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Preface

In his 1974 book: *Sea of Glory, A Naval History of the American Revolution*, Nathan Miller writes in the preface: “Historians have lingered over the American Revolution, examining in exhaustive detail its military and political aspects, its diplomatic and social overtones. Yet the naval side of the conflict has been almost completely neglected... From the very beginning, the American War of Independence was a maritime conflict. The high-handed manner adopted by the Royal Navy in enforcing the laws against smuggling helped bring on the war... Britain had undisputed control of American waters and should have had no difficulty in snuffing out the rebellion by choking off the tools of war destined for the rebels from abroad. That this was not done was the result of muddled planning and the courage and skill of Yankee seamen.”¹

Intent

The intent of this study is to identify and examine all the claims made by various towns and regions to be the “*Birthplace of the Navy*” or the “*First American Navy*.”

Definitions²

To identify and examine all the claims made by various towns and regions, we need to set parameters and exactly define what we’re looking for. Since we’re studying the “*Birthplace of the Navy*” or the “*First American Navy*” we need to define what a Navy is. Webster’s definition of the word “*Navy*” is “A group of ships...” Just to be sure there is no confusion, Webster’s definition of the word *Group* is: “Two or more...”

¹ Miller, Nathan, *Sea of Glory, A Naval History of the American Revolution*, Charleston, SC, 1974, Preface, pp. ix-x

² Webster’s 7th Collegiate Dictionary

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Therefore, the definition of a “Navy” for the purposes of this study is: *Two or more ships.*

In examining all the various claims, I’ve identified three different types of claims:

1. Legislative action.
2. By order of a military commander.
3. A spontaneous action, generally taken by enraged citizens against a naval tormentor.

For the purpose of this study, claims based on legislative action and the orders of a military commander will be considered valid, while spontaneous actions are considered just that, with no lasting standing.

Each claim will be cited, and then analyzed as to whether it can be considered a “Navy” and whether it’s claim is based on a legislative, military or spontaneous action. If it’s determined to be a valid legislative or military navy, the claim will be preceded with an asterisk “*”.

The Claims, in Reverse Chronological Order (* = a valid claim)

Delaware

Delaware had no Colonial Navy, and thus has no claim.³

Analysis: No Claim

New Jersey

New Jersey had no Colonial Navy, and thus no claim.⁴ However, “in July, 1776, a committee of Newark, NJ, requested of the NJ Provincial Congress to build four

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‘gondolas,’ or row galleys, to be mounted with cannon, and to ply between the mouths of the Passaic and Hackensack rivers and the town of Perth Amboy. The Provincial Congress referred the proposition to a committee of four. It finally ended the business by referring the report of this committee to the Continental Congress.”⁵

Analysis: No Claim

New Hampshire (#1 of 3)

“New Hampshire’s only state vessel was the privateer *Hampden*, 22 [guns], taken into state service for the Penobscot expedition [**25 July to 14 August 1779**] and lost there shortly afterwards [to the British].”⁶

Analysis: not technically a Navy as there was only one ship

New Orleans, Louisiana

While this adventure is late by the standards of this study, it is a fascinating and little known story. Oliver Pollock, originally from Pennsylvania, was the commercial agent of the Continental Congress in New Orleans. He worked closely with “Galvez” the Spanish governor of Louisiana. Pollock was authorized by the Continental Congress to grant commissions for Continental Line officers, as well as Privateers. In April 1778, one of the privateers he commissioned returned the *Rebecca* as a prize. Pollock purchased this ship, renamed it *Morris*, after his Pennsylvanian friend, and refitted it with 16 six-pounders at his own expense. The ship was ready to begin cruising in **July 1779**, when the ship was destroyed by a hurricane. The Spanish

³ Coggins, Jack, *Ships and Seamen of the American Revolution*, Harrisburg, PA, 1969, p. 101.

⁴ Coggins, Jack, *Ships and Seamen*, p. 101.

