

PIRATES AND PRIVATEERS IN THE DELAWARE  
BAY AND RIVER.

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The Atlantic Coast, adjacent to the Delaware Bay, has for years been associated with the pleasures of summer recreation, but during the Colonial period the waters about the Delaware Capes were the favorite cruising places for swift-sailing pirates and privateers, differing often but in name and considered among the greatest and most imminent perils of the sea.

The continued wars in Europe had created countless privateers—daring seamen, who, encouraged by their respective governments to prey upon the enemy, eagerly accepted a license which afforded rare chance of fortune and adventure. The Dutch and English seldom failed, when opportunity offered, to deal a blow to their common enemies, France and Spain, and, in retaliation, the French and Spanish privateers waylaid craft flying the flags of Great Britain and the Netherlands. On the seas, discontented by failure or arrogant from continued success, men often crossed the line that distinguished the privateer from the pirate, and became followers of the black flag. Frequently the crews, wearied and sullen from inaction and dearth of prize money, compelled their captains to attack neutral ships, and later, any and all vessels that could be taken. The temptation was great, for the pirates, possessing fleet and well-armed vessels, were able to defy even the men-of-war, and after securing wealth could gain pardon by renouncing their calling.

The concentration of navigation on the Atlantic, due to the rapid growth of the American colonies, attracted many rovers from the southern seas, to try their luck with the merchantmen plying between the Old World and the New.

The Island of New Providence, the Bahamas, and the bay-indented coast of the Carolinas, became the headquarters of the fraternity. Some inhabitants of these places, finding trade with the buccaneers profitable, acted as their agents; in fact, persons of high standing in the Colonies were accused of co-operating with and protecting the pirates. In consequence, American shipping suffered greatly. The privateers of the Spanish were fitted out in the West Indies, the French rendezvoused at Louisbourg, Cape Breton, so the English colonies were between the two scourges.

The Delaware Bay, an outlet for the rich fur trade and the main inlet for supplies to the Provinces of Pennsylvania and West Jersey, was not overlooked. French and Spanish ships lurked about the Capes, and at times, when their depredations had caused a temporary lull in the shipping, boldly sailed into the Bay and river in their eagerness for booty.

The first recorded trouble seems to have been in 1672, when a party of privateers made a descent upon the present town of Lewes, evidently doing considerable damage, as an impost of four guilders in wampum on each anker of strong liquor was authorized for one year to repair the losses occasioned. In 1696 the Council of Pennsylvania was called by Governor Markham to consider charges, made by the Lords of Trade, against Philadelphia for encouraging the pirate Avery. This man, one of the most noted freebooters of his day, a native of England, had at the age of twenty entered on the *Duke*, a vessel fitted out by merchants of Bristol, for Spanish service. With others he mutinied, secured the vessel and was made captain. They sailed for the American coast and operated for a time between Newfoundland and the West Indies, making many captures. Avery eventually went to Madagascar and, building fortifications, established a government of his own; many of the petty kings of the Island paid tribute to him. One of his most cruel deeds was the capture of the Great Mogul's

daughter, who remained his unhappy captive and paramour until released by death. After a life of crime and villainy he took advantage of King William's pardon and returned to England, where it is said he died in poverty.

Previous to June, 1698, pirates had been captured in the vicinity of the Delaware Capes; two, confined in New Jersey at that time, were ordered to New York by the Earl of Bellamont, Governor of the last-named province, for trial before the Court of Admiralty. It was through the well-intended influence of this Bellamont that the galley *Adventure* was manned and sent to clear the Indian Ocean of piratical craft. The *Adventure* was commanded by an old privateersman, who upon the sea developed into a pirate and made forever famous the name of Captain Kidd.

In the autumn of 1698 a French pirate called Canoot captured a Philadelphia sloop three miles below Cape May, and, manning her, landed fifty men at Lewes and looted the town. An express was sent to Philadelphia, and upon its arrival, although it was the Sabbath, a meeting of the Council was instantly called; but naught seems to have been done to remedy the evil. In 1699 a richly-laden ship, with about sixty pirates, said to have been a portion of Kidd's crew, was reported by the Judge of Admiralty to have arrived in the Delaware.

