

America, 1749

The history of American Naval Shipbuilding begins in the Piscataqua River basin near Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Here, from a Newcastle shipyard in 1690, mast contractor and shipwright John Taylor launched the Falkland of 54 guns, 638 tons, 128'6" long on the gundeck, and 33' beam. Purchased into the Royal Navy in 1695, Falkland's subsequent career is obscured by the fogs of intervening centuries.

In 1696 Taylor completed the Bedford, or Bedford Galley at the same location. Probably rigged as a Snow, which Falconer's Marine Dictionary defines as "the largest of all two-masted vessels used by the Europeans"- a rig similar to a modern full-rigged brig-, Bedford carried 44 guns, and was 103' long on the gun deck with a 21' beam. Galleys, according to naval experts, were a type of vessel that carried all their guns on a flush deck in contrast to the low waists and high poop decks and forecastles of contemporary frigates. Registered in the Royal Navy in 1697, Bedford's fate is scarcely more clear than Falkland's. One account describes Bedford's rebuilding in 1709, conversion to a fire ship in 1716, and ignominious end as a sunken foundation in Sheerness in 1725. Another historian

reports Bedford's participation in Sir Hovenden Walker's unsuccessful attempt to capture Quebec in 1711, and as a "fine ship" in Sir John Morris' squadron of 1720-21.

America, launched from the North mill pond shipyard of Colonel Nathaniel Meserve in 1749, was the third Royal warship ordered by the Lords of Admiralty from Piscataqua builders. As registered in the Royal Navy, America was a "fifth rate", carried 44 guns, measured 862 tons British measurement, 139'1" length on the gun deck, and 37'5" in beam. Built in "Portsmouth New England," in 1749, America was renamed Boston on April 13, 1756, and sold out of the service in 1757. The British rating system in effect for ships built after 1740 specified that a "fifth rate" 44 would have 20 eighteen pound cannon on the lower deck, 20 nine pounders on the upper, and four six pounders on the poop or forecastle as chasers.<sup>1</sup>

Colonel Meserve was undoubtedly chosen as builder for his expertise- he was a "fine mechanical genius" according to contemporary opinion-, but also as a reward for his contribution to the successful Louisburg expedition of 1745. In the Colonies the War of the Austrian Succession, 1740-48 was known as King George's War. The European conflict centered around various claims of succession to the Imperial title. The immediate effect in North America was the attack on the British fishery at Canceau Island in Nova Scotia by the French forces stationed at Louisburg and their Indian allies. The Indians took hostages who were later ransomed in Boston. There, after interviewing the prisoners

about the strength of the French forces, Governor Shirley conceived of a plan to capture the fortress at Louisburg, which was used as a base by French privateers against the English. After convincing the Royal government in England that the plan was viable, Shirley enlisted New Hampshire aid in the form of money, troops, and the support of Governor Benning Wentworth. William Pepperell of Kittery, the most prominent merchant in the area, was chosen to command the operation as much for his popularity as his military experience, being "unacquainted with the arts of war". Sir Peter Warren led the Naval assault force, and Nathaniel Meserve served as lieutenant under Colonel Samuel Moore in New Hampshire's regiment of 500 men. Landing near Louisburg on March 29, 1745, a small force led by Lieutenant William Vaughn, son of New Hampshire Lieutenant Governor Vaughn, managed to destroy the French wine and brandy supply, and captured the ill-defended garrison. For the next few days Lieutenant Meserve directed the construction of sledges to transport cannon over a swamp to an advantageous siege position. Meserve had also been active in providing transports for the troops, and building necessary barracks, breastworks, and bridges."

The operation was considered a success by the seventeenth of June. Pepperell and Warren returned to Boston as heroes. King George awarded baronetcys to both of them. Sir Peter Warren was promoted to admiral, and Governor Shirley and Sir William Pepperell were

commissioned as Colonels in the English Army. The Louisburg capture- even if the Fortress was returned to the France by the terms of the Treaty of Aix-la Chapelle- was the first successful British campaign in North America using colonial troops. Parliament reimbursed the Colony of New Hampshire £ 13,000 for its costs of troops and expenses. The contract for America was a bonus, a reward for services rendered. 2.

Sir William Pepperell wrote to Governor Wentworth on March 13, 1746, announcing that "Sir Peter Warren, in a letter 24 Oct. last wrote me that the Right Honorable Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty had directed him to build four ships of war in New England, two of 44 guns and two of 24." This in itself was no small achievement for Warren, because although the Admiralty were convinced that more ships were needed on the American station, and were equally impressed with the colonial achievement at Louisburg, the Naval Board held a low opinion for American-built ships. They protested that the quality of American timber was poor and prone to rot, that supervision of warship construction at that distance was impossible, and to supply the necessary "King's equipment"- guns, canvas, and iron work- would be difficult and costly. However, Warren prevailed and suggested that the Admiralty send experienced shipwrights to supervise the projects.