⁵ Paullin, Charles O., *The Navy of the American Revolution*, New York, 1906, reprinted 1971, p. 477

⁶ Coggins, *Ships and Seamen*. pp. 106, 168; also Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, p. 476.

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Governor then loaned Pollock an armed schooner, with which he was soon capturing British ships and small British settlements.⁷

Analysis: not technically a Navy as there was only one ship

New Hampshire (#2 of 3)

“As the first aggressive act in the American Revolution, the assault upon and capture of Fort William and Mary at Newcastle [NH], then known as ‘Great Island,’ near Portsmouth was performed on New Hampshire soil by a party of patriots, led by John Sullivan and John Langdon, so it may be truthfully said, the American Navy had its birth in the same region, when on the **10th day of May, 1777**, the sloop of war “Ranger,” built... at Langdon’s, now Badger Island, in the Piscataqua River, opposite Portsmouth, was formally launched.”⁸

Analysis: This is the launching of a single ship, and therefore doesn’t qualify as a Navy.

*Maryland

“The state vessels of Maryland were almost all galleys or barges. The earliest was the Ship *Defense*, acquired March 1776.”⁹ It carried 22 six-pounders. In **March 1777**, the schooner *Resolution* was purchased as a tender for the *Defense*.¹⁰

Analysis: Meets the definition of a Navy, and was authorized by the legislative council.

⁷ Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, pp. 309-10

⁸ *The Granite Monthly*, August 1927, as reprinted by the Piscataqua Pioneers

⁹ Coggins, *Ships and Seamen*, pp. 105-106.

¹⁰ Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, pp. 441

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Captain, RI Naval Militia; Colonel, RI Militia

***Lake Champlain, New York (#1 of 2)**

Of course Benedict Arnold built his famous fleet here, during the **summer of 1776**. His creation of a 17-vessel fleet was remarkable.

Analysis: Arnold's fleet certainly qualifies as a Navy, and it was created by order of a military commander.

Marblehead, Massachusetts

The town of Marblehead, MA, lays its claim as follows: "It was at the Town House that the Declaration of Independence was read. It was signed by the town's representative Elbridge Gerry. Then Gerry accepted the challenge of General Washington to commandeer ships to attack British supply ships. Marblehead patriots quickly renamed and armed their ships and sent them to seas as '...ye navy of the United Colonies,' thus laying claim to the birthplace of the U.S. Navy."¹¹ This narrative is very short on dates, but it would appear to be **after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, which was of course 4 July 1776**.

Analysis: As there were numerous ships, this qualifies as a Navy, however, and there is no legislative action or any order of a military commander, as there was no immediate threat. The action would appear to be a spontaneous one.

New Hampshire (#3 of 3)

"Whereas, on **March 21, 1776**, more than three months before the Declaration of Independence... the keel of the continental Frigate "*Raleigh*" was laid on Rindge's Wharf Portsmouth... and... launched May 21, 1776, six weeks before the Declaration – the first, and pioneer American Man-of-War built on the Piscataqua."¹²

¹¹ Website: www.marblehead.com/commun/history/

¹² Resolution of the Society of Piscataqua Pioneers at their 18 August 1926 Annual Meeting.

By Bruce Campbell MacGunnigle
Captain, RI Naval Militia; Colonel, RI Militia

Analysis: This is the launching of a single ship, which was the first of the ships authorized to be built by the Continental Congress on 13 December 1775.

*New York

“New York was occupied by the British from 1776 until the end of the war. The sloops *General Schuyler* and *Montgomery* and a schooner *General Putnam*, were briefly employed, and several armed boats and fire ships attempted to halt the British advance up the Hudson when New York City was captured in 1776.”¹³ The Provincial Congress on 20 December 1775 appointed a committee to buy, arm and fit out the *General Schuyler* ready for service by March 1776. In **March 1776**, the Provincial Congress ordered the Sloop *Bishop Landaff* to be fitted out.¹⁴

Analysis: Meets the definition of a Navy, and was authorized by the legislative council.