In 1704, one Eleazer Darby, while bringing his vessel into the bay, was taken by a French privateer. The continued reports of privateers on the coast in 1706 caused the Council to order every house in Philadelphia to be visited, and an account of the available arms and ammunition made, and throughout the Province a general muster was ordered. The following year a French privateer that had caused considerable trouble in 1705 returned to the Delaware and was again successful in captures. This vessel, a sloop called the *Elizabeth*, had been captured by the pirates. She was built in Rhode Island, and to this was probably due her success. The merchants protected their vessels by having them well armed and capable of outsailing the foreigners, hence very

early American-built boats were in demand. Prior to 1700 a British man-of-war had been built in New England.

At least six privateers were known to be on the North Atlantic coast in 1708, and, owing to the losses from them, John Evans, Governor of Pennsylvania, called the Assembly on July 20th, to take action, but, as anticipated, he was unable to arouse the Assembly to defence. An appeal was made to Lord Cornbury for a man-of-war to be stationed at Philadelphia, to convoy vessels out of the bay. This would have been of material aid. The pirates hovered about the harbors, where a limited field made captures more certain. With an escort out to sea, a ship's safety was greatly enhanced. But this want was not to be satisfied for forty years.

The town of Lewes was for a third time threatened in 1709. On July 6th a French privateer endeavored to land a force, but, being driven off, stood up the bay. The Governor, happening to be at Lewes, sent advice to Philadelphia by a messenger in a boat, manned by four oarsmen, a pull that would now seem heroic. The messenger was sent by water so that outward-bound vessels could be warned.

In 1713 the sloop *Betty* of St. Christopher's was taken by a Frenchman, three leagues off Cape May. In the spring following, five sailors arrived at Philadelphia, in the sloop *William's Endeavor*, and voluntarily acknowledged having been guilty of piracy, but, claiming that "their behavior had been within the limits of his Majesty's late gracious pardon," were not held. This pardon of the Crown granted amnesty to pirates delivering themselves within a stated time, and many successful men of the profession returned and recanted. It was unjust that such men should have been allowed to thus enjoy their ill-gotten gains in peace, and it proves how powerful and feared these rovers of the sea had become.

In the last-mentioned year eight seamen brought to Philadelphia a tale of adventure. They had sailed for Jamaica in the summer, to work upon wrecks. Their captain died, and, meeting with another sloop, they were induced to mu-

tiny. Securing one of the sloops, they started on a piratical cruise. They first took another sloop, and retaining her for a consort, captured a ship. According to their story, these eight men had deserted their comrades when the ship was taken and sailed immediately for Philadelphia. They were released and commended by the Council for giving themselves up.

At this time a pirate named Teach was believed to be lurking about Philadelphia, and former pirates, residing in the city, were suspected of being in communication with him. This man, better known as Blackbeard, was an Englishman, born in Bristol. He had first distinguished himself by boldness in service on a Jamaican privateer. In 1717 he sailed from the Island of New Providence, in a pirate sloop, to the American coast, capturing three vessels on the way. He then operated about the West Indies, and successive captures enabled him to secure a large French Guinea ship, which he called the *Queen Anne's Revenge*, and with which he was able to withstand an engagement with the English man-of-war *Scarboroughh*. To save the booty, Teach ran his vessel ashore on the North Carolina coast, and, after receiving certificates of pardon from the Governor of that Colony, immediately started upon another expedition. The Governor of Virginia sent out two sloops against Blackbeard, manned with men from the *Pearl* and *Lime* men-of-war. After a fierce engagement, in which Blackbeard, receiving twenty wounds, was killed, the pirate ship was taken and the outlaw's head adorned the bowsprit of one of the sloops. It is related that Teach the night before he was killed, when asked whether his wife knew where his money was, replied, "Nobody but the Devil and myself knows, and the longest liver shall take it all." This pirate was said to have been known by many frequenters of the taverns along the Philadelphia water front. "He and his crew kept many a revel at Marcus Hook, at the house of a Swede woman."

