

November 2010, Number 6

Compatriots, in this newsletter, there are two articles.

The first article on John Peck Rathbun was written by Compatriot Henry Anthony Lewis Brown and given as a speech at a John Peck Rathbun Chapter#4 at the Kentish Guards Armory.

The second article was furnished to us by Compatriot and Past State President Irving Harris Tucker. This article was written by Eagle Scout Alexander Tasi for the essay contest from the State of Florida SAR to compete on the National SAR level.

I hope that you enjoy them both.

John W. Adams
Secretary

Please mark your calendar for the Annual Meeting on February 12, 2011.

John Peck Rathbun

Born in Exeter in 1746, he grew to manhood in Rhode Island and was then apprenticed to his uncle, Thomas H. Peck, of Boston, who sent him to sea on a merchant ship. He sailed to various parts including Nova Scotia, where he learned of the disposition and habits of the British fishing fleet, useful information in wartime. Although he married a Boston Tory's daughter, Polly Leigh, Rathbun felt no affection for the British, who had roughed him up at Machias, Maine, in the summer of 1775. In November, he joined the Continental Navy as a lieutenant and sailed to Philadelphia to begin his illustrious career as an American naval warrior.

This career can be divided into three parts, service as a lieutenant mostly under

Captain John Paul Jones, commanding officer of Continental armed sloop *Providence*, and captain of the converted merchantman *Queen of France* and subsequent misfortunes. Highlights of his tour as a lieutenant include the following:

- Helped seize Nassau, New Providence Island, Bahamas, in March 1776.
- On Board sloop *Providence* during the fight with the British *Glasgow* in April 1776, but his captain, John Hazard, would not engage.
- Remained on *Providence* as John Paul Jones took command. Hazard relieved and court-martialed. Under Jones helped capture enemy brigantine

Britania in August 1776. Escaped from British 26 gun *Solebay* on 1 September 1776. Captured brigantine *Sea Nymph* (rum, sugar, ginger, oil and wine) on the 6th. During October 1776 in Canadian waters broke up the British fishing fleet. Returning to Narragansett Bay, Jones was given command of the ship *Alfred* and left sloop *Providence*, taking Rathbun and fifty men with him.

Jones and Rathbun on *Alfred*, with *Providence* in company, returned to Canadian waters in November, where they captured a large enemy merchant ship, *Mellish*, with 10,000 uniforms for Burgoyne's army plus weapons and equipment in her cargo holds. Took the enemy brig *Active*. Still in November captured three enemy colliers and the privateer *John*. Attacked by the British frigate *Milford*, which retook two of the colliers and the *John*. Soon after returning to Narragansett Bay in December 1776, *Alfred* and *Providence* along with the rest of the small American fleet were blockaded by the British Navy, which had sailed into the Bay to land troops, who seized Aquidneck Island and Conanicut.

Jones and Rathbun, who were about the same age, traveled together south to Philadelphia to discuss their future with the Marine Committee of congress. William Ellery, Rhode Island delegate, wrote that "...I believe the most of the success Capt. Jones has had is owing to (Rathbun's) Valour and Good conduct." Congress commissioned Rathbun Captain in the continental Navy on 19 April 1777 and assigned him as commanding officer of the Continental armed sloop *Providence*.

Highlights of Rathbun's tour as captain of *Providence* include the following:

The sloop escaped from Narragansett Bay in April 1777 and in June put into New Bedford, where Rathbun took over

the command from the wounded Jonathan Pitcher.

The new captain had the ship repaired and recruited men to bring the crew up to strength, aided by the lure of prize money. Sailing from New Bedford in August, Rathbun soon encountered the large armed merchant ship *Mary*, which he tried unsuccessfully to board. In the Gulf Stream, *Providence* came upon a ghost ship with a missing rudder and no one aboard except a small dog. The sloop's crew removed the cargo of French clothing and the dog and burned the ship to prevent the British from salvaging her. Marine Captain John Trevett wrote that "He (the dog) opened all the eyes he had but could not speak our Yankee tongue."

After returning to New Bedford and raising the Stars and Stripes in place of the Grand Union Flag, Rathbun and *Providence* sailed off for Charleston, South Carolina, on Thanksgiving Day 1777. Off the South Carolina shore they fought and captured the enemy privateer *Governor Tryon* and brought her into Georgetown, South Carolina. In Charleston, they heard that ship *Mary*, loaded with a valuable cargo, lay in Nassau harbor. Rathbun and Trevett decided that they would attempt to capture that enemy port a second time.

In late January 1778, *Providence* arrived off New Providence Island to put ashore Captain Trevett and twenty-six Marines, who seized the fort under cover of darkness and turned its guns on the town, threatening to shoot if the British fought back. Helped by American merchant captains and their crews, Trevett and his Marines were able to capture ship *Mary*, fully loaded with rum, molasses, sugar, indigo, coffee and cotton. The Americans took also two sloops, *Washington* and *Tryal* and two schooners. Bucking adverse winds, *Providence* finally sailed into the harbor. Rathbun loaded captured military stores aboard his sloop, placed Trevett in

command of the prize *Mary* and departed victoriously for New England waters.

After three weeks hard sailing both vessels arrived at Nantucket. *Mary* put into Edgartown, Martha's Vinyard, to unload. Rathbun brought *Providence* to New Bedford for refitting. Bitter arguments arose with the local continental agent over prize money. Trevett left *Providence* in anger and refused to release the *Mary's* goods for sale. At sea again in August 1778 Rathbun and *Providence* closed with a British transport carrying 200 Highland infantrymen and were repulsed. In September a British landing party destroyed *Mary's* cargo, which had been transported from Edgartown to New Bedford. This action, which deprived the crew of their prize money as well as Trevett, resulted from the abortive American effort to regain Aquidneck Island and Newport during the summer of 1778.

In mid-November, after struggling to resupply *Providence*, Rathbun put to sea from Boston. He took a Quebec schooner loaded with flour. On Christmas Day he captured the brigantine *Chance*, loaded with rum and sugar. In the next two weeks, he took three more prizes. When Rathbun and *Providence* returned to New Bedford, January 1779, the Rhode Island captain received congratulations from Congress, but, feeling ill and in need of a rest, he asked to be relieved of his command and left the sturdy sloop with which he had been so closely associated since coming aboard as a lieutenant in February 1776.

Some of the major events occurring during Rathbun's last period of service:

- Recovered from his indisposition, Rathbun received command of the old

converted merchantman *Queen of France*, this in the spring of 1779. In company with Commodore Abraham Whipple of Rhode Island in frigate *Providence* (36 guns) and smaller *Ranger*, Rathbun sailed up the Newfoundland coast. There inside a fog bank the three American warships moved into the middle of a large British convoy, taking ten prizes before the accompanying enemy frigates awoke to the danger. Whipple and Rathbun sailed south in December 1779 to Charleston, where their luck ran out. Blockaded by the British fleet, they became prisoners of war when in May 1780 General Benjamin Lincoln surrendered the city, the army and the warships of the Continental Navy trapped there. Both Rhode Islanders were paroled by their captors.

- In the summer of 1781, released from parole, Rathbun took command of the armed brig *Wexford*, 20 guns, 120 men. This vessel he sailed from Boston, headed for the British Isles. Off the Irish coast he ran afoul of the enemy frigate *Recovery*, 32 guns, 220 men. After four hours of combat, Rathbun struck his colors. Confined in a British prison ship, the Rhode Islander dies on 20 June 1782, age 36, an American sea fighter equal to the best.

Let us honor his memory, his contribution to American victory in the Revolution, and his sacrifice of time, comfort, safety and life.