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## Free Trade and Sailors' Rights

Samuel Leech knew the horror of naval warfare. When he was fourteen years old he served as a powder boy attached to the fifth gun of the main deck of the HMS *Macedonian*. On October 25, 1812, his sleek frigate was pounded by the American frigate *United States* in the mid-Atlantic Ocean. Although the ships were rated similarly, it was not an even match; the *United States* broadside contained 786 pounds of metal to 546 pounds for the *Macedonian*; the *United States* had 478 men aboard, the *Macedonian* had 301. In the ninety-minute contest more than one-third of the British crew were killed (forty-three men) or wounded (sixty men). The Americans suffered only seven killed and five wounded. Although the *United States* was damaged in the battle, the *Macedonian* "lost her mizzenmast, fore & maintopmasts and mainyard & was much cut up in her hull." Somehow the Americans were able to bring this shell of a ship back to the United States as a prize.<sup>1</sup>

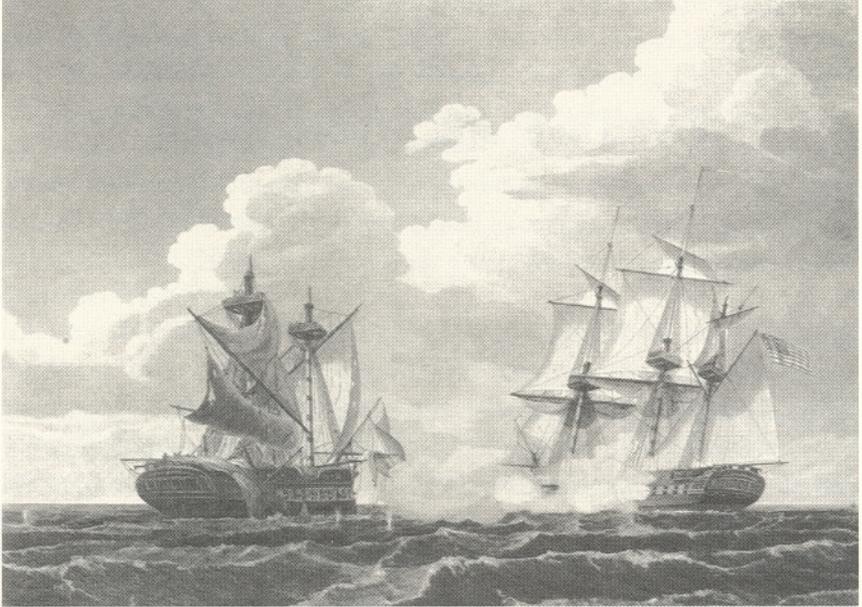
Leech went beyond these statistics in his memoir, providing a vivid account of what it was like to survive this battle. The crew was both excited and anxious when the American frigate first appeared on the horizon. As the ships closed the captain ordered the *Macedonian* cleared for action, and "the whole dread paraphernalia of battle was produced." The crew, after a few minutes of confusion, stood at the ready to do its "best service" for the country. It was difficult to see anything from Leech's post. As the ships neared each other, three of the *Macedonian's* cannon went off. The captain ordered the men to hold their fire. The "motionless suspense" was broken by the dull thud of cannon from the American vessel. "A strange noise" that "sounded like the tearing of sails" whizzed over their heads. It was the wind of the enemy's shot. Soon both ships roared with cannon fire, "trembling" the ship. Metal shot struck the sides of the *Macedonian*, and "the whole scene grew indescribably confused and horrible." Leech compared it to "some awfully tremendous thunderstorm, whose deafening roar is attended by incessant streaks of lightning,

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28. Samuel Leech vividly described the hell aboard the *Macedonian* during the battle with the *United States*. “*United States* capturing the *Macedonian*.” Painted by T. Birch, engraved by S. Seymour (Philadelphia, 1815). Philadelphia Maritime Museum.

carrying death in every flash, and strewing the ground with the victims of its wrath.” It “was rendered more horrible than that, by the presence of torrents of blood which dyed our decks.” The men shouted with excitement and feverishly worked their guns.

As Leech ran back and forth with his powder, he witnessed a scene that became seared into his memory. Suddenly he saw blood “fly from the arm of a man stationed at our gun,” although he saw nothing strike him. The cries of the wounded filled the gundecks. The two boys of the gun next to him fell almost at the same time. One “was struck in the leg by a large shot; he had to suffer amputation above the wound. The other had a grape or canister shot sent through his ankle” and had to lose his foot. Another boy’s powder caught fire and the flame burned away most of his face. As the boy stood there in agony with both hands lifted, a passing shot instantly cut him into two. The wounded were carried down to the surgeon with his dreaded saw and bloodied operating table. The dead were quickly tossed overboard. Leech noted one man with his hand cut off by shot “and almost at the same moment he

received another shot, which tore open his bowels in a terrible manner. As he fell, two or three men caught him in their arms, and, as he could not live, threw him overboard." Leech "distinctly heard the large blood-drops fall pat, pat, pat, on the deck" as a wounded man was carried past him. The American fire was devastating. "The large shot came against the ship's side like iron hail, shaking her to the very keel, or passing through her timbers, and scattering terrific splinters, which did a more appalling work than even their own death-giving blows." Amidst the chaos "the work of death went on in a manner which must have been satisfactory even to the King of Terrors himself."<sup>2</sup>

What did this fourteen-year-old boy think about the hell he was living through? In his memoirs Leech recalled, "I felt pretty much as I suppose every one does at such a time." To run was impossible. Officers were stationed below with orders to shoot any man who abandoned his post. "To give way to gloom, or to show fear, would do no good, and might brand us with the name of cowards, and ensure defeat." Leech concluded, "Our only true philosophy, therefore, was to make the best of our situation, by fighting bravely and cheerfully." Regardless of appearances, each man took his situation seriously. Standing "amid the dying and the dead," Leech turned his thoughts to God, recognizing that at any moment he might meet his maker.<sup>3</sup>

After the firing finally stopped, the *United States* shot out ahead of the *Macedonian*, made some quick repairs, and prepared to continue the conflict. The British frigate was crippled and hardly able to maneuver. In such a condition, the Americans could have raked the *Macedonian* fore and aft, with little chance for the British to respond. The British captain decided to haul down his colors.

Leech now found himself a prisoner of war. Men abandoned their battle stations, piled on clothing, broke into the ships stores. Several men stuffed themselves with food and drank as much alcohol as they could before the American boarding party arrived. Leech, too, left his post. He raided the officers' stores and then headed for the steerage, where the wounded had collected. The sight was, if anything, worse than the carnage he had seen during the battle. Men were groaning and crying. "The surgeon and his mate were smeared with blood from head to foot: they looked more like butchers than doctors." He found a few of his messmates, and together they looked for the other men they had shared their meals with. Two were wounded. Leech and some of his other messmates had to hold one of these while the doctor cut off his leg above the knee. "The task was most painful to behold, the surgeon using his knife and saw on human flesh and bones, as freely as the butcher at the shambles does on the carcass of the beast!"<sup>4</sup> As he was a boy, he remained

aboard the *Macedonian* to help with the wounded and clean the vessel. He stayed on the captured frigate on its voyage to the United States. Imprisonment was relatively lenient. The fourteen-year-old made friends among the American prize crew, and was even allowed to mess with them. Once they reached the North American coast, and after a brief stay at Newport, the *Macedonian* and the *United States* sailed to New York, where the Americans were treated like triumphant heroes.