In the colonies different problems arose. New York and Connecticut, designated for the 24 gun ships, declined the contracts, and shipbuilder Benjamin Hallowell of Boston opted to build one of the smaller frigates in

Massachusetts. One historian speculates that Hallowell, with an active market for commercial vessels, did not wish to undertake the time-consuming larger project and found the prospect of trying to collect from the Navy Board, after the ship was completed, unattractive. In New Hampshire, the proposal met with success: Sir William Pepperell accepted the contract and in turn let it out to Colonel Meserve. <sup>3</sup>.

In his letter to Governor Wentworth, Sir William wrote that he had "been treating with Colonel Nathaniel Meserve" about the building of the 44, and requested that Wentworth name "three men of probity, skill, and judgement in shipbuilding" to estimate a fair price. Wentworth duly appointed Joshua Fierce, Jotham Odiorne, and Mark Hunking Wentworth to evaluate the business. After conferring, Meserve agreed to build America for £ 9/ ton. This began a steady correspondence between Pepperell and the Admiralty, Sir William writing to assure them that Meserve was using the best materials, "the quality of timber and plank is a point I have very much at heart". The Admiralty sent plans and directions and honored Pepperell's drafts when the vessel was building. Evidently Sir William bankrolled the project, paying for materials, wages, and the equipment not locally available. Undoubtedly, as general contractor, Pepperell charged commissions on materials, billing the Navy Board for the total amount. <sup>4</sup>.

After a year of foot-dragging the Navy Board dispatched supervisors, Robert White to Boston, and Henry Wallace to Portsmouth. Work had already begun before they arrived,

and Sir William had assumed responsibility. He reported to the Lords of Admiralty that he inspected the work twice a week before the official inspectors arrived, climbing in his decorated eight oared barge, to be rowed three miles up the harbor from his Kittery plantation by liveried black slaves, "to see that the timber was sound and well-worked." 5.

Meserve began work on America in 1747, and on May 4, 1749 she was launched into the Piscataqua amidst the conviviality and festivities attendant to the occasion. Apparently the builder had contributed to America's design. According to the Navy Board "establishment"- specifications- for 44 gun ships in 1745, at 139'1" on the lower deck, America was six feet too long. Sir William had to justify the increased expense for the larger vessel, and attributed the increased length to the advice of Admiral Charles Knowles, military Governor of Louisburg. Howard I. Chapelle, in his History of the American Sailing Navy illuminates the Admiralty procedure which possibly accounts for the divergence from the "establishment." The Admiralty often supplied the builder with a contract design " for guidance only." Usually this plan or model was based on the "establishment" of the time or on a plan of a previously built ship. However, such a plan was not binding on the builder if he could produce a ship "equal or superior" to the specifications. The Admiralty agent, or supervisor, was authorized to approve or disallow the builder's proposed changes. Often the Admiralty had no plan of a ship-as-built, and when a successful sailing ship docked for repairs, a careful plan would be made of her lines and details. Thus, the contract

Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.

design had little detail;" whereas the plan made from a ship was well detailed, showing carving, outboard detail, and sometimes a very complete deck arrangement superimposed on the contract design." Chapelle writes that America's extra length "indicates that her American builder was allowed to take liberties with the contract design." If Henry Wallace came to Portsmouth after construction was already underway, and Sir William's pro-tem function suggests that this was the case, then the length difference was a matter between Pepperell, Meserve, and possibly Admiral Knowles. At any rate, the increase meant more money for the contractor and the builder. 6.

Both Inspector Wallace and America's captain on her maiden voyage were in Portsmouth from 1748 until her sailing for England in 1750 according to records of St. John's Masonic Lodge in Portsmouth. In fact, two meetings of the lodge were held aboard America in October and December of 1749. Along with "Wallis" and Captain Henry Barnesley, four others present at those meetings were probably among America's crew: William Smith, Henry Pascal, William Jennes and William Campbell. Captain Barnesley, an officer in the Royal Navy since 1740, was also a cartographer and had experience in naval architecture. In 1760, after Barnesley's death, a map of the sea coast of New England from Cape Cod to Casco Bay was published under his name in London. A copy of this map is in the Moffat-Ladd House in Portsmouth. Barnesley's signature is also to be found on a draught of the Ship Rattan of 1742. 7.

