

# MAHSNEWS



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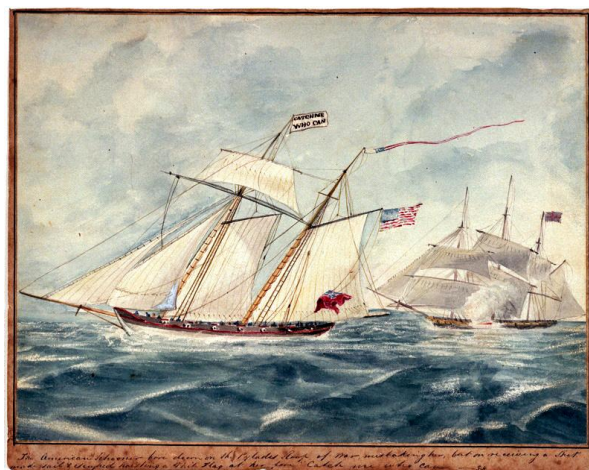
## The Search for the *Lion of Baltimore*: An American Privateer from the War of 1812

By David Shaw

This is the story of the search for an American privateer sunk by the British in the Chesapeake Bay in 1814. The time was the War of 1812. United States naval ships were blockaded in port by the British. Most of the naval battles of the war were fought on inland lakes such as Lake George and Lake Champlain in New York State. In large part because of the blockade, the new United States government looked to private enterprise to help out – private enterprise in the form of privateering.

Privateers were nautical mercenaries, non-military, ship-borne raiders sanctioned to attack enemy vessels, whether naval or merchant, in the name of the Federal government. Privateering was, of course, not unique to America or to the War of 1812. As early as the 13th century, ship commanders were issued formal authorization from their governments, known as Letters of Marque and Reprisal, which allowed and in some cases encouraged them to prey on enemy ships. Privateers were an effective way for a government to mobilize a naval force without expending much money. Or, as in the case of the United States in the War of 1812, these nautical irregulars supported a navy that was blockaded and ineffective.

Most American privateers during the War of 1812 were from Massachusetts or Baltimore, although a few sailed out of New York. They were very successful and inflicted significant damage on the British, having far more of an effect than American naval vessels. Between 1812 and 1815, the United States Navy seized or



An American schooner escaping from H.M.S. Pylades during the War of 1812. From a watercolor in the Macpherson Collection.

destroyed 15 Royal Navy ships and no commercial vessels. During the same period, American privateers seized three naval vessels and an estimated 2,500 British merchant vessels. The success of the privateers forced the British to convoy merchant ships, which further engaged Royal Navy vessels already busy blockading American ports.

Among the more renowned privateers sailing out of Baltimore was Joshua Barney, who was captain of the privateer *Rossie* before he joined the Federal Navy to command the Chesapeake Flotilla. Equally famous was Thomas Boyle, who first captained the schooner *Comet*

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## Notes from the Prez – Steven Anthony

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You know spring has arrived in Washington DC when the cherry blossoms begin to bloom and MAHS wraps up our Introductory Course in Underwater Archaeology with the annual pool session. This year will be the twentieth anniversary of our course so please take a moment to congratulate Tom Berkey and his team of devoted instructors. For twenty years they have dedicated their personal time to provide sport divers with a unique opportunity to become involved in underwater archaeology and shipwreck exploration.

The course wasn't the only activity keeping MAHS members busy this season. The search for the *Lion of Baltimore* continued throughout the winter months. Under the direction of Dave Shaw, MAHS teamed with Brian Jordan, the newly appointed Assistant Underwater Archaeologist for the State of Maryland, to map a wreck found at Bodkin Point. At the conclusion of this work, there was sufficient evidence to determine that this site is not the wreck of the *Lion* (see following article). So MAHS decided to expand the search and has submitted a grant application to the Maryland Historical Trust for funding..

Dennis Knepper also led a MAHS team into the field several times during the "off season" to map and survey the remains of three shipwrecks located in the Wicomico River within the city of Salisbury, MD. In coordination with Susan Langley, the Maryland State Underwater Archaeologist, a World War II-style landing craft was examined (see the article in this issue) and a site survey was commenced on a structure identified only as the centerboard wreck.

In January, the MAHS Board of Directors voted to update and improve the MAHS website. That work has been ongoing and the new website is expected to be ready for "prime time viewing" in mid-July 2008.