Although the officials wanted to exchange the crew of the *Macedonian* in a cartel, many British sailors slipped off the vessel and melted into the American population. Indeed, a great many signed on to the American army and navy. Leech also determined to run away. To be exchanged meant being sent to sea again aboard a British naval vessel. The United States held out unlimited possibilities. On Christmas day 1812 Leech escaped from the *Macedonian* to the streets of New York. For a few weeks he lived off of some money he had earned showing American visitors the *Macedonian*. Then he signed on as an apprentice to a bootmaker. A chance meeting with a cousin sent him to Salem, Massachusetts. From there he signed aboard an American warship, the *Syren*.<sup>5</sup>

Leech's experience reveals just how easy it was to shed one's nationality along the waterfront. He had fought with spirit, joining in the shouting of the *Macedonian* crew. Now, he posed as an American, as had many of his countrymen, and volunteered to sail under his enemy's flag. Aware that capture might well mean being strung up from the yardarm, Leech grew his hair long and wore it hanging loosely around his neck in ringlets, instead of the accustomed queue of British seamen. He also donned typical American clothes, leaving the top buttons of his shirt open and displaying his collar in the American style. These precautions paid off when the *Syren* was captured by the British off the coast of Africa on July 12, 1814.<sup>6</sup>

Although Leech looked like an American on the outside, we will never know for sure how long it took him to become an American on the inside—in the way he thought and the way he approached the world. Leech wrote his memoirs thirty years after his capture, and after he had spent more than twenty-five years living in the United States. By the time he wrote *A Voice from the Maindeck*, his identity was American. In explaining the defeat of the *Macedonian*, he mentioned not only the disparity between the vessels, but also a difference in the attitude of the crew. He seemed to forget the commitment of the *Macedonian* crew to the battle that he so vividly described. On the one hand, he noted that the British tars fought lustily regardless of the carnage about them, and that some of the men wanted to continue the battle after the

captain had surrendered. On the other hand, he declared that many of the men on the British ship, including Americans, had been impressed and "were in service against their will," whereas the Americans were fighting to maintain "free trade and sailors' rights." In fact, Leech seized the opportunity to justify the American cause in the war, as would any patriotic American in 1843, by asserting that Great Britain "had impressed American seamen" and "had violated the American flag by insolently searching their vessels for her runaway seamen."<sup>7</sup>

As a young deserter from the British navy, Leech knew that the process of becoming American was more complicated than growing his hair long and changing the cut of his clothes. He jokingly related the story of an Irishman who pretended to be an American before the war. When his vessel was searched by a British cruiser, his true identity was impossible to hide. A British officer asked the man what part of the United States he came from. The Irishman replied, "I used to belong to Philadelph, but now I belong to Philama York." The officer detected the man's brogue, and impressed him into His Majesty's navy.<sup>8</sup> Leech also jokingly related his first ill-fated effort to pass as an American. Fortunately for him he was being questioned by an American officer shortly after his escape from the *Macedonian* in New York. He, too, claimed to be from Philadelphia. He had even rehearsed that he had lived on Pine Street. The officer, however, seeing through the ruse, had some fun with poor Leech by quizzing him on the various side streets that crossed Pine. Leech, despite his best efforts, soon became befuddled. He had almost salvaged the situation when the officer saw that one of his concealed buttons had British insignia. The officer asked if Leech had gotten the buttons in Philadelphia. Leech admitted, "This was a shot which raked me fore and aft. I hauled down my colors and stood silent. The officers laughed heartily as one of them said, 'Go below, my lad; you will make a pretty good Yankee.'"<sup>9</sup>

By the time Leech joined the American navy a year later, not only had he altered his exterior appearance and grown physically, but he had become committed to the ideal of equality. Service aboard the *Syren* seemed to fit his new approach to the world. Leech claimed that his American officers treated him better than had the British officers. After a midshipman attempted to order him to wash clothes for him, Leech simply refused this "sprig of American aristocracy" and never heard any more about it. Such impertinence would have earned him a flogging on the *Macedonian*. When physically threatened by a noncommissioned officer, Leech reported the incident to the first lieutenant, who then reprimanded the man. Leech was never again troubled by any other "would-be tyrants."<sup>10</sup>

Leech shared his democratic ideals with the rest of the *Syren's* crew. After they were captured and brought to Cape Town, the enlisted men were separated from the officers. As Leech put it, "we had lost the natural exactors of discipline among seamen." Like prisoners during the Revolutionary War and those held elsewhere during the War of 1812, "to remedy this deficiency, our first step was to adopt a set of regulations in respect to order, cleanliness, &c., and to appoint certain of our number to enforce them."<sup>11</sup> American sailors during the War of 1812 also resorted to collective action to assert notions about their proper treatment even as prisoners of war. Finding some of the sergeants in charge of their guard manifesting "a surly, tyrannical temper, annoying us in many little things," the prisoners returned "their abuse in a rather provoking kind of coin." Whenever the guard was under the command of one of these noncommissioned officers, the sailors compelled the entire guard to stay on duty longer by delaying the prisoner roll call at the end of the shift. If the sergeant on duty treated the Americans fairly, the wily tars promptly formed for the head count. The soldiers soon got the message and the bullying ceased. Similarly, the prisoners organized a successful protest against the poor quality of bread provided.<sup>12</sup>

The Americans held in Cape Town, like their compatriots in other compounds during the war, could push resistance to extremes. A crisis erupted after an English doctor, offended because two sailors had hung their wash in the walkway to his office, threw the laundry into the mud. The two prisoners responded with "a volley of sailors' oaths." These "wrathful ebullitions" angered the doctor, who ordered the two men into solitary confinement. The rest of the prisoners saw this as "a manifest case of injustice," and they resolved "not to submit to it." When the sergeant came for the two men, they "all turned out in a body," declaring that they would be punished together or no one would be punished at all. The whole guard was called out and ordered to load and fire. The prisoners maintained their defiance, shouting "Fire away! You will have but one fire, and then it will be our turn." Outnumbered and aware that a bloodbath might ensue, the sergeant backed down and the issue was dropped.<sup>13</sup>

By the time Leech returned to New York after the war, he was an American. For a few years he lived like many sailors. He had picked up the vice of gambling in prison, and to that he added drinking and all the other sins seamen committed while on liberty ashore. He ran through his one hundred dollars pay from the voyage on the *Syren* and soon joined the navy again. This time he found his situation less to his liking; he complained of the floggings and his treatment in the democratic language of his adopted country. Even-

tually he deserted, headed for New England, established himself as a store-keeper, and experienced a religious conversion.<sup>14</sup> A part of him always remained a sailor. In the 1840s, he so impressed Richard Henry Dana, Jr., with his storytelling, especially in relating the terror of warfare at sea, that the author of *Two Years Before the Mast* encouraged Leech to write his own memoirs. Perhaps even more revealing was what happened when Leech visited the *Macedonian*, by then in the service of the United States. Years after he left the sea he called the crew shipmates and entertained them with tales about that frightful day in October 1812.<sup>15</sup>

Although Leech was born in England, his story conveys in large part what it was like to be an American seaman during the War of 1812. Embedded in his *A Voice from the Main Deck* is a vivid portrait of the sailor's life in an exchange of broadsides in battle. Whether aboard the *Macedonian* or the *Syren*, Leech, like every sailor who put to sea, risked life and limb. Similarly, reasons for joining the war at sea were often mixed. Although Leech fully understood the patriotic explanation of the war as an old man, he was less clear about his motivation for signing aboard the *Syren* in 1814. Apparently he needed to find employment after living at his cousin's in Salem for about a year. The cousin wanted Leech to learn sailmaking. Leech merely asserted that "by this time I had quite a desire to go to sea again." No doubt the three-month advance he received upon joining the navy, which enabled him to buy clothes and pay his board, contributed to this desire.<sup>16</sup> Most American sailors' motivation combined pragmatism and patriotism. Leech's experience aboard the *Syren* and as a prisoner of war in Cape Town also demonstrated how at sea and ashore American sailors often practiced a rough egalitarianism and expressed a spirit of liberty that reflected national values and a long maritime tradition of rowdyism. American tars exhibited their odd notions of liberty even when held captive. Tragically, not every British officer reacted as did the Cape Town sergeant. On April 6, 1815—months after a peace was agreed upon—British soldiers fired on an unruly crowd of American prisoners in Dartmoor prison in western England. This "massacre" of American seamen became embedded in the collective memory of the waterfront, and, like the *Jersey* prison ship of the Revolutionary War, came to stand for the sailor's sacrifice for American liberty.