*Virginia

“The Navy of Virginia was impressive in size, if not accomplishment. Despite considerable effort and expense it was usually poorly armed and manned, and in general failed in its main purpose, which was to defend the state’s rivers and bays and drive off British vessels preying on its commerce.” Seven galleys, 1 sloop, 5 brigs and 2 armed boats are listed as being in service in 1776.¹⁵ “The Virginia Provincial Convention in **December [1775]** authorized the Committee of Safety of the state ‘to provide from time to time such and so many armed vessels as they may judge necessary for the protection of the several rivers in this colony...’ ”¹⁶

¹³ Coggins, *Ships and Seamen*, p. 106.

¹⁴ Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, pp. 471

¹⁵ Coggins, *Ships and Seamen*, pp. 101-102.

¹⁶ Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, pp. 396

By Bruce Campbell MacGunnigle
Captain, RI Naval Militia; Colonel, RI Militia

Analysis: Meets the definition of a Navy, and was authorized by the legislative council.

***North Carolina**

“The state of North Carolina was chiefly concerned with protecting shipping attempting to enter the important Ocracoke Inlet. Three brigantines – *Washington*, *Pennsylvania Farmer* and *King Tammany* – were acquired for this purpose.”¹⁷ The Council of Safety resolved to fit out these three brigantines on **21 December 1775**, and this was accomplished by October 1776.¹⁸

Analysis: Meets the definition of a Navy, and was authorized by the legislative council.

***Lake Champlain, New York (#2 of 2)**

"During operations against Fort Ticonderoga, 10 May 1775, Samuel Herrick led a raid that captured the schooner *Liberty* at Skenesboro. [Benedict] Arnold used this vessel to raid St. Johns, 17 May 1775, where he captured the large sloop *Enterprise*. [Richard] Montgomery used these two vessels (and a flotilla of small boats) to attack St. Johns, where the schooner *Royal Savage* was captured **2 Nov. 1775**.¹⁹

Analysis: the 17 May 1775 raid was one ship only, thereby not qualifying as a Navy. The 2 Nov. 1775 raid did qualify as a Navy, and was created by order of a military commander.

¹⁷ Coggins, *Ships and Seamen*, p. 106.

¹⁸ Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, pp. 451-2

¹⁹ Boatner, *Encyclopedia*, pp. 174, 194-195.

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Captain, RI Naval Militia; Colonel, RI Militia

***National Navy Authorized by the Continental Congress**

The Continental Congress created a national navy on **13 October 1775**, by passing a 26 August 1775 resolution presented by Rhode Island's delegate Stephen Hopkins, who had been instructed to present such a resolution by the R.I. General Assembly. The first ship to become part of the new national Navy was the sloop *Katy*, from the Rhode Island Navy, which was promptly renamed the *Providence*.²⁰
Analysis: Meets the definition of a Navy, and was authorized by the Continental Congress.

***Massachusetts**

“On June 7, 1775, [the] third provincial congress appointed a committee of nine ‘to consider the expediency of establishing a number of small armed vessels to cruise on our sea coasts for the protection of our trade, and the annoyance of our enemies.’”
The committee reported to the provincial congress on 12 June 1775, and the report was discussed until 20 June 1775, but no action was taken, no doubt due to the Battle of Bunker Hill, which took place 17 June 1775.

However, in **August 1775**, in response to a petition from the town of Machias, in the District of Maine, the Massachusetts General Court took the sloops *Machias Liberty* and *Diligent* into state service, and granted state commissions to their officers. Similar requests by the towns of Salem and Newburyport of 1 December 1775 were not approved.²¹

Analysis: Meets the definition of a Navy, and was authorized by the legislative council.

²⁰ Ryder, Hope S., *Valor Fore & Aft*, Newport, RI, 1978, pp. 37-40.

²¹ Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, pp. 318-20

By Bruce Campbell MacGunnigle
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***South Carolina**

In July 1775, South Carolina Council of Safety sent 40 men on two well armed barges to assist Georgia in taking an English supply ship carrying 16,000 pounds of gunpowder...²² Later that month the Council of Safety sent the *Commerce*, borrowed from some New Yorkers, to cruise off St. Augustine, where she captured the brigantine *Betsy* from London, along with her cargo of 12,000 pounds of gunpowder.²³

Analysis: Meets the definition of a Navy, and was authorized by the legislative council.

