THE AMERICA - 1782

The seventy-four gun America, the United States' first and only sailing ship of the line, represented to many people the pinnacle of American shipbuilding ability and technological achievement during the Revolution. Launched from Langdon's Island in 1782 by the same builders and crews responsible for the thirty-two gun frigate Raleigh and the twenty-gun Ranger, the America, displacing 1982 tons, was three times the size of the Raleigh, and the largest warship built in Colonial America. Her cannon, thirty eighteen-pounders, thirty-one twelve-pounders, and fourteen long nine-pounders, mounted on three decks, were the heaviest and most complete array of firepower ever assembled by the Continental Navy. America's crew of 626 men was four times greater than Ranger's complement. She was the eighteenth century equivalent of a modern battleship. [1] Yet for all her symbolic greatness, the America was in some ways a complete failure, an embarassment to both her builders and to the Continental Congress. Her construction, an on-again-off-again proposition, caused principally by an empty treasury, dragged on for five years. During the construction period America's costs, multiplied by a rampant inflation, grew to well over a million dollars, more than twelve times the cost of

the Raleigh. When she was finally launched, still without spars, rigging and much of her interior joinerwork, America was functionally obosolete. She was presented to the French in November, 1782, as a gesture of appreciation for their aid to the Revolutionary cause, and also to replace a French ship, the Magnifique, that had sunk in Boston Harbor. Eight months more passed before the America was rigged, equipped and ready to sail for France. By that time, the war was over. In 1786, just four years after her launch, surveyors found that the America was riddled with dry rot, and the French Ministry of Marine ordered her to be broken up. [2]

From this historical perspective, rather than being a way point in the progression of American shipbuilding technology, the construction of America illustrates the limits of Naval shipbuilding capacities in the era, as well as the economic effects of a protracted war on maritime industry. From a local perspective, the details of the America's construction indicate a decline in the efficiency, organization, and ability of Portsmouth shipwrights and the Langdon shipyard.

In November 1776, while shipyard crews throughout the seaboard colonies labored to fit out the thirteen frigates ordered in 1775, the Continental Congress resolved to build three seventy-four gun ships of the line and an additional number of smaller warships. Congress designated building sites for the seventy-fours in Boston, Philadelphia, and Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Work begun on the Boston ship in 1777 was soon abandoned. The seventy-four scheduled for Philadelphia was probably never started, as that city was in British hands by the summer of 1777. Only the Portsmouth-built America was ever launched. [3]

John Langdon heard about the seventy-four gun ships when he received the contract for the Ranger in the fall of 1776. He expressed his eagerness to obtain the contract in several letters written to William Whipple, New Hampshire's Marine Committee member, and Langdon's contact in Congress. "I understand that some large ones are to be built," Langdon wrote in November, "pray let me have orders to cutt Timber as soon as may be." Langdon wrote again in December, "I observe you mention a seventy-four gun ship, but why have I not orders to cutt Timber." Citing a potential two months postal delay, Langdon decided "as a venture, to cutt and hall three or four hundred tons of Timber, more than I want for this ship [the Ranger]." The additional "1200 tonns or more" that Langdon estimated would be necessary for a ship the size of America, would have to be paid for "in cash down, or it may as well never come." [4] Although Langdon's credit arrangements with merchants and suppliers as well as shipbuilders and artisans had functioned successfully to build the Raleigh, Ranger and a number of privateers, this credit was now stretched beyond its limits. Langdon needed cash to continue, both for the shipyard payroll, and to pay for timber, spars and planks from the Piscataqua hinterlands. Construction of the earlier ships had also exhausted local supplies of iron, cordage, and canvas. Responding to a query from Boston Naval contractor Thomas Cushing in January, Langdon remarked, "am undetermined how to proceed, cannot form any idea where the materials are to come from." [5]

True to John Langdon's prediction, William Whipple's letter of formal authorization did not reach Portsmouth until March. With it came specifications for the seventy-four and Whipple's admonition, "It is not desired that the Building of her should be so hurrid as to be any disadvantage to the ship." [6]

doubtful that either Whipple or Langdon appreciated the irony of the remark in retrospect.