**D**uring the War of 1812, sailors recognized that they remained an important symbol of the United States, while simultaneously struggling to survive the tempests that swirled around them. The people of the waterfront believed that the war was fought in large part to protect seamen from impress-

ment. Politicians spoke directly to this issue. In his message asking for a declaration of war against Great Britain, James Madison highlighted the plight of the seaman by decrying the “thousands of American citizens” who should have been protected by their flag, had “been torn from their country . . . to be exiled to the most distant and deadly climes, to risk their lives in the battles of their oppressors, and to be the melancholy instruments of taking away those of their own brethren.”<sup>17</sup> Madison reiterated this point in his second inaugural address by stating “that the cruel sufferings” of American seamen “have found their way to every bosom not dead to the sympathies of human nature.”<sup>18</sup>

Once hostilities began, common seamen shared in the limelight of naval victories that became the pride of the nation. Within six months of the start of the war, Americans won five single-ship actions, including the frigate battles by the *Constitution* over the *Guerrière* and the *Java*, and the *United States* over the *Macedonian*. Although Britain’s losses did not put a dent in its overall naval superiority, they were humiliating nonetheless and thus a source of pride to Americans.<sup>19</sup> The naval war did not always go so well for the Americans. For most of 1813 and 1814, the American navy remained bottled up in protected harbors, unable to get past the British blockade. After the defeats of 1812, and recognizing that the American frigates outsized the smaller British frigates, the British admiralty ordered its captains to avoid single ship actions. However, one such action took place on June 1, 1813, just off Cape Cod. In this short battle a well-trained British crew on HMS *Shannon* pulverized the unlucky *Chesapeake*. The American frigate had proclaimed its support for the war’s ideals by flying a banner with “Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights” emblazoned on it as it left Boston harbor. The untrained crew experienced fifteen minutes of the same kind of hell that Leech and the *Macedonian* crew had suffered for over an hour; 48 Americans were killed and 98 were wounded out of a crew of 379.<sup>20</sup>

While relishing the victories and suffering defeats, seamen could still also pursue their own interests and goals. The *Chesapeake* lost its battle with the *Shannon* in part because much of its crew were untrained raw recruits. Many of the veterans had refused to reenlist in a dispute over prize money. Similarly, aboard the *Constitution* the change of command after taking the *Guerrière* left many men unsatisfied. Isaac Hull had been popular among the men, and the new captain, William Bainbridge, was seen as something of a Jonah—among other things, it was he who had lost the *Philadelphia* off Tripoli. Before the *Constitution* left Boston for a cruise to the South Atlantic there was a great deal of muttering, and only a few weeks before the crucial battle with the *Java*

Bainbridge had to quell a near-mutiny as the men complained about short rations.<sup>21</sup> When HMS *Pelican* captured the USS *Argus*, some of the American crew may have been suffering the aftereffects of having drunk too much wine from a prize captured the night before.<sup>22</sup>

The experience of Ned Myers offers a window into the seaman's mind during the war. Out of work at the beginning of the conflict, Myers and a shipmate signed aboard a gunboat in New York. Like other sailors they hated these small vessels that Thomas Jefferson had hoped would be able to protect the American coast. Offered the opportunity to serve on the Great Lakes, Myers and "every man and boy volunteered." After a brief liberty, the men headed for Albany and Oswego. Their journey was more frolic than orderly progression. Myers explained: "we went through the country, cracking our jokes, laughing, and noting all oddities that crossed our course."<sup>23</sup> Once on Lake Ontario, Myers was assigned to several vessels and took part in sea and land battles. His concerns, however, were often immediate and mundane; he and his shipmates sought plunder and liquor before anything else. One exploit that netted a few gallons of whiskey "seemed to us to be a scrape, and that was a sufficient excuse for disobeying orders, and for committing a crime." The booty itself was not the main aim. Myers confessed that he "was influenced more by the love of mischief, and a weak desire to have it said" that he "was foremost in such an exploit, than from any mercenary motive."<sup>24</sup>

Capricious winds and fickle fate had a dramatic impact on this sailor. He was aboard the schooner *Scourge* in the early morning hours of August 8, 1813, when a sudden squall overwhelmed the vessel and sent it to the bottom of Lake Ontario in a matter of minutes. Though he did not know how to swim, he survived in part because he was sleeping on the deck and some raindrops awoke him just before the storm hit. Rescued by the *Julia*, he was captured a few days later, in a battle with the British. After a British officer wounded him for being saucy upon capture, Myers went below for a bandage. He found his remaining shipmates and some British sailors breaking into the ship's whiskey and bread bags. Both the British and Americans "without distinction of country, sat down to enjoy themselves" and even began to sing "for good-fellowship." The "jollification" did not last long before a British officer broke it up.<sup>25</sup>

Then began Myers's experience as a prisoner of war in which he was shipped across Canada to Halifax and then to Bermuda, and back to Halifax. Throughout his twenty months of captivity, Myers drew some odd distinctions. He agreed twice to work as a sailor aboard British transports to earn better treatment, more food, and some money. He spent time in a prison ship

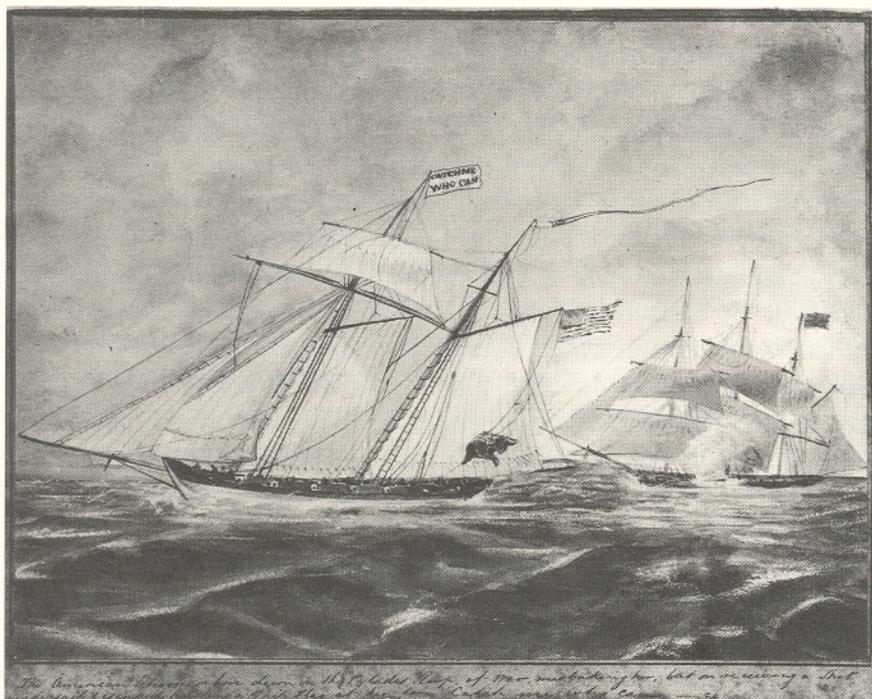
in Bermuda, and later on Melville Island near Halifax, and attempted to escape several times. On one of these occasions in Nova Scotia, he and two others made their way to a small port and signed aboard a British privateer, hoping, Myers claimed, to find their way back to the United States. At the rendezvous house they pocketed the £4 advance and then spent a day drinking, awaiting the return of the vessel to port. The next twenty-four hours, Myers confessed, "was pretty much a blank with us all." The following day a British patrol seized them and sent them back to prison.<sup>26</sup> Despite his willingness to serve on a privateer and aboard transports, Myers resisted efforts to force him into the British navy. At one point Myers and some other prisoners were put aboard a British warship and ordered to work, with the intention "to swallow us all in the enormous maw of the British navy." They refused and for the greater part of two weeks were "playing green, with our tin pots slung around our necks." Myers amplified on the comic scene, recounting that the British sailors "began to laugh at us, as real Johnny Raws, though the old salts knew better."<sup>27</sup> However much he might adapt to his circumstances, Myers would not bow to the pressure of the British navy. Although born in Canada, Myers saw himself as an American. He told James Fenimore Cooper, "I was determined not to yield" to any entreaties or arguments to enter His Majesty's navy. "I did not like England, and I did like America. My birth in Quebec was a thing I could not help; but having chosen to serve under the American flag, and having done so now for years, I did not choose to go over to the enemy."<sup>28</sup>