During the summer of 1722, shipping on the Delaware was sorely crippled by a pirate brigantine cruising off the

Capes. Trade was for a time entirely cut off. The *Pennsylvania Gazette* of July 26th states that for one week no vessels had entered except a sloop, which had sailed for St. Christopher's, but being thrice taken and plundered by pirates was obliged to return.

Although privateering and piracy had flourished before, they gained their height after the declaration of war between England and France in 1744. In anticipation of this action the French, before the close of 1743, were busily engaged in fitting out their privateers, and until the peace of 1748 were unceasing in their depredations on the coast from Florida to Newfoundland.

A favorite and most successful ruse of these corsairs was to enter the Delaware Capes under English colors, and signal for a pilot, who on approaching was captured. The pilot-boat was then manned and stationed within the capes; incoming vessels were met and easily captured by this innocent-looking guide.

Spaniards from a captured pilot-boat, on Sunday, July 12, 1717, went ashore on the plantation of Edmund Liston, in New Castle County, about four miles from Bombay Hook, near the present Woodland Beach. Armed with pistols, guns and cutlasses they rifled Liston's house, taking even furniture and clothing, a negro woman, her two children and a negro girl. They then clapped a pistol to Liston's breast and compelled him to accompany them to the plantation of James Hart, who, observing their approach, secured his doors and with a gun offered resistance. They fired upon Hart, and after wounding his wife and threatening to burn his house, he surrendered and his home was looted. In the evening of the same day they captured the pilot-boat of one John Aries.

The ship *Mary* from Antigua, Bernard Martin of Philadelphia captain, upon entering the bay, July 14, 1747, was hailed by a pilot-boat known to Martin. Coming alongside the *Mary* was boarded and captured by about thirty-five French and Spaniards who had been concealed beneath the

hatches. One of the crew of this privateer was a Boston man, who knew Philadelphia, and the commander told Captain Martin that he expected to soon pay a visit to the latter city. This information, imparted by Martin, caused considerable anxiety in Philadelphia, which was increased when the Council was informed of an alleged plot of some Spanish prisoners to secure a ship's boat with the help of some negroes, and go down the river.

The following month, the sloop *Elizabeth*, Pyramus Green of Philadelphia captain, was captured off the coast of North Carolina, by a French sloop, the *Marthel Vodroit*, of about one hundred tons, carrying fourteen carriage and sixteen swivel guns and six swivel blunderbusses, having one hundred and seventy men, made up of English, Scotch, Irish, French and Spaniards. This Frenchman had taken three English prizes, and after Green's capture took a brigantine and two ships off Virginia, a sloop at Delaware Capes and two ships in Delaware Bay. Arriving at Cape May she hoisted English colors and, securing a pilot, ordered him to take her up where the shipping lay. The captain of the privateer endeavored to gain information regarding Philadelphia, and was told that the *Trembleur* was coming down the river and the *Pandour* was preparing.

The *Trembleur*, or *Le Trembleur*, was an American privateer, a converted Bermudas sloop purchased in 1744. She carried about one hundred men and had thirty-two guns. In May of 1748 the *Trembleur* captured and brought to Philadelphia a ship and two snows, laden with sugar, coffee, cotton and cocoa, making six prizes taken in the cruise.

The *Pandour*, an American privateer, was commanded by William Dowell, formerly captain of the privateer schooner *George*. She was built in Philadelphia, in 1745. The following notice appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* of January 21, 1746:

PHILADELPHIA, December 17, 1745.

Now fitting out for a Cruizing Voyage against his Majesty's Enemies, and will sail in two Weeks

THE SHIP PANDOUR, William Dowell, Commander; Burthen about 300 Tons; to carry 24 Carriage Guns, nine and six pounders, 24 Swivels, and 30 Brass Blunderbusses, with 150 Men, is a new Ship, built for a Privateer, and every way completely fitted for that Purpose.