Like the Raleigh and the Ranger, the America's designer remains a mystery; although Portsmouth tradition credits William Hackett, the cousin of Master Builder James Hackett. Beyond the certainty that William worked as a carpenter on the America in 1777, I have been able to find no evidence that suggests he designed the seventy-four, or that he was connected with the Raleigh and the Ranger in any capacity. Some historians consider that a draught of a Revolutionary seventy-four gun ship preserved in the National Archives is the work of Philadelphia ship constructor Josiah Humphreys. Yet a half model of a seventy-four at the Independence Hall in Philadelphia, which was definitely Humphrey's work, disagrees in detail with the Archive's plan. Dimensions of the America, recorded by John Paul Jones, are similar to the plan, but they do not correspond precisely. The chart makes clear the differences.

	Jones' dimensions	Archive's plan
Length on the gun deck	182'6"	180'
Length on the keel	150'	147'
Breadth or beam	50'6"	49'
Depth in hull	23'	19'

Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that the Portsmouth shipwrights received an official draught from the Continental Congress. We can only speculate that someone in the Portsmouth area had both the expertise and experience to loft and mold a ship that was larger than any attempted in the Colonies before. Variations in the America's dimensions from the

specifications sent by Congress were, like the Raleigh, the result of local talent and practice. [7]

Workmen, under the direction of James Hackett, James Hill, and Stephen Paul, cut, hewed, and hauled timber for the Ranger and the America during the winter and early spring of 1777. In April, just one month before the launch of the Ranger, the keel of the America was laid near the northwest end of Langdon's Island, and construction proceeded. Labor accounts, returned to Langdon every six months by Yard Superintendent Tobias Lear, indicate that work progressed steadily, if not with the concentration of labor that accompanied the building of the Raleigh, until the end of March 1778. Langdon had continually prodded the Marine Committee for cash to pay the workmen's wages, and in April the Committee responded "So great and frequent have been the demands on the treasury, for that necessary article, that it hath been out of our power to furnish the Navy Board agreeable to our wishes." With that, and the expressed hope that money would become available when the priorities of the Continental Army were satisfied, all work on the seventy-four was to stop immediately, "and measures taken to preserve the Timber." [8]

Two months later, the Marine Committee reversed its decision. "We are determined to resume this ship," they wrote, "and you will now employ men immediately ... to finish that business which we expect will be conducted upon the best and most OEconomical terms for the public." Simultaneously, a Congressional resolve directed the modification of the America from a seventy-four to a fifty-six gun ship, with two batteries of twenty-eight twenty-four-pounders on the lower gun deck, and twenty-eight

eighteen-pounders on the upper. For money, materials, and assistance, Langdon was to apply to the Navy Board in Boston where privateering activity, and the subsequent condemnation and auction of enemy prize ships, had supposedly revived the economy. [9]

Work on the America continued through the last months of 1778, and according to Tobias Lear's bills for "carpenters and common labourers on the 74," through most of 1779. Early in 1780, Langdon informed the Marine Committee that his credit was completely exhausted and, unless Congress provided money for wages and materials, work on the America would stop. At this point, Philadelphia financier Robert Morris, who was taking more and more interest in Naval affairs, determined to finish the America, to preserve Continental prestige if nothing else. Reinstating the original plan for the seventy-four gun ship, Morris urged Langdon to continue construction. There was no money available from Congress; the Continental Treasury had been drained dry, Langdon was assured that John Bradford, Naval Agent at Boston, but could supply funds. Bradford claimed to have banked over £ 500,000 in the Navy Board's name from privateering profits. Exhorting Langdon to "not suffer the ship totally to perish," Morris arranged to have iron and coal shipped to Portsmouth from Virginia, and he requested supplies and assistance from the New Hampshire Government. Morris particularly wanted the America completed in the summer of 1780, in expectation of the arrival of a French squadron, which would be bringing her cannon. "Let me beseech you," Morris wrote to Langdon in July, "as many men be employed in this business as can work to advantage and every nerve be exerted to complete the Hull of the

74 with all possible speed." [10]

Whether Bradford's claim of prize money existed more in the telling than in substance is not known. However, a year later the America was still unfinished, and the Marine Committee, unable to either finance the project, or to force Langdon to continue with his personal resources, authorized diplomat John Jay, in May 1781, to sell the semi-built hull and extra timber to Spain. Robert Morris objected, and, citing the probable loss of American reputation if the ship were sold, wrote to the President of Congress in June, relaying a report from Langdon that "the 74-gun ship now on the stocks at that place [Portsmouth] must be shut in and launched this summer." Morris proposed, that instead of selling America, she be sent to France for completion and then serve in the Continental Navy. Morris also suggested that a special commander be appointed to oversee her completion. [11]

Congress responded quickly. On June 23 they authorized Morris to devote his energies to readying the America for sea, and three days later, appointed John Paul Jones her commander. Morris in turn sent his secretary, John Brown, to Boston to transfer prize money from Bradford's account to Portsmouth as it was needed, wrote encouraging letters to Langdon, and pressed the State of New Hampshire to supply beef to feed the shipyard workers. He also supplied the solution to Langdon's cash-flow problem. Langdon wrote early in June, thanking Morris for his attention and outlining both the local situation and a proposition.

