to Parents, 10 Nov. 1812. Asa Grant Letters 1812-1813, Small Collections: Box 48, Folder 4-10, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- [14] Gretchen A. Condran, "Changing Patterns of Epidemic Disease in New York City, 1625-1990," in *Hives of Sickness*, New York: Rutgers University Press, 1995.
- [15] George Hunt, Des Moines to Gen. Gibson, Fort Wayne. 17 Feb. 1813, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan.
- [16] Asa Grant, Sacketts Harbor to Parents, 2 Oct. 1812, Grant Papers, Clements Library.
- [17] William S. Dudley, *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History, vol. II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1992), 27.
- [18] Commodore John Rodgers, Boston to Secretary of the Navy Hamilton, Washington, D.C. 19 Jan 1813, in *The Naval War of 1812*, 31.
- [19] Testimony of George W. Burbank at his Court Martial, Marine Barracks Charlestown Navy Yard, 6 March 1813, in *The Naval War of 1812*, 33-34.
- [20] Valpey, *Journal*, 32.
- [21] U.S.C. 2 Chapter 28, *Militia Act*, sec. 6.
- [22] John Pendleton Kennedy, *The Life of John Pendleton Kennedy*, ed. Henry T. Tuckerman (New York: J.P. Putnam and Sons, 1871), 65.
- [23] Peter Earle, *Sailors: English Merchant Seamen 1650-1775* (London: Methuen, 1998), 26-27.
- [24] Ibid.
- [25] Jones, *Yankee*, 23.
- [26] Munro, "Successful American Privateer," 14.
- [27] Peter Lindert and Jeffrey Williamson, "American Incomes 1774-1860," in *NBER Working Paper Series*, Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, Sept. 2012.
- [28] To be sure, the American Revolution brought forth very little in the way of socioeconomic levelling. However, it did constitute a difference in how citizens conceived of their own role in a democratic. There has been plenty of scholarship on this shift, including Gordon Wood's *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*.
- [29] Valpey, *Journal*, 9.
- [30] Privateering success was also dependent on the equipment that a captain had at his disposal, which varied from ship to ship. Sometimes, superior navigational tools could compensate for ineffectual leadership. For more on this see "Aftermath," in Garitee, *The Republic's Private Navy*.
- [31] Harry S. Laver, *Citizens More Than Soldiers, The Kentucky Militia and Society in the Early Republic* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 99-101.
- [32] Or, "equally qualified for militancy and diplomacy," after the Latin proverb. Kennedy use of this phrase in and of itself shows that he holds a classical education, but yet sheds his social advantage in a lust for glory on the battlefield. Instances like this point to the divergence between the egalitarian but solidary privateering culture, and the bonded men seeking glory in the militia. Kennedy, *Life*, 63.
- [33] McArthur would, as it happens, resume his political career after the war, serving as a U.S. Representative from 1823-25 and the 11th Governor of Ohio from 1830-1832.
- [34] Laver, *Citizens*, 102.
- [35] Ibid.
- [36] Paul Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), xiii.
- [37] Jerome Garitee, *The Republic's Private Navy* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1929), 14.
- [38] "Noble Youth," in *American Commercial and Daily Advertiser*, Baltimore, Maryland, 24 Jun 1812.
- [39] Charles Gordon, Baltimore to Secretary of the Navy Jones, Washington, D.C. 15 Apr 1813, in *The Naval War of 1812*.
- [40] Maclay, *Privateers*, 338.
- [41] Valpey, *Journal*, 1-2.
- [42] Jones, *Yankee*, 22.
- [43] Kennedy, *Life*, 65.
- [44] Partially, the fact that the militia was stagnant was because the War Department did not trust the militia to carry out its objectives. The militia frequently ran from battle, and left the standing army to clean up the damage or otherwise to suffer routs at the hands of the British Army. More on this in the next section. For more on the employment history of the American militia see Edward Skeen, *Citizen Soldiers in the War of 1812* (Lexington: Kentucky University Press, 1998).
- [45] Duncan McArthur, Upper Sandusky to R. Forsythe, Chilli-cothe, 11 Jan. 1813, in Duncan McArthur Correspondence, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan. Skeen, *Citizen Soldiers*, 40.
- [46] William S. Dudley, *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History, vol. II* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1992), 4.
- [47] Secretary of the Navy William Jones, Washington, D.C. to Congressman Burwell Bassett, Washington, D.C., 2 Feb 1813, in *The Naval War of 1812*.
- [48] 12 U.S. Chapter 107, *An Act Concerning Letters of Marque, Prizes, and Prize Goods*, 26 Jun. 1812.
- [49] Valpey, *Journal*, 17.
- [50] Skeen, *Citizen Soldiers*, 41.
- [51] Kennedy, *Life*, 79-80.
- [52] Duncan McArthur, Upper Sandusky to R. Forsyth, Camp Meigs, 5 May 1813, in McArthur Correspondence, Burton Historical Collection.
- [53] Garitee, *Private Navy*, 243.
- [54] Munro, "Successful American Privateer," 6.
- [55] Garitee, *Private Navy*, 243-244.
- [56] Jones, *Journal... Yankee*, 60.