An odd combination of American nationalism, democratic principles, contractual obligations, and a concern with their own interests created a different kind of navy. Conditions aboard American naval vessels were not nearly as autocratic as William Ray and James Durand would have us think. For example, when Samuel Leech's captain on the brig *Syren* died during the 1814 cruise, the first lieutenant asked the crew if they wanted to continue the voyage, a request to which the crew heartily agreed. Such an appeal to democracy was unthinkable in the British navy. There is some evidence to suggest that Leech's comment about his lenient treatment on the *Syren* was not merely the reflection of the peculiar conditions on that vessel. Shortly before the outbreak of war, Moses Smith related a story of how one tar avoided a flogging appealing to an officer's national sensibilities. When the man was tied up ready for the lash, he turned to the lieutenant and declared, "I thought it was a free country; but I was mistaken. My father was American born, and my mother too. I expected to be treated as an American myself; but I find I'm not." Whether in earnest or merely using a clever ploy, the plea worked. The lieutenant had him cut down and placed him in irons instead.<sup>29</sup> The independ-

ent spirit of the American sailor can also be seen in some of Smith's own experiences. As the warship *Adams* was preparing to get to sea several crew members broke into the provisions and helped themselves to food and drink. Naturally they got drunk, but the officer who caught them simply disregarded this dereliction of duty. Shortly thereafter Smith was promised a quartermaster's berth if he agreed to sign aboard a gunboat. Against his better judgment Smith accepted this promotion. As Smith explained, "there was so much clearing away, and dressing up, and walking about, and making signals, that I sighed for the unrestrained station I had just left" aboard the *Adams*. When the lieutenant discovered Smith's dissatisfaction he was "mortified" and "even went so far as to threaten to stop" Smith's grog and then flog him if he asked for a transfer. Smith retaliated and wrote, "In revenge for this, my plan was to intoxicate myself that I might be broken on purpose." Unfortunately for Smith, as he explains, "they overlooked this folly in me, and I returned to my duty again."<sup>30</sup>

These tendencies were accentuated aboard the privateers that far outweighed the American navy in numbers and in impact on the British. Although the U.S. Navy during the War of 1812 numbered 23 vessels and captured 254 enemy craft, at least 517 authorized privateers captured 1,345 British prizes worth \$45.5 million.<sup>31</sup> Service aboard privateers also differed from the regular navy. Speed and stealth were the main trademarks of a privateer. Battle, even with an equal foe, was to be avoided. Instead, these vessels, often schooners that could sail like the wind, played cat-and-mouse games. The aptly named *Young Teazer* during a two-week span in May 1813 either chased or was chased almost every day. It eluded capture and obtained two prizes during this part of the cruise.<sup>32</sup> Although privateersmen gambled with their lives, the payoff could be quite handsome. In 1813 the schooner *Thomas* took two prizes which sold for a total of \$214,531. After fees, customs duties, and the owner's share, \$92,246.35 was split into 891½ shares. The captain got nine shares. The least a crewman received was about \$800.<sup>33</sup>

The men who wrought this devastation on British shipping came to their trade for a variety of reasons. Josiah Cobb admitted that he did not sign aboard a privateer in 1814 out of patriotism. Instead, it reflected this eighteen-year-old's infatuation with the idea of going to sea. Many of his shipmates had even more base motives; they were in it for the money. Cobb's shipmates were Irish, English, French, Spanish, Dutch, and, of course, American. Many of the men "could hail from no quarter of the globe, but whose destination required no conjuring to ascertain." Cobb was surprised to find that some in the crew had left regular occupations on shore, including a forty-



29. American privateers during the War of 1812 were usually swift schooners like this vessel, which had closed with HMS *Pylades*, mistaking it for a merchantman. Relying on their speed, the Americans added insult to injury by flying a pennant proclaiming "Catch Me Who Can." "HMS *Pylades*." Peabody Essex Museum.

year-old carpenter with a wife and children. These men were dissatisfied with "not making money fast enough." As one man put it, he would "cruise for dollars, where they were to be found in greater plenty than in the place of his birth." Cobb and his shipmates were unlucky, and all they got for their efforts was six or seven days of intense seasickness before being captured by the British.<sup>34</sup>

George Little served aboard at least two privateers during the war and had a very low opinion of both crews. On one vessel, sailing out of Baltimore, the captain wanted to use Cartagena (Colombian) papers to raid the shipping of several nations. Little saw this as piracy. The crew was all for it. They were "composed of all nations; they appeared to have been scraped together from the lowest dens of wretchedness and vice, and only wanted a leader to induce them to any acts of daring and desperation." Little left that vessel in the Caribbean, but later joined another privateer. The men were no better than on

his first privateer. They were "selected from the very elite and respectable portions of the lowest sinks located in the 'Five Points,' 'Hook,' and other places of like celebrity in New York." They were "a motley crew of loafers, high-binders, butcher boys, &c. &c."<sup>35</sup>

The behavior of many privateersmen reflected this rough makeup and an emphasis on personal interest over lofty ideas. It was not unusual for privateersmen to be drunk and riotous during the capture of a merchantman. Petty thievery was rampant, as privateer boarders stole from crew and even passengers.<sup>36</sup> While American privateers did not capture neutral shipping, they stopped and searched such vessels, helping themselves to small items like fruit and wine. Divisions in the crew and among the officers broke out. One prize-master decided to take a prize from the *Herald* to Spain "in hope's of Making his fortune."<sup>37</sup> In another instance a lieutenant and a captain had a falling out, with the lieutenant refusing duty and being put ashore at the first opportunity. Similarly crews and captains could disagree. On one schooner the men conducted a work stoppage for two days because the captain had limited them to one gill of New England rum a day when they expected twice that. For two days "never one of them so much as lifted a spun-yarn." The captain could hold out as long as the weather was pleasant. After it began to turn foul, "Our captain found that his government was democratical . . . he conceded to the large and fearful majority; and the New England spirit carried the day."<sup>38</sup>

"New England spirit" and "democratical" government were odd ways of describing relationships aboard armed ships. Several crosscurrents seemed to have brought the American Jack Tar to a peculiar understanding of himself. The nation may no longer have depended on his presence in the street. However, he had been held up as a symbol for the new republic for more than twenty years. Sailors recognized the image of themselves in that symbol and obtained a sense of meaning and direction from it. Like any reflection off the surface of the ocean, where wind and wave were constantly in motion, the likeness was imperfect and incomplete. Men fought in the war for many reasons—sometimes they were patriotic and sometimes they were mercenary. Often they were both. And, regardless of the larger issues at play, as in the street so also on the planks of a ship—sailors continued to pursue their own varied agendas.

A strange mixture of patriotism, democracy, pursuit of the main chance, and rowdiness all appeared most graphically in the experiences of prisoners of war. As the war dragged on, the British tightened their blockade of the United States and swept more and more American vessels from the sea.

Thousands of men were captured. The British collected these prisoners in depots in the West Indies, Cape Town, Nova Scotia, and England. A few lucky individuals were exchanged. Most prisoners, however, ended up at Dartmoor.<sup>39</sup>

Patriotism could emerge in the most unlikely places. Cobb's mercenary crew members showed their true colors once his brig surrendered and behaved the same way many of the crew of the *Macedonian* had when captured. All work on the vessel stopped and every man had license to do what he wanted. Several broke open the hold, stealing food and liquor. Many got drunk. Cobb grabbed some coffee and food for himself. Others stripped the vessel of canvas and rope. By the time a boarding party arrived, delayed through the night because of high seas, the brig's rigging was a mess. And yet the night after they were thrown into the cable tier of the capturing British frigate, the sailors joined in song proclaiming American victories over the British. They did so in part to taunt their captors, but it also expressed national pride in men who Cobb claimed had more sordid motives.<sup>40</sup>

Patriotic songs and poems appear in some of the journals kept by prisoners of war. Alden White copied several such tunes in a prison ship in Halifax, including "Major Andre," "Decatur's Victory," and an untitled work that celebrated John Paul Jones's famous battle in the *Bon Homme Richard*.<sup>41</sup> Joseph Valpey wrote patriotic poems in his journal. One was entitled the "American Tar" and highlighted the role of the "sons of Columbia[,] the American tar" in the war. It included the following stanza:

On the salt briney ocean our Eagle is a hovering  
 Directed by Neptune Assisted by Mars  
 Our Brave Constitution with fix't Ressionion  
 Commenced all the rights of American tars.<sup>42</sup>

Robert Stevenson Coffin addressed a similar theme in a song he wrote as a prisoner aboard HMS *Vestal* in Barbados in 1814.