> I see no prospect of my being able to borrow sufficient money to put her in the Water. Could I get sufficient money to pay the Carpenters, I would launch her unfinished, to save her bottom. My private Timber, Iron, Provisions, Rum, &c to the amounht of One thousand Pounds had money on the credit of the Bank, I would advance myself Whatever is done must be done immediately as the Season is far advanced, and if any measures are taken I should be glad to

> be informed of it speedily, otherways my shipyard must be employed in other ways and I fear the 74 must be lost to the Continent.[12]

In short, Langdon proposed to advance money from his personal account in exchange for shares in the newly organized Bank of North America. Langdon's veiled threat of employing his shipyard "in other ways" was not lost on Morris, who accepted Langdon's idea and subscribed him for "five shares, equal to two thousand dollars."[13]

John Paul Jones arrived in Portsmouth on August 31, 1781 and resumed his lodgings at the Widow Purcell's. Jones had expected to take command of a nearly complete ship of the line. Instead he found himself with a ship "not much planked above the bilges, only deck beams, the work suffered for lack of iron, no spars were ready, and no provision for sails or rigging." The work force was minimal and Langdon was apparently unwilling to hire more workers until he received financial assurance from Congress.

While he was waiting, Jones apparently spent much of his time attending Portsmouth social affairs, dancing until dawn, and impressing the young ladies with his French Order of Merit, a medal he displayed more confidently in Portsmouth with its Royalist and aristocratic traditions than he dared in more republican areas.[14] He also planned the sculptures for America, and, fortunately, described them for posterity:

> The figurehead was a female crowned with laurels. Her right arm and forefinger pointing to Heaven, appealing to that High Tribunal for the Justice of the American Cause. On the On the left arm was a buckle with blue ground and thirteen stars. The legs and feet of the figure were covered here and there with wreaths of smoke, to represent the dangers and difficulties of war. On the stem, under the windows of the great cabin appeared two laye figures in bas relief representing tyranny and oppression, bound and biting the ground with the cap of liberty on a pole above their heads. On the back part of tne

> the starboard quarter gallery was a large figure of Neptune and on the Larboard gallery, a large figure of Mars. Over the window of the great cabin on the highest part of the stern, was a large medallion, on which was a figure representing wisdom surrounded by danger with the Bird of Athens over her head. [15]

Eventually Jones managed to hire skilled labor "on terms of credit which I was authorized by the Honourable John Langdon to arrange in the name of Congress on his personal security." One of the reasons for the America's unfinished state, according to Jones, was that James Hackett had never seen such a large ship and was unable to make the calculations for the necessary scantlings on the size of the iron fastenings required. Jones wrote, however, that "the leading shipwright, Mr. William Hauscom, who worked on the Alliance ... took up these questions with more address than the others and soon relieved me of the details." [16] Jones also directed changes in the America's plan. The mainmast was stepped further aft to increase her windward ability. Both the quarterdeck and the forecastle were lengthened. The waist was then carriied flush with the upper deck sheer. Broad gangways were constructed on either side of the waist level with the quarterdecks and forecastle, and a low bulwark placed all around to stop grapeshot. Workers reduced the size of the stern gallery and doubled the bow and stern planking to reduce the effects of a raking fire. Jones was proud of these changes, that he claimed gave the America a descriptive appearance. "Though the largest 74 gun ship in the world, [the America] had, when the lower battery was sunk, the air of a delicate frigate - from a mile away no one would realize her strenghth." [17]

Unlike the Raleigh, which had been kept from sailing for a full year for lack of armament, cannon were available for the America.