***Pennsylvania**

“On July 6, 1775, a committee was appointed which approved a plan for the building of a number of small galleys about 50 feet in length and 13 feet in beam, to be armed with a cannon of fair size... Action was swift. The first vessel was ordered on July 8 [1775] and launched July 19.”²⁴ There were 13 vessels built by October 1775.²⁵

Analysis: Meets the definition of a Navy, and was authorized by the legislative council.

***Georgia**

Georgia’s naval armament was small and contributed little to the naval war. However a single 10-gun schooner was commissioned in June 1775. It was briefly employed to capture an English supply ship carrying 16,000 pounds of gunpowder in

²² Coggins, *Ships and Seamen*, p. 102; also described in Miller, *Sea of Glory*, Charleston, SC, 1974, p. 36; also Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, p. 418.

²³ Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, p. 419.

²⁴ Coggins, *Ships and Seamen*, p. 99.

²⁵ Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, pp. 373-4

By Bruce Campbell MacGunnigle
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July 1775, along with two barges from South Carolina. Four galleys were built in 1777.²⁶ On **July 5, 1776**, the Continental Congress resolved to build four galleys under the direction of the Georgia Provincial Congress. In the spring of 1777, Georgia had 3 galleys in service.²⁷

Analysis: Meets the definition of a Navy, and was authorized by the Continental Congress.

***Washington's Navy, during the Siege of Boston**

After Washington assumed command on **2 July 1775** at the Boston Siege, he organized a flotilla of six schooners and a brigantine to prey on enemy supply ships. On 2 September 1775 he commissioned the *Hannah*, which has been called America's first war vessel... What has been called Washington's Navy took 35 prizes with cargoes valued at over \$600,000 before it was disbanded in 1777.²⁸

This gives the Boston area a claim, and may well be the basis of Marblehead's claim. No legislative action appears to have been taken.

Analysis: Meets the definition of a Navy, and was ordered by a Military Commander.

***Connecticut**

The first vessel of the Connecticut Navy was the Brig *Minerva*, which was ready October 1775, but its crew refused duty and it was returned to its owner December 1775. The Schooner *Spy* made the first capture by the Connecticut Navy in October 1775.²⁹

²⁶ Coggins, *Ships and Seamen*, p. 106; also Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, p. 459.

²⁷ Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, pp. 460.

²⁸ Boatner, Mark M., III, *The Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*, New York, 1966, p. 769; also Potter, E.B., *The Naval Academy Illustrated History of the United States Navy*, New York, 1971, p. 2.

²⁹ Coggins, *Ships and Seamen*, p. 104; also Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, pp. 355

By Bruce Campbell MacGunnigle
Captain, RI Naval Militia; Colonel, RI Militia

“...Connecticut had had two vessels fitting out since the **first of July [1775]**...”³⁰

Analysis: Meets the definition of a Navy, and was authorized by the legislative council.

Machias, Maine [at that time part of Massachusetts]

This action has been called the “first Naval engagement of the war,” although several historians feel this is stretching the point somewhat. It has also been called the “Lexington of the Sea.” And finally it has been said that this “could probably be called the first war vessel in the service of an American State.”³¹

The general consensus is that the date of the action was **12 June 1775**, although some historians argue for the date of **12 May 1775**.³²

The action in question refers to the capture of the British schooner *Margaretta* by local patriots inspired by the Battles of Lexington and Concord. The *Margaretta* was re-christened as the *Machias Liberty*.

The *Machias Liberty* and the *Diligent* were taken into Massachusetts state service on 21 August 1775, where they remained until October 1776.³³

Analysis: Whichever date is used, this was a spontaneous event. No navy was created. No legislative action was taken. Those familiar with the Gaspee Affair of 9 June 1772 will recognize the similarities.