America sailed for England in the fall of 1750, "loaded with spars and naval stores and under convoy, having only one tier of guns mounted." Also included in America's cargo was a Micmac Indian bark canoe. Upon arrival in England the canoe was presented to Lord Anson who in turn had a <sup>scale</sup> plan drawn by Chatham dockyard architects. According to Howard Chapelle in The Bark Canoes and Skin Boats of North America, the plan "probably represents a war canoe, since a narrow, sharp ended canoe is shown. The bottom, neither flat nor fully rounded, is a rounded V-shape: this may indicate a canoe intended for coastal waters." The Admiralty plan is evidently the earliest and most accurate drawing of a North American bark canoe. 8.

After her arrival in England in November, 1750, under the command of Captain Barnesly, America joins the earlier American-built warships in the fog bank of uncertainty prompted by inaccurate recording and downright wishful thinking. Pepperell's earliest biographer, for example, claims that "America was esteemed one of the best frigates in the Royal Navy." Another historian, Walter H. Fentress, finds reports in James's Naval History, vol. 1, that America saw action in 1796, commanded by Captain John Blankett, and that America was one of the ships in the squadron of Vice-Admiral Sir George Keith Elphinstone at the surrender of the Dutch fleet under Rear Admiral Englebertus Lucas. Still another scholar,



Howard T. Oedel, in his 1960 Phd. dissertation, Portsmouth: The Role of the Provincial Capital, wrote " America served the Royal Navy well, despite her bad publicity, and became a proud part of the French fleet after her capture during the American Revolution." <sup>9.</sup> In contrast to these glowing accounts, Commodore Henry Edward Preble, in his research of Vessels built in Portsmouth, found only one mention of America in Navy lists of September 1755 and May 1756. She was designated "in ordinary at Chatham"- the modern term is "in mothballs". " America was probably not durable," wrote Preble, " and was made of green wood." Howard Chapelle projects still another scenario. Boston, a smaller ship than America, launched in Boston by builder Benjamin Hallowell in 1748, was taken into the Royal Navy but proved to be unserviceable very quickly- most likely due to rot- and broken up in 1752. At that time America was renamed Boston. Chapelle considers such a listing in Charnock's 1800 History of Marine Architecture to be in error in the light of Portsmouth tradition and records; yet, the Boston nee America was also declared unserviceable on September 13, 1757 and was sold to private interests for L 367. <sup>10.</sup>

A third America built at this time - the first was a merchant vessel taken into service in 1650- at Wells Stanton, Thames, of 60 guns and weighing 1248 tons may account for some of the historical confusion. It appears in the light of this investigation that the Portsmouth-built America fulfilled the expectations of the Navy Board and was short-lived because of decay. <sup>11.</sup>

As a postscript Chapelle writes, "American -built ships did not stand alone in respect to having short lives: the average life of ships in the Royal Navy during the colonial period was only about ten years. Only a few ships served more than this time without extensive repairs or rebuilding. It appears that insufficient attention was given to seasoning timber and to the ventilation of ships." 12.

As the official records of America end in 1757, so the men connected with her were short lived. Captain Barnesley was drowned in a hurricane off Louisburg in 1757 while in command of HMS Tillbury, Nathaniel Meserve rose to some prominence in 1756 as the commander of the Crown Point expedition. As officer in charge of Fort Edward, Meserve organised three companies of Rangers led by Robert Rogers, John Stark and William Stark. For these and other services Meserve received a commemorative bowl from the Earl of Loudon, Commander in Chief of His Majesties Forces in North America. On a subsequent campaign to re-capture Louisburg, both Meserve and his son contracted smallpox and succumbed. Sir William Pepperell, whose estates stretched all the way from his home in Kittery to the Saco River, lay in state for a week at his funeral in 1759. According to social annals, everything including the pictures in his house, and even the pews in the meeting house were draped in black. "Two oxen were roasted for the funeral feast, and bread, beer and spirits were given to the common people; while rich wines and choice viands covered the tables for the more distinguished guests. "

The Funeral prosession was the largest ever recorded in the Province. Yet such were the vicissitudes of the time that Sir William's grandsons were only kept from the poor house by the bounty of strangers. 13.