Her eighteen-pounders, originally cast for the Bon Homme Richard, had arrived that spring from France on the frigate Alliance. Morris' secretary, John Brown, obtained the twelve-pounders and long nines from a captured English ship and a condemned French ship at Newport. Jones expected problems in mounting the cannon, but the timely arrival of a Mr. Gardner, an experienced gunnery technician and personal friend of Jones, solved that difficulty. "Much of the good conditon when the America was finished was due to his skill and diligence," wrote Jones. [18]

As the America progressed slowly, Jones became impatient, and he began to complain. There was a scarcity of paint and oil. There was no cordage for rigging, lines and cables. Jones complained about having to use second-hand materials, and about having only an eight-oared pinnace to be rowed about instead of a ceremonial "barge" that befitted his station. He complained about having to use his own funds to pay guards and workers. But fundamentally, Jones blamed Langdon for the delays. Commenting on the lack of achievement by the Continental Navy, Jones cited the great public expense, the cheating of seamen, and that the only advantage seemed to be for the agents. In a not particualrly subtle reference to Langdon, Jones wrote "[the situation] allowed a few of the actors = perhaps not the first in merit or abilities to purchase farms &c." [19]

In May 1782, out of money once more, Langdon threatened to dismiss all the workers. A timely remittance of £10,000 from Robert Morris kept a small crew working. However, this did not appease Jones who considered that Langdon was deliberately obstructing the progress of construction. In a letter to Morris, written partially in cipher, presumably so Langdon

would not be able to read it, Jones charged Langdon with diverting public material to private use, charging Congress an exhorbitant rent for "that little barren Clod" where the shipyard was located, culling the best timber for his own ships, and paying his workers in goods at inflated prices instead of the money sent by Morris. [20]

Although the changes are impossible to substantiate from this temporal distance, Langdon's business activities and economic circumstances suggest the possibility that not all of Jones' accusations were simply the expression of his impatience and frustration with the delays. Langdon was deeply involved with privateering, for example, having built several at the island shipyard, including Portsmouth and Hampden, and owning shares in others. He was criticized for this apparent conflict of interest by his peers, including William Whipple, Captain Thomas Thompson of the Raleigh, and Mesheach Ware, President of New Hampshire. Whether Continental funds had financed these ventures is another question. Similarly, in his capacity as Naval Prize Agent for Portsmouth, an appointment he had enthusiastically solicited in 1777, Langdon was able to purchase captured ships and cargoes at low prices, and sell later as demand and prices rose. While it is evident that Langdon mixed public and private interests in the buying and selling of prizes, to hold him accountable for the inflation that followed the collapse of the Continental dollar in 1779 is impossible. Real scarcities and economic hardships were more the results of disruptions in trade and the costs of war than effects of individual profiteers. [21]

Paul Jones also accused Langdon of using green wood and "short plank

in the gun deck" of the America. When he was queried about this by Robert Morris, Langdon furiously denied the charges and offered his resignation. Morris found himself in the middle of a feud between Jones and Langdon. Their mutual antipathy, begun years before during the construction of the Ranger, had escalated to the point where it threatened the completion of the America.

To Jones Morris wrote, "He [Langdon] is a respectable gentleman, his Country confides in him and you must not listen to every thing you hear. Public men are tooo much Subjected to Abuse in Republics especially if they have anything to do with Money Matters." Mollifying Langdon took more effort.

> With respect to the Coldness between Captain Jones and you I must sincerely Wish it were done away. Harmony between Gentlemen engaged in the same cause and particularly whilst employed on the same object is absolutely necessary if they mean to promote and Serve the public interest. And as there does not appear any other reason for your desiring to resign the care of her than the difference in Opinion which sometimes happens between Captain Jones and you, I cannot by Any means consent to that Resignation.[22]

Neither Jones' nor Langdon's reactions to Morris' attempts at reconciliation are recorded, but Langdon's accounts from 1781 on reflect a declining financial interest in the warship.

During the spring of 1782, work continued, under Jones' direction, with Langdon's personal credit guaranteeing the worker's wages. There was no extra cash however, and Jones used his own funds for workers and watchmen when he suspected sabotage. Several times, during foggy nights, longboats with muffled oars were heard approaching the shipyard. Jones mounted a guard and even stood watch himself. At one time the boats were fired upon without any effect.[23]