³⁰ Fowler, William M., Jr., *Rebels Under Sail, The American Navy During the Revolution*, New York, 1976. pp. 49-50.

³¹ Boatner, *American Revolution*, pp. 666-667, 769.

³² Boatner, *Encyclopedia*, pp. 666-667, 769. The website for USS O’Brien (DD 975) a Spruance Class Destroyer, commissioned 3 December 1977, and named for Jeremiah O’Brien, the American hero of the action, uses the 12 June 1775 date: <http://navysite.de/dd/dd975.htm>, as does the web page of the town of Machias, ME: <http://www.machiasblueberry.com/tmachias.html>

³³ Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, p. 320.

By Bruce Campbell MacGunnigle
Captain, RI Naval Militia; Colonel, RI Militia

New Bedford and Dartmouth, Massachusetts

“Scarcely a fortnight after the Battles of Lexington and Concord [**3 May 1775**], men from New Bedford and Dartmouth fitted out a vessel and attacked and cut out from a harbour in Martha’s Vineyard a prize of the British sloop of war *Falcon*, 16 guns. This act was called forth by the captures which the *Falcon* had made from the people of Buzzards Bay.”³⁴

Analysis: Does not qualify as a Navy as it was a single ship, and appears to be a spontaneous act.

***East Greenwich Rhode Island**

On **12 June 1775**, the Rhode Island General Assembly, meeting at East Greenwich, passed a resolution, which created the first formal, governmentally authorized navy in the Western Hemisphere:

“It is voted and resolved, that the committee of safety be, and they are hereby, directed to charter two suitable vessels, for the use of the colony, and fit out the same in the best manner, to protect the trade of this colony...

“That the largest of the said vessels be manned with eighty men, exclusive of officers; and be equipped with ten guns, four-pounders; fourteen swivel guns, a sufficient number of small arms, and all necessary warlike stores.

“That the small vessel be manned with a number not exceeding thirty men.

“That the whole be included in the number of fifteen hundred men, ordered to be raised in this colony...

“That they receive the same bounty and pay as the land forces...”³⁵

³⁴ Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution*, p. 339.

³⁵ Bartlett, John Russell, *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island...* Vol. VII, 1770-1776, Providence, RI, 1862. pp. 346-347.

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Wasting no time, on 12 June 1775, the same day as the above resolution, Governor Nicholas Cooke signed orders addressed to “Captain Abraham Whipple, commander of the Sloop *Katy*, and commodore of the armed vessels employed by the government...”³⁶

Many Rhode Islanders remember John Fitzhugh Miller, who built the modern day replica of the 20-gun British Frigate *Rose*, which had been terrorizing Narragansett Bay since its arrival in November 1774. In his book on the building of the American warships *Washington* and *Warren*, he sums things up nicely: "On June 12, 1775, the Rhode Island General Assembly created the Rhode Island Navy to recapture some of the provision ships (previously captured by [British Captain Sir James] Wallace of the HMS *Rose*). This was the first salt water navy of any colony in the Revolution, and it consisted of two sloops... but the Rhode Island Navy was clearly not designed to stand up to the *Rose* herself. ...Realizing this in August the General Assembly voted to instruct its delegates in Congress to introduce legislation creating a national navy.”³⁷

For many interesting additional details about the *Katie*, the “larger of the said vessels” which was renamed the *Providence* when it was the first vessel to be taken into national service, see Hope S. Rider’s *Valour Fore & Aft*, Newport, 1978.

Analysis: Meets the definition of a Navy, was authorized by the legislative council, and is the earliest of the all the valid claims made to be the “**Birthplace of the American Navy.**”

³⁶ Ryder, Hope S., *Valour Fore & Aft*, Newport, 1978, pp. 18, 215.

³⁷ Miller, John Fitzhugh (Editor), *Building Early American Warships: The Journal of the Rhode Island Committee for Constructing the Continental Frigates Providence & Warren, 1775-1777*, Providence, RI, 1988, pp. 5-6.

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