The time is not distant, when our Eagle shall soar,  
 Unmolested and free, to roam earth's farthest shore,—  
 When Brittania shall yield, and candidly own,  
 That in vain she clam'd Neptune's Trident and throne;—  
     For our tars *will* be free  
     To traverse the sea  
 Though between every billow rise bulwarks of stone!<sup>43</sup>

Prisoners also celebrated national holidays. The six hundred Americans in Dartmoor on the Fourth of July in 1813 raised two standards over the prison. British officials ordered soldiers to cut them down, and the redcoats managed to capture one flag. The prisoners successfully defended the other, even though the British fired into the crowd, wounding two.<sup>44</sup> The prisoners in Halifax celebrated the anniversary of independence in 1814 by decorating their prison with a huge painting suspended from the ceiling, displaying American naval victories, over which "was the Emblem of Liberty, standing on the Lion with a spier in her hand in the act of percing it through the Lions head." Completing the scene was "the American Stand of Arms—handsomely drawn."<sup>45</sup> American prisoners aboard the *Crown Prince* raised their national flag "as high as the top of our railings," had a fife and drum play "Yankee Doodle," cheered prisoners on other vessels, and heard an "inflammatory" oration from a man who had been impressed by the British and had surrendered himself as a prisoner of war once the hostilities broke out. One prisoner, thrilled with the experience, wrote, "we felt the spirit of freedom glow within us; and we anticipated the day when we should celebrate our anniversary in that dear land of liberty, which we longed to see, and panted after, as the thirsty hart pants after the water brooks."<sup>46</sup> In the same year the number of men held at Dartmoor had increased dramatically, and the prisoners made elaborate plans to celebrate national independence. They obtained two hogsheads of porter with the keeper's permission and several gallons of rum without his permission. They greeted the day by raising a banner with "All Canada or Dartmoor prison for life" emblazoned across it. The men collected in the yard and, just as if they were back in the United States, listened to an oration trumpeting American naval victories. The sailor speaking also detailed the causes of the war, emphasizing Britain's violation of neutral rights and practice of impressment. He contrasted the tyrannical government of England with "the happiness our countrymen enjoyed under so mild a government." They then sat down to a dinner of beef and soup, the best that could be had under the circumstances, and spoke of the president and congress, "for whom we sailors have the greatest respect."<sup>47</sup>

Democratic and egalitarian ideals surfaced in prison. The British often lodged officers and men together, much to the discomfort of those accustomed to the quarterdeck. Placed aboard the prison ship *Nassau* with 750 American prisoners, Captain Jeduthan Upton and eleven other officers put up a screen "to keep a little separate from the ship's company." The cramped quarters, however, were not conducive to such distinctions, and Upton reported that "our situation is very disagreeable on account of sailors who

think they are equal to any of us and take advantage."<sup>48</sup> Benjamin Waterhouse commented that "Liberty is the parent of eloquence," and was struck by the aplomb with which an American approached his officers. "When an American speaks to an officer set over him, he utters all that he has to say, in a ready and fearless manner." He also explained that the United States was "a country of laws; and their very sailors are full of 'rights' and 'wrongs;' of 'justice and injustice;' and of defining crimes, and ascertaining 'the butts and bounds' of national and individual rights."<sup>49</sup>

How deeply these men had imbibed of the ideals of their republic can be seen in their efforts to set up self-governing organizations in prison after prison. Like Leech and the Americans at Cape Town, prisoners repeatedly organized themselves into small self-regulating republics.<sup>50</sup> The effectiveness of the prisoner self-government varied. The men placed aboard prison ships in Jamaica in 1812 and 1813 created some sort of committee system, although they had difficulties enforcing provisions against theft.<sup>51</sup> Halifax prisoners, with officers taking a leading role, not only had their committee system to try infractions of agreed-upon regulations, but the committee also kept a count of all prisoners, noting when they were sent to the hospital and when they were returned.<sup>52</sup> Aboard the prison ship *Jason* the officers, "knowing much depended upon the regulation of the prisoners, suggested" that the sailors "form a government to control prisoners in their every day activities."<sup>53</sup> Committees also negotiated for better treatment of prisoners, and on the *Nassau* in April 1813, "the people drew up a resolve" against prisoners volunteering for service in British ships. Aboard the prison ships in Bermuda the president of the committee negotiated issues like the quality of the food served and the type of work the prisoners could be expected to do.<sup>54</sup> The committees on prison ships in England "made laws and regulations respecting personal behavior, and personal cleanliness," especially because there were "a good many lazy and shiftless men who were willing to live like hogs and to wallow in dirt and filth." Serving on a committee could be hazardous. In Bermuda, several convicted criminals assaulted the president of the committee the day after a trial led to corporal punishment. After no one came to the president's aid the rest of the committee resigned, forcing an election and replacement by new committee members. At least one prisoner confessed in his account of his incarceration that he avoided serving as a judge in prison for fear of retribution.<sup>55</sup>

The most elaborate committee system emerged in Dartmoor Prison. As the numbers of prisoners increased in 1813, lack of self-organization created deplorable conditions, including men stealing from one another. As Charles

Andrews put it, "Honesty and integrity are but mere chimeras in dire necessity." Their situation "resembled more a state of nature than a civilized society." To remedy this deficit "we appointed a legislative body, to form a code of laws." To enforce the regulations the sailors also created a tribunal "to try and convict all criminals according to law and evidence."<sup>56</sup> More and more seamen were poured into the prison in 1814. The defeat of Napoleon led to the release of the French held at Dartmoor, and Americans replaced them in the other prison yards. All except one prison compound developed a committee system, normally with twelve members, that tried cases of theft and imposed regulations pertaining "to the cleanliness of the interior of the buildings, and defining each one's rights."<sup>57</sup>

The one area of Dartmoor that did not follow this system was Prison Number Four. When Americans arrived in Dartmoor they were all put in Number Four with Frenchmen who were considered too dangerous or criminal for the other prison yards. After a fight between the French and American prisoners in July 1813, the British separated the two groups, leaving most of Number Four to the Americans. In February 1814, at the request of the white American prisoners, the blacks were relegated to the upper floors in Number Four. Finally, in September 1814, after most French prisoners had been released and several other prisons opened to Americans, only blacks and the most derelict whites remained in Number Four.<sup>58</sup> At this point, the government of this building became autocratic under the leadership of an immense—one report stated he was seven feet tall—African American named Richard Craftus.<sup>59</sup> King Dick, as he was called in the prison, ruled with an iron hand and wielded a huge club to enforce his authority. If any of his men were "dirty, drunken, or grossly negligent," he threatened "them with a beating; and if they are saucy, they" were "sure to receive one."<sup>60</sup> White commentators believed that these strong-arm tactics reflected the lack of democratic principles among the prison blacks. Jeff Bolster has suggested that the rule of King Dick had antecedents in African American culture in New England and New York in which blacks parodied Yankee democracy by holding mock elections parallel to the regular elections and selecting their own governor or king. Bolster believes that this "king" fulfilled an important function for New England blacks as a community leader and that the emergence of King Dick in Dartmoor was an extension of this practice. From this perspective King Dick and his followers also represented a form of self-rule.<sup>61</sup>

If American prisoners could act in concert with one another in creating little republics in the prisons, they also expressed a strident individualism in the pursuit of the main chance. Some men concentrated on personal improve-

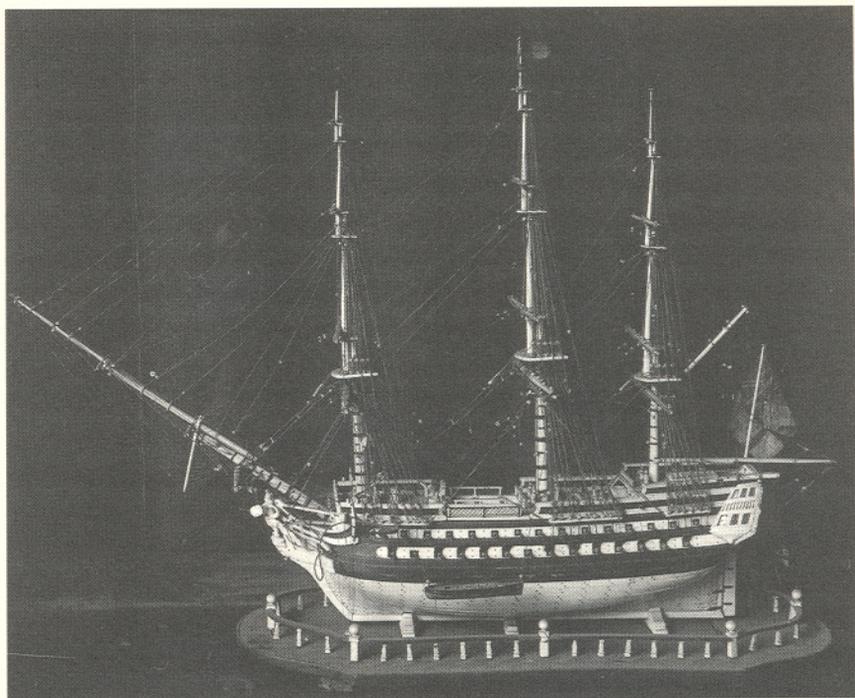
ment, studying in schools, learning to read and write. It was even possible to learn navigation in an effort to advance from the forecandle to the quarterdeck. Perez Drinkwater kept a journal in Dartmoor in which he worked out a series of navigational problems, wrote notes on the kinds of records a captain needs to make, rehearsed bookkeeping procedures, and detailed business practices at a customs house for selling a cargo. Drinkwater noted a poem that denied the sailor values of generosity and asserted what would become middle-class notions of thrift.