The story of the America would end here, except for local interest and some material evidence. Like the earlier Falkland and Bedford, no plans of America have been found. However, in 1860, Mrs Elizabeth Langdon Elyyn, daughter of ex-Governor of New Hampshire and Portsmouth merchant John Langdon, presented a scale Admiralty model of America to the Portsmouth Athenaeum. The model, constructed of native black walnut, and judged to be an authentic "Admiralty type" of the middle eighteenth century by Smithsonian experts allows some comments about America's design. The model demonstrates a "straight rise of floor and easy bilges" which was the state of the art in fast sailing ships of the time. According to Howard Chapelle, who examined the model in the 1960s, America can be compared to both an "enlarged Prince Edward, built by Henry Bird on the Thames in 1745", and to the Serapis, taken by John Paul Jones during the American Revolution in 1779. Interesting in itself as an artifact illuminating modeling techniques of a bygone age, the model could have been made either as a commemorative award for Colonel Meserve, or as a guide for the builders. 14.

During the Kennedy administration , a telephone call from the White House to the Smithsonian inspired new interest in America. The caller proposed a permanent display in the White House of full-rigged ship models

that played a role in America's maritime history. Although the project never transpired, Smithsonian Restorer James F. Knowles traveled to Portsmouth, measured the model America, and eventually restored her for a three year exhibition in Washington, D.C. According to Knowles, the model of the HMS America, now back in its Portsmouth home, "is the earliest known Admiralty type model constructed in the colonies." Just how accurately the model reflects the America as built, however, remains an open question. 15.

Thus a few widely scattered documents, historical reports both accurate and fantastic, and the model whose reflection of the actual is unprovable are the remains of America left to history. Yet her primary importance, perhaps, lies not in any factual element of her construction or career, but more in her function as a focal point of investigation for the early political, military, and maritime history of Portsmouth and the individuals whose lives and attention coincided with her construction.

Notes to the Text

1. The following works discuss the early Portsmouth-built warships in varying degrees of length and accuracy. Three works by the late Howard I. Chapelle, dean emeritus of American shipbuilding history and for many years curator of Transportation at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, are essential for a general understanding of colonial shipbuilding design and construction: The History of American Sailing Ships, New York, 1935, 1-43; The History of the American Sailing Navy: The Ships And Their Development, New York, 1949, 1-51; The Search For Speed Under Sail, 1700-1855, New York, 1967, 3-82. Joseph Goldenburg's general survey, Colonial Shipbuilding, Newport News, Va., 1976, 108-116, contains a chapter on all colonial warships, as well as an explanation of the relation between the Admiralty and the Royal Navy Board. George Henry Preble, Naval Historian, explores the origins of the Portsmouth Navy yard and the early warships built in the area in the History of the United States Navy Yard at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, Washington, D.C., 1892, 10-11, and "Ships Built at Portsmouth", New England Historical and Genealogical Register, XXII, 393-403, typescript is MSS file at the Portsmouth Athenaeum. Walter H. Fentress, in Centennial

History of the Navy Yard at Portsmouth, 1775-1875, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1876, 9-11, records the early ships in the area, but tends to be inaccurate in detailing their later careers. JJ Colledge's Ships of the Royal Navy: An Historical Index, New York, 1969, 2 vols. 12-13, 39, 69, 202, presents records from the British Admiralty Office.

2. Howard T. Oedel, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: The Role of the Provincial Capital, Phd. dissertation, Boston University, 1960, 420.

Nathaniel Adams, Annals of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, 1825, 174-178.

William Saltonstall, Ports of Piscataqua, Cambridge, Mass., 1941, 31-34.

Preble, Navy Yard, 11.

Goldenburg, 110.

3. Adams, 178.

Goldenburg, 111.

Preble, 10.

Saltonstall, 33.

4. Usher Parsons, The Life of Sir William Pepperell, Bart., Boston, 1855, 161.

5. Byron Fairchild, Messrs. Wm. Pepperell: Merchants at Piscataqua, Ithaca, New York, 1954, 182.

6. Ibid., 182

Chapelle, American Sailing Navy, 21.

7. "Curator's Research", America 1749, file in Mss. drawer, Portsmouth Athenaeum.

8. Ibid.

Edwin Tappan Adney and Howard F. Chapelle, The Bark Canoes  
Courtesy of the Portsmouth Athenaeum, Portsmouth, N.H.

And Skin Boats of North America, Washington, D.C., 1964, 21.

9. Oedel, 665.

Fentress, 11.

Usher, 162.

10. Preble, "Vessels", 396.

Chapelle, American Sailing Navy, 47.

11. Colledge, 39.

12. Chapelle, 47.

13. Louis Clinton Hatch, Maine, A History, Somersworth, N.H.,

1973, New York, 1919, 809.

14. Chapelle, Sailing Ships, 32, Search for Speed, 77.

15. James F. Knowles, "Colonial Ship Model HMS America",

Nautical Research Journal, 223-230, copy in America, 1749

file in MSS. Portsmouth Athenaeum.