ALSO

THE BRIGANTINE GEORGE, Robert Wood, Commander; To carry 16 Carriage Guns, and 18 Swivels, with 120 Men. Both Vessels will be completely fitted, and are to go in Consort.

ALL Gentlemen Sailors, and others, inclin'd to enter on board either of the said Privateers, may repair to the Commanders aforesaid, or to the *Sign of the Boatswain and Call* near the Draw-Bridge, Philadelphia, where the Articles are to be seen and sign'd by those who are willing to go the Cruize.

The *Sign of the Boatswain and Call* was in the first building erected in Philadelphia, built by George Guest, and originally called the *Blue Anchor*, where Penn landed when he first came to Philadelphia. It stood on Front Street, just north of the creek.

The privateer ship *Wilmington*, of 300 tons, carrying 48 guns and 150 men, previously advertised in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, was later made a Letter of Marque, and in 1746 brought in the French snow *Two Sisters*, laden with sugar and coffee. She was commanded by Captain John Sibbald. These are a few examples of the many private vessels-of-war sent out by Philadelphia to harass the enemy and protect our shipping. Privateering became quite popular in this city, many of the leading merchants and other prominent citizens fitting out vessels. Lieutenant Governor DeLancey, of New York, writing to Secretary Pitt in 1758, regarding the lack of men for the army, said, "the Country is drained of many able bodied men, by almost a kind of madness to go a privateering." The inducements were in-

deed great; it was not uncommon for an ordinary seaman to realize one hundred pounds on one cruise. Many indentured servants ran away before their time had expired, to enlist on privateers.

The following appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 19, 1748 :

Philadelphia. This morning arrived here Capt. Pyramus Green, who sailed last week from this place for Bermuda, in a small Schooner, called the *Phoenix*, laden with Bread and Indian Corn, but was taken about 30 Leagues S. E. of the Cape last Sunday Morning, by a Privateer Sloop from Cape Francois (formerly the *Clinton* of New York) mounting 14 Carriage Guns, and 16 Swivels, with 175 Men, the same that cruized in our Bay last year. They took out his Hands, and all his Bread, threw the Indian Corn over-board, put 10 Men on board his Vessel, with Muskets and Blunderbusses and order'd them to proceed to the Capes of Delaware. On Monday Evening they anchor'd in Hoarkill Road, and about Midnight weigh'd and boarded the Brig. *Tinker*, Capt. M'Carter, from Providence, then lying there at Anchor, All the Frenchmen went on Board the Brig. she floated off, Capt. Green observing, he repossessed himself of his Schooner, hoisted her Sails, and stood over to Cape-May, where he procured Hands to help him up with her to Philadelphia. An English Prisoner who was in the Privateer, informed Capt. Green, that there were a Brig. and Sloop concerts with the *Clinton*, and that they had taken five Vessels to the Southward: Tis supposed they may be all now at the Capes, expecting to meet with the Schooner.

Captain Green was unfortunate: he had been captured, with the sloop *Elizabeth*, the previous year. The captor of the *Phoenix*, as the American privateer *Clinton*, had been of good service, making captures as early as 1744.

These instances of depredations by foreign privateers and

pirates afford some idea of their menace to the commerce of Philadelphia. The city was a prominent port and much of her wealth was represented by vessels and their cargoes. Ship-building was among her important industries, and any hindrance to commerce greatly affected her welfare. Philadelphia vessels not only attended to local needs, but had made this a point of distribution. The account of one Philadelphia merchant's estate in Colonial times furnishes record of twenty vessels, ships, brigantines, schooners and sloops, the majority, if not all, having been his property. The following items from this account show the variety of his import and export trade: Rum and sugar from Barbadoes; rice from South Carolina; wine from Madeira; sugar from Boston; spirits from Jamaica; muskets, pistols, cutlasses and gunpowder to Jamaica; onions to Antigua; chocolate to Virginia; linen from Newry and Liverpool. This same account mentions loss of a vessel "taken," going from Philadelphia to Jamaica.