I had both money and a *Friend* and took his word therefore  
 I asked my money of my *Friend* for see him I would not  
 if I had my money and my *Friend* and take his word no more

I lent my money to my *Friend* of whom I got great store  
 I loos my money and my *Friend* and naught but worse I got  
 I'll keep my money and my *Friend* and I had once before.<sup>62</sup>

Others sought to make a profit in business. Although the French controlled most employment and enterprise in Dartmoor when the Americans arrived, Yankees eagerly took their place in 1814 as the French prisoners started to be released. Americans set up shops selling tobacco, potatoes, butter, and a host of other specialized items. There were also "grocery-shops" that "sold glasses of rum, pipes, ha' penny-worths of tobacco, butter, snuff, tea, coffee, trickle, &c." Americans also produced items for sale, like model ships, hats, wooden shoes, gloves, and clothing. Some Americans opened a beer house, while others started a school to teach reading, writing, and arithmetic for sixpence a month. These businesses provided as, Charles Andrews suggested, a new meaning to the phrase "free trade and sailors' rights."<sup>63</sup> Often several prisoners would bind together, almost like "joint stock companies." Josiah Cobb and his messmates ran a soup business until one day two of his partners drank up all of their capital in a Sunday spree instead of buying the week's supplies. With all of these "shops and stalls where every little article could be obtained" it was possible for a "man with some money in his pocket" to "live pretty well through the day in Dartmoor Prison."<sup>64</sup>

The most prominent business, however, was gambling, which occurred in almost every prison.<sup>65</sup> After the failure of the soup enterprise, Cobb went into a partnership on a wheel of fortune. He estimated that the game favored the banker by about 25 percent.<sup>66</sup> Nathaniel Pierce and his partners set up a "Bread Wheel," probably a game of chance whereby the winner received a loaf



30. While in Dartmoor Prison, sailors would use the bones from their food to make elaborate ship models like this one of an English frigate. New Bedford Whaling Museum.

of bread, by which he was able to live “very well.”<sup>67</sup> One of the favorite games was Keno, a type of bingo. The advantage of this form of gambling was that it was drawn out and did not cost very much, enabling the prisoner to occupy an hour or two.<sup>68</sup> Prison committees occasionally attempted to stop gambling because some men would sell their clothes in order to back a wager and it often led to quarrels.<sup>69</sup>

One of the most prominent areas of gambling and entrepreneurial activity in Dartmoor was Prison Number Four. If many white prisoners looked askance at the form of government in the African American prison, they did not shun it as some untouchable ghetto. Quite the contrary. Prison Number Four was the very center of social and cultural life among the Americans at Dartmoor. Joseph Valpey admitted that he went to Prison Number Four “to see the Fashions and pass the time,” while Nathaniel Pierce confessed that “I have spent considerable of my time” in the “Black’s Prison,” declaring that the

activity there "is very diverting to a young Person, indeed their is more amusement in this Prison than all the rest of them."<sup>70</sup> Simon, one of King Dick's lieutenants, declared himself a minister to the gospel. His religious services attracted whites and blacks from all over the prison. While questioning the depth of Simon's Christianity, Benjamin Waterhouse had to admit that "his performances have an imposing cast; and are often listened to with seriousness." More significantly, it was in this prison that the pursuit of the main chance took its most obvious form. Black entrepreneurs engaged in a wide variety of occupations. A visitor to Prison Number Four saw a "strange assemblage of antics." There were schools for boxing, fencing, and dancing. Some blacks drew pictures with coal and charcoal. There were raffles "and tricks of slight-of-hand." One's "sense of hearing" would "be regaled with the sound of clarionets, flutes, violins, flagelets, fifes, tamborines, together with the whopping and singing of the negroes." Twice a week the blacks of Number Four even performed theatrical plays.<sup>71</sup>

All of this activity depended upon cash circulating in the prison. Money came from a variety of sources. At times the American government paid a small sum to each prisoner. Larger infusions of cash came from prize money. Some of these funds were earned aboard American ships, but much of it came from the British navy. More than one thousand impressed Americans were sent to Dartmoor, claiming prisoner-of-war status, and carried in their pockets money gained from their years in His Majesty's service. Relatives, too, might send money. One sailor wrote to his affluent father to have a correspondent in England pay him two hundred dollars to ease his life.<sup>72</sup>

Pursuit of the main chance among sailors involved more than economic activity. Many sailors followed their own course, regardless of larger ideological issues. Just as in the Revolutionary War, although in smaller numbers (only about 220 men in Dartmoor), some men sought their way out of prison by joining the British navy. These sailors "justified themselves on the plea of self preservation; that there was a possibility of escaping and saving their lives; and if detected by their country, their death was distant, but here [Dartmoor] it was speedy and certain." Whatever their plea, if their fellow prisoners discovered their intention they were in for some rough treatment.<sup>73</sup> Others, like Ned Myers, simply agreed to work on British transports to get out of prison.<sup>74</sup> Still others pretended to have another nationality. At various times the British allowed Swedish, Dutch, and Prussian nationals captured on American vessels to leave prison. When French prisoners left Dartmoor well over one hundred Americans who knew some French managed to join in their release. As

Charles Andrews explained, "Yankees were citizens of all nations whose language they knew."<sup>75</sup>

Prisoners, regardless of the committees that supposedly policed them, still engaged in criminal activity. Often they stole from one another and misbehaved. One prisoner lamented that young men who fought for their country and for "free trade and sailors' rights" were placed "amid vice and roguery." These activities varied from prison to prison and from group to group. Conditions differed markedly on two British prison ships in England where American captives were held earlier in the war. Whereas the committee managed to keep good order aboard the *Crown Prince*, aboard the *Bahama* the men cared little about cleanliness and did not obey "good and wholesome regulations."<sup>76</sup> Men on prison ships in Bermuda and in Jamaica were also often difficult to control. In Dartmoor there was even a criminal gang, the Rough Allies, who declared themselves outside the normal bounds of the committee system. These men were "riotous, disorderly, filthy, thievishly inclined, or in anywise guilty of rowdyism." Another prisoner described the Rough Allies "as rascally a set of devils as ever escaped drowning." They bullied other prisoners and created as much of a ruckus as they could. Even among the regular prisoners there were men who would get drunk and fight with one another.<sup>77</sup>

This misbehavior contributed to an undercurrent of rowdiness that periodically disrupted the prison, at times in good-natured fun but at other times in a threat of greater violence. The Rough Allies, and other prisoners, would occasionally shout "Keeno! Keeno!" as a signal to make a rush at some person and knock him over. They even played this prank on the British sentries.<sup>78</sup> Sometimes the prisoners would join together and flout the authority of their British keepers. A few days after a man accidentally fell overboard from a prison ship in Jamaica and the guards fired upon him, prisoners tossed a hat over the side to watch the guards fire on it.<sup>79</sup> Prisoners in Dartmoor played a similar trick, lowering a jacket over the wall at night to see the guards' reaction.<sup>80</sup> The men aboard the *Crown Prince* had little respect for the British officer in charge of the vessel. After word got around that he had been caught in having a sheep commandeered from a local farmer, and had to pay compensation, the prisoners had great fun at his expense by shouting "Baa! Baa!" when he and his family came aboard the ship. American prisoners also contested their inadequate provisions by refusing to eat them and even tossing them overboard. They stopped work if they thought that they were not being treated fairly. They hustled would-be British recruiters, and on several occa-

sions fought with their guards.<sup>81</sup> In this context the confrontation over dirty laundry described by Leech was not unusual behavior for American prisoners of war. One British official in Barbados confided to an American prisoner that his countrymen had “such a wild, reckless, daring, enterprising character, that it would puzzle the d—l to keep them in good order.”<sup>82</sup> Benjamin Waterhouse admitted that the sailors’ behavior in prison was often “provoking,” but believed that it was “never malignant, much less, bloody.” He traced it to a “spirit of *fun* and frolic, which our people indulge in beyond all others in the world.” Waterhouse saw this behavior “as one of the luxuriant shoots of our *tree of liberty*,” showing “the strength depth, and extent of its roots, and the richness of the soil.”<sup>83</sup> Yet its ultimate outcome was to have tragic consequences.