By the end of June, the America had progressed to a state that allowed Jones to celebrate, and he held a spectacle on board the ship - still in her building stocks - to honor the birth of the French Dauphine. After a twenty-one gun salute was exchanged between the fort and the ship, thirteen successive toasts were declared, with a fresh salute after each one. All day long until midnight the America kept up a rolling fire from her musketry and swivels. After dark the ship was decorated with lanterns and the festivities continued with fireworks. At midnight America fired a final twenty-one gun salute. Jones repeated the spectacle on the fourth of July to the delight of crowds lining the banks of the Piscataqua.[24] Later that summer an event occured in Boston Harbor that changed America's destiny. On August 31st, a French fleet of thirteen ships of the line and three frigates arrived at King's Roads, Boston's Outer Harbor. A local pilot was leading the fleet up the channel against head winds when three ships of the line, each drawing over twenty-five feet. went aground between Lovell's and Gallop's Islands. Two of them managed to work their way off, but the Magnifique listed so badly in the ebb tide that she began to break up. The next few days mariners managed to salvage much of her equipment and rig, but the ship was a complete loss.[25]

The Continental Congress, when they heard about the sinking, were still without funds, and decided to use this oppotunity to solve the problem of the America. They decided to present the America to France to replace Magnifique. Early in September Congress resolved that, "being desirous of testifying on this occasion to his Majesty the sense they entertain of his generous exertions in behalf of the United States,"

and ordered the Agent of Marine to turn the America over to the Chevalier de la Luzerne for French Royal Service. Although the America was the tenth ship that had been offered to Jones and then taken away, he accepted the Congressional decision gracefully. In October, as the builders and work crews prepared to launch America the French commander dispatched three ships of the line to Portsmouth under the command of Capitaine de Vaisseau Le Comte Rigaud de Vaudreuill. [26]

To launch the America presented a particular challenge to Jones and the builders. The warship was twice the length of any earlier ship launched from the shipyard and a ledge running from the western end of the island nearly halfway across the Piscataqua presented an acute angle to the America's keel. As the river was only three hundred yards wide at this point, Jones and the crews rigged a complicated system of lines and anchors to control the launch. The first attempt was unsuccessful, but Jones described the second, on November 5, 1782, in his inimitable way, casting himself as the central figure.

> When everything was prepared, Captain Jones stood on the highest point of the brow or gangway that ascended from the ground to the brow of the ship. From that position he could perfectly see the motion of the ship, and determining by a signal the instant when it was proper to let go one or both of the anchors which were hung at the bows, and slip the end of the cable that depended on the anchor fixed in the ground on the Island. The operation succeeded perfectly to his wish, and to the admiration of a large assembly of spectators. [27]

On the same day Jones presented the America to Capitaine Vaisseau de Marcarty Macteigne, the former commander of the ill-fated Magnifique.

Yet, what had been given? When Jones heard about the Congressional resolve to present America to the French, he had written to Governor Morris. "Are we in a position to make presents?" he asked, "If we were I should be against offering to give a friend an empty eggshell." America still lacked masts, spars, rigging, and much of her interior partitions and furniture. Jones left for Philadelphia a week later, but it was eight months more before the French were able to fit America out with the gear and rig from the Magnifique and sail her home. By that time the British had surrendered at Yorktown and the war was over.[28]

The America, although she pleased the French as a gesture of appreciation, was not of practical value. She was too broad of beam and too shallow to keep her place in the battle line with French ships of similar size. A survey in Brest in 1786 found the America riddled with dry rot and stated that the timber of North America is not good for ship construction, "except for the higher parts of the superstructure." Soon after, the French Ministry of Marine ordered her broken up.[29]

In 1776, the America had been an inspired idea, a flagship for the infant American Navy that would compete in size and armament with England's most powerful warships. A symbol of defiance and determination, the America would also demonstrate to the world the strength of the Continental Navy and the abilities of American craftsmen and shipbuilders. Six years later, when the America finally slid into the Piscataqua River, she was incomplete, unserviceable and unwanted. Rather than representing American Naval power and capacity, the construction of the America illuminated the negative aspects of defense contracting. Congressional indecision and

vacillations, conflicting priorities, and deficit financing plagued the project from its conception, to say nothing of profiteering, local conflicts of interest, and the hostility between Jones and Langdon. Materials were expensive and either inaccessible or unavailable. Militia and Continental Army quotas had reduced the numbers of the Portsmouth labor force. Inflation only made the situation worse. And finally, the very size of the America apparently demanded a technical expertise beyond the capacity of local builders. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the America is that she was finished at all. Yet she was completed, owing as much to an ideological determination and ambition as to material and technical capacity, and experiential knowledge of the difficulties attending her construction undoubtedly proved invaluable to the later development of naval shipbuilding and naval policy.

NOTES TO THE TEXT

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