During all these years, complaints from the merchants to the Proprietary had been continuous, and in May, 1748, a letter was received by the Council from Governor Thomas Penn, containing the welcome news that, after long application, he had succeeded in having a man-of-war stationed in the Delaware Bay. This vessel, the sloop *Otter*, Captain Ballet, arrived about the same time, but having been damaged in an engagement with a Frenchman on the way over, was dismantled at once for repairs. At this most opportune time for their success, pirates appeared at the Capes and entered the Bay. One, a Spanish brigantine, the *Saint Michael*, commanded by Don Vincent Lopez, with a crew of one hundred and sixty Spaniards, English, Irish and Negroes, carrying thirty-four guns, captured a sloop off the Capes and was then piloted into the Bay and river by an Englishman who had accompanied her from Havana. She proceeded on up the Bay and captured a pilot-boat. Seeing a large merchantman at anchor off New Castle, Lopez determined to take her, promising his men to then loot and

burn the town and continue up the Delaware, treating in a like manner the settlements on either side. Fortunately, an English sailor, who had been impressed in Cuba, escaped from the *Saint Michael* during the night, and, swimming ashore, informed the people of Salem. Then crossing to New Castle, he arrived just before the Spaniard came up displaying English colors. After considerable difficulty the sailor convinced the inhabitants that the ship was a Spanish privateer, and she was fired upon from New Castle and from the merchantman. At this the *Saint Michael* drew off, hoisted Spanish colors and anchored off Reedy Island, near four sloops that had been chased into the Delaware by a privateer. These sloops she captured after dark, and, stripping the crews of everything, put them ashore with forty-five other prisoners.

News of these occurrences having been immediately sent to Philadelphia by an express, great excitement ensued, many fearing that the long-threatened sacking of the city was about to be accomplished. Captain Ballet, of the recently arrived sloop-of-war *Otter*, was summoned, only to inform the Council that his ship was dismantled and in her present condition unseaworthy. He proposed placing the ship's guns in the shore batteries. These batteries, erected along the Delaware, near the present Lombard Street and below Old Swedes' Church, were manned by militia under the command of Colonel Abraham Taylor, who was authorized to "burn, sink or destroy the Enemy, their Ships or Vessels, attempting to pass the said Batteries."

The owners of the *Trembleur* privateer offered their vessel to the Council, and the Captain, Obadiah Browne, agreed to take command. But those offers were unfortunately declined when it was found that the owners desired security and Obadiah wished suitable provision made in the event of his losing a limb in the engagement.

While the *Saint Michael* was causing so much consternation in the river, the French privateer (formerly the *Clinton*) was busily engaged off the Capes. The sloop *Three Brothers*

was captured, but the prize crew was overpowered by George Portens, captain of the sloop, his son and an old man, and the sloop was brought up to Philadelphia. When Portens was captured, the crew of the brigantine *Richa* were prisoners on the privateer. A portion of the *Clinton's* crew, in a pilot-boat, captured the schooner *Mary*, of Philadelphia. The *Clinton* had taken eleven prizes before reaching the Delaware, and at the Capes she had met a French brig that had taken six prizes. In passing Townsend's Inlet the *Clinton*, seeing two sloops inside, sent boats in and took them.

By July the *Otter* sloop-of-war was in good order and patrolling the coast. On the fifteenth she had captured two Frenchmen, and the following day, with the *Hector* man-of-war, from the Virginia station, took a Spanish schooner and retook three of the Spaniard's prizes.

From this time on, trouble from privateers and pirates decreased. The Americans with their swift-sailing boats became masters of the Atlantic seaboard and even went in search of conquest. In 1757 the Spanish Government complained of losses from American privateers, and the following year the Spanish Governor of Monte Carlo wrote that the American boats *Spry* and *Knowles*, "have had the boldness in contempt of the Spanish flag to carry off a Snow from this port while she was at anchor."

As the frontier life had prepared the colonists for the army of Washington, so the privateers fitted men to follow Barry and Jones.