In the months after diplomats agreed to the Treaty of Ghent (December 24, 1814), ending the war, American prisoners at Dartmoor were caught in a world in limbo. Peace promised to bring their release. Neither the British nor the American government seemed eager or able to deal with six thousand unruly sailors. These men could care less about delays caused by the niceties of treaty ratification. Left to languish through another austere winter, they grew ever more resentful of the walls and guards that bound them to their desolate fate. With liberty on the horizon, but still out of reach, Jack Tar took rowdyism to a new level and pushed his keepers to the edge and then beyond.

Trouble began soon after word of the treaty reached Dartmoor on December 28, 1814. That day passed in boisterous celebration with banners flying from all the prisons. One standard had the words “FREE TRADE AND SAILORS’ RIGHTS” emblazoned on it, because the sailors were convinced that this ideal formed the “groundwork of the treaty.” Captain Thomas G. Shortland, commandant of the prison, persuaded the Americans to take down these banners only after he agreed to fly both the British and American flags at his house.<sup>84</sup> Two days later, more impressed Americans arrived from the British navy. These men, however, were tainted by the fact that they had declared their citizenship only after hearing of the treaty and as a means of escaping His Majesty’s service. Sixteen had even served in HMS *Pelican* when it took the *Argus*. After they bragged of this fact, Shortland had to intercede and remove “these traitorous villains” from the prison. Even more galling was the appearance of two men who the previous winter had volunteered in prison to serve in the British navy. The American prisoners determined to punish these men. Some wanted to kill them; others were for giving them the lash. Finally, “it was unanimously concluded to put upon them a mark, which would be a last-

ing stigma." Patriotic tars seized them "upon a table, and tattooed with U.S. on one cheek, and a T on the other, for United States Traitor."<sup>85</sup>

Tension remained high during the next month. Sometime in January Shortland provoked another confrontation with the Americans. He insisted on counting the prisoners in the cold and wet air of the yard. After submitting to this hardship for a few days, the Americans in a body refused to stand in the yard to be counted. Shortland stopped the market and ordered the guard to drive the Americans to their assigned prisons. The obstinate tars held their ground and told the militia guard that if they charged with their bayonets they would disarm them. Recognizing that he did not have enough men to force the issue, Shortland backed down.<sup>86</sup>

The prisoners no doubt were emboldened by the fact that they knew the war was over and their status more ambiguous. As they waited in anticipation of their release that winter, escapes, which had occurred only rarely before, now increased as the guards eased their vigilance. Still the prisoners suffered, and in early February smallpox broke out.

Amid growing discontent another incident further increased the tension at Dartmoor. Four American prisoners had been held permanently in solitary confinement for attempting to blow up their vessel before it could become a British prize. One of these men escaped from the cachet—black hole—and ran into a mass of prisoners standing in the yard. His countrymen, believing that his crime was an act of patriotism, protected him. Shortland closed down the markets and denied every privilege to compel the prisoners to surrender the man. When that did not work he marched into the yard with two hundred soldiers. "The prisoners were ready for this, and standing united, surrounded the soldiers and told the officers they were prepared to defend themselves and the man." Faced with such defiance, Shortland ordered the soldiers to retire. The standoff lasted six more days before Shortland abandoned all hope of retrieving the man and reopened the markets.<sup>87</sup>

American prisoners had intermittently challenged British authority before. With peace in the offing, they were now developing defiance into an art form. Another month went by and news of the ratification of peace arrived. Some prisoners now obtained their release through friends, or by signing on with an American captain. The British did not seem to mind escapes since the men were likely to be pressed as soon as they appeared in a port.

Prisoners increasingly relied on traditional forms of collective action. On March 17, Shortland told the prisoners that they would be released as soon as the American agent, Reuben Beasley, was ready to receive them. On the same day a letter arrived from Beasley insisting that the men would not be sent back

to the United States until the sailors who had not had smallpox were inoculated. The coldness of the letter annoyed the prisoners. Believing that Beasley had often ignored them, the prisoners had a long list of grievances against him. Now, he seemed to stand between them and their return to America. On March 25 the prisoners determined to punish Beasley by resorting to a crowd ritual developed during the resistance movement against Great Britain in the 1760s and 1770s. They paraded with an effigy of Beasley and held a mock trial. They accused Beasley "of depriving many hundreds of your countrymen of their lives, by the most wanton and most cruel deaths, by nakedness, starvation, and exposure to pestilence." An "impartial and judicious jury" of his countrymen convicted him of this crime "upon the testimony of five thousand seven hundred witnesses." His sentence, read to the effigy, was to "be hanged by the neck on the top of prison No. 7, until you are dead; your body is then to be taken down and fastened to a stake, and burned to ashes, which are to be distributed to the winds, that your name may be forgotten, and your crimes no longer disgrace our nation." Before the prisoners carried out this sentence on the effigy in front of the guards and British officers, they read a stylized confession in which Beasley admitted his many faults and his long history of neglect of the prisoners. As one observer put it, this action was not "the conduct of an infuriate mob; but it was begun and carried through by some of the stediest men within the walls of Dartmoor Prison."<sup>88</sup>

It is not clear what Shortland thought of this spectacle. Perhaps he was glad that the prisoners were focusing their wrath on Beasley instead of the British. Whatever his thoughts, he would soon come to realize that this crowd behavior was going too far. Everyone expected the prisoners to begin leaving Dartmoor soon. In anticipation of their release the various prison shops broke up on April 2. Probably for the same reason the contractor who supplied the prison with bread decided to unload his store of hard bread on the prisoners on April 4. (The contractor was obliged to serve soft bread on a daily basis, keeping a store of hard bread in case of emergency. If the prisoners left Dartmoor before he could use the bread it would probably be a total loss.) On the fourth Captain Shortland went to Plymouth, and the perfect opportunity to get rid of the damaged stock appeared. Many of the prisoners had had similar experiences in other compounds. In January 1814, the prisoners aboard the *Crown Prince* had refused to eat for two days when they were served hard bread instead of soft bread. Although one sailor reported that this "embargo on our bowels" was "a pretty tough piece of self-denial," the Americans held out for two days before the British relented and the prisoners "established the Yankee character for inflexibility, beyond all doubt or controversy."<sup>89</sup> Now that

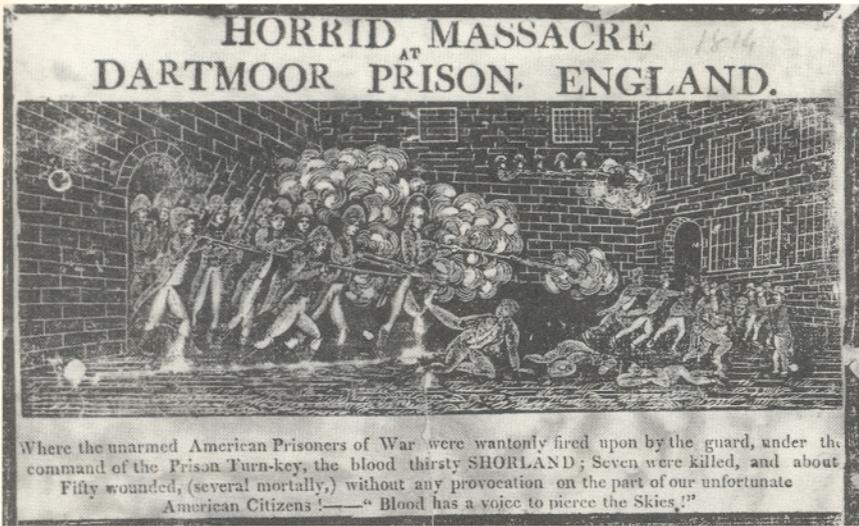
peace had been agreed upon and liberty close at hand, American Jack Tars would only be more obstinate in their rights and again refused to eat the hard bread. As the day wore on, tensions increased, as did the hunger pangs in the pit of every prisoner's stomach. By evening the Americans had determined to "die by the sword than the famine." When the time came for them to return to the prison houses, as usual in the evening, they charged the gate and broke it open, sending the soldiers stationed there in hasty retreat. Alarms bells sounded, drums rolled, and the entire garrison was called to arms. Word spread through the countryside and militia bands began to march to Dartmoor. The prisoners stood in front of the storehouse, confronted by soldiers with fixed bayonets. Undaunted, the Americans persisted in their demands, declaring that the soldiers did not have orders to fire and that if they did "they must abide by any consequences." They also threatened to level the storehouse, and every prisoner would march out of Dartmoor unless bread were served out immediately. The contractor realized his mistake and promised to serve the soft bread if the men returned to prison. The Americans withdrew, taking a clerk as hostage. That night, as they ate their soft bread, the Americans knew they had won the day.<sup>90</sup>

Shortland, who arrived on April 5 with two hundred extra soldiers, must have known it too. He also must have resolved that he could no longer allow an American mob to rule Dartmoor. That decision would earn him infamy among American sailors.

On April 6 American prisoners were playing ball in the prison yard. These men were "ready dogs and ripe for fun." They repeatedly threw the ball over the wall. An obliging guard retrieved it for awhile, although he soon grew tired of this game telling the men that the next time they should go fetch it themselves. The men were willing to push the joke further, and began digging a hole in the stone wall in front of the guard. A huge crowd collected and shouted encouragement to the men, who worked away at the stone. Two men even used metal bars, until they had a hole big enough for a man to crawl through. The sentry told them to stop their digging; he received only insults and taunts for his efforts. He was even told to go ahead and fire his musket if he dared.<sup>91</sup> At the same time, in another part of the prison, some sailors had gained permission to lay on the grass between a railing and the walls, an area usually off-limits to the prisoners. A privilege for a few became a right for the many, and the area filled with Americans. The crowding led to some jostling, and then scuffling. The Americans threw pieces of turf and even old shoes at one another "principally in play" and with "considerable noise."<sup>92</sup>

American prisoners later claimed that there was no serious threat, and that

both incidents reflected spirited play by bored men waiting to be released. Given the context of recent events, the disturbance and the possibility of escape seemed real enough to Shortland and the British guard. As it was approaching seven in the evening, the regular time for the American sailors to return to their prison buildings, Shortland alerted the garrison and ordered the alarm rung. Confused and curious, hundreds of prisoners ran to the main gate between the market yard and the prison yards to see what all the fuss was about. The press of humanity, or the mischievousness of a few tars, forced the gate open, further creating the impression that the Americans were going to break out of Dartmoor. As prisoners piled into the market yard some were shouting "Keeno! Keeno!"—the prison phrase for a free-for-all.<sup>93</sup> Shortland appeared with a file of soldiers. Other soldiers lined the walls. Amid the noise and commotion, Shortland determined to control the prison, and ordered his men to lower their bayonets to the charge position and force the crowd back. The mass of prisoners stood so close to the soldiers that the order was difficult to execute. Gradually the British pushed the prisoners out of the market square toward the prison buildings. Several Americans were not ready to beat a retreat, and dallied in the passage between the square and prison yards. Perhaps emboldened by past experience, they were "making a noise, hallowing, insulting, and provoking, and daring the military to fire."<sup>94</sup> Some of the soldiers claimed the prisoners hurled stones as well as epitaphs. One reported he had his cap knocked off.<sup>95</sup> In these strained circumstances a shot rang out. The prisoners later swore that Shortland had ordered the firing out of hatred and spite.<sup>96</sup> No matter who was responsible, shot after shot ensued. The initial round seemed to have no real effect since several soldiers raised their weapons and fired over the crowd. A few prisoners brazenly shouted more insults, crying out, "Fire you buggers, you have no shot in your pieces or guns."<sup>97</sup> British soldiers, angered by the repeated taunting and loss of face two days before, leveled their guns into the mob, and once their weapons were empty thrust their bayonets in every direction. Some prisoners scurried back to the buildings, crowding the doors in an effort to escape the bloodshed. Others paused to throw more stones at their attackers. The Americans later claimed atrocities were committed. Several witnesses described one wounded man turning to his attackers to beg for mercy; Shortland, so the prisoners reported, had a party of soldiers riddle the sailor with bullets.<sup>98</sup> The British officers said that they strove to control their men, who continued the massacre out of "individual irritation and exasperation."<sup>99</sup> A few soldiers fired into the prison buildings after the sailors withdrew inside. While Americans viewed this action as wanton savagery and proof of British brutality, the soldiers



31. Reminiscent of Paul Revere's famous engraving of the Boston Massacre, this portrayal of the Dartmoor Massacre appeared at the top of a broadsheet decrying the British action of April 6, 1812. Detail of "Horrid Massacre at Dartmoor Prison, England" (1815). Nantucket Historical Association.

argued that the prisoners had thrown stones at them from the doorways and from inside the buildings. One American, confessing that he was a little groggy that evening because he had been drinking, admitted that he dared the soldiers to "fire and be damned" and tossed a stone out of his prison at the guard.<sup>100</sup> The shooting lasted about twenty minutes. After the ruckus quieted down at last, seven Americans lay dead; scores more were injured. Several had to suffer amputation as a result of the wounds. And the Dartmoor Massacre became etched in the mind of American tars as the ultimate example of British perfidy.<sup>101</sup>

A somber and vengeful mood descended upon the American prisoners in the days after the incident. The Dartmoor prisoners' committee put together its own report of the massacre, fearing that official channels would not properly represent the "brutal" massacre. They took depositions from prisoners who all accused Shortland of a "predetermined act of atrocious murder." From their perspective, Shortland, who they also said was drunk at the time, planned the entire incident.<sup>102</sup> The American sailors expressed their anger as they began leaving Dartmoor a few days after the massacre. Flags escorted the men to the coast, proclaiming Shortland a murderer and depicting scenes to



remind each sailor of the terrible event.<sup>103</sup> One banner had "the representation of a tomb, with the Goddess of Liberty leaning on it, and a murdered sailor lying by its side." The inscription proclaimed "Columbia weeps, and we remember."<sup>104</sup> Upon their return to the United States, newspapers filled with stories of the Dartmoor Massacre.<sup>105</sup> Handbills appeared depicting the "HORRID MASSACRE" showing how "the unarmed American Prisoners of War were wantonly fired upon by the guard" and describing Shortland as "blood thirsty." An enraged citizenry joined in the outcry. Within a few months, however, the anger waned and the story disappeared.<sup>106</sup>

The official reaction was more measured. Shortly after the event a British court ruled the shooting justifiable homicide. A joint Anglo-American commission, American Charles King and Briton Seymour Larpent, investigated the massacre, drawing up a report by April 26, 1815. They interviewed guards and prisoners and were confronted by a maze of contradictory evidence. Ultimately they provided a balanced narrative that exonerated Shortland and shifted blame to the militia guard and the American prisoners. The incarcerated sailors viewed the King-Larpent report as a whitewash, and declared that it was concluded without hearing all of the depositions collected by the Dartmoor prisoners' committee. Diplomats on both sides wanted to put the issue behind them. The British Prince Regent expressed his regrets over the incident and offered to compensate the families of the killed. American diplomats quibbled over the responsibility of Shortland but decided not to dwell on the loss of a few sailors.<sup>107</sup>

Dartmoor would remain in the popular consciousness of the waterfront for a long time. However the sailors may have behaved, whether they had pursued the main chance in prison, or had espoused the ideas of the Age of Revolution, the massacre was seen as the ultimate price Jack Tar paid for American liberty. In the wake of the War of 1812, at the dawn of the Era of Good Feelings and in the shadow of Andrew Jackson, Dartmoor carried little lasting resonance with the rest of the American public. As the nation turned inward to exploit a continent, many a sailor must have begun to wonder if anyone away from the waterfront cared for Jack Tar.

Liberty on the  
Waterfront

*American Maritime Culture in the  
Age of Revolution*

Paul A. Gilje

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA PRESS

Philadelphia