Also, in January, Jim Smailes, Ray Hayes and Bill Utley attended the 2008 Annual Conference for the Society of Historical Archaeology in Albuquerque NM. While attending the conference, Jim also represented MAHS at the annual meeting of the Advisory Council in Underwater Archaeology.

In February, Earl Glock conducted his annual course, Emergency First Response (CPR and First Aid), along with DAN's Oxygen First Aid for Scuba Diving Injuries. Earl provided these courses at cost to MAHS members at the Splash Dive Center in Alexandria, Virginia.

Dave Shaw, Dennis Knepper, and Tom Berkey represented MAHS at the 38<sup>th</sup> Annual Middle Atlantic

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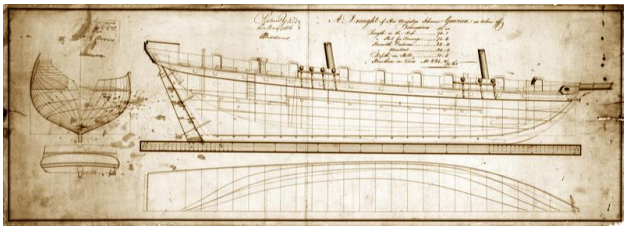
MAHSNEWS will consider articles and notices for publication which enhance public awareness and appreciation of maritime history, archaeology, and heritage preservation.

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and later the *Chasseur* (from the French for hunter). Boyle's success in *Chasseur* led the citizens of Baltimore to call the vessel "The Pride of Baltimore," a name that lives on today in the famous replica vessels *Pride of Baltimore* and *Pride of Baltimore II*.

The vessel of choice for many privateers during this period was the so-called Baltimore clipper schooner. *Rossie*, *Comet*, and *Chasseur* were all Baltimore clippers, each built in Baltimore's Fells Point yards by the shipwright Thomas Kemp. The Baltimore clipper was a sleek schooner design, built for speed. Howard Chapelle, curator of maritime history at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., who has written widely on American ships and boats ranging from vernacular watercraft to military vessels, noted that:

there is no type of vessel that has so much romantic and historical interest to Americans as that commonly called the Baltimore Clipper. First appearing in naval history during the war of the Revolution...by 1800 the Baltimore Clipper was extremely popular with privateers, slavers and other mariners requiring fast vessels.



The lines of the Bermuda Sloop, Flying Fish, one of the forerunners of the Baltimore clipper.

Developed from earlier sloop and schooner designs, the clipper schooners were long and light, with little rigging, low freeboard, and a distinct rake to the stern and stem posts. Their wide, clear decks were suitable for both working the ship and for ease in handling guns.

The clippers were used as blockade runners and privateers, for which they were rightly seen as heroic. But they also had their dark side. The vessels were also commonly sought as slavers, especially following the abolition of the slave trade by Britain in 1807, when American slavers felt the need for fast ships to evade British warships patrolling the African coast.

It has been said that some of the most storied vessels in American sailing history were built in the shipyards of Fells Point. Founded in 1730 by William Fell, who was attracted by the beautiful deep water and proximity to agricultural areas and thick forests, Fells Point quickly became a shipbuilding and commercial center. The Fell's Point yards produced the first frigate of the Continental Navy, the *Virginia*, in 1775. In 1797 David

Stodder built the *Constellation*, a three-masted ship that carried elements of the sleek, schooner design for which the yards became famous. Ironically, the great black abolitionist Frederick Douglass in his earlier years worked as a ship's caulker in the yards of Fells Point, shipyards which would eventually produce some of the most notorious of the nation's slaving vessels.

In partial retaliation for the actions of the Baltimore privateers, the British launched the Chesapeake Campaign of 1814. The campaign was designed in part to close down the Fells Point shipyards, to "clean out that nest of pirates in Baltimore." Baltimore thus became a principal target of the British, leading eventually to the bombardment of Fort McHenry, the inspiration for Francis Scott Key's poem *Star Spangled Banner*.

While the most well-known Baltimore privateer was *Chasseur*, another highly successful raider was a clipper known as the *Lion*, or the *Lion of Baltimore*. More than one vessel at that time carried the name *Lion*, including several that sailed out of New England ports. The *Lion of Baltimore* was listed in George Emmons' *History of the US Navy*, written in 1850, as a Baltimore schooner with a crew of 22 men and 2 guns. Lloyd's Register of American Vessels listed her as a brig or schooner of 161 tons, sheathed in copper and copper fastened, with a single deck, and drawing 12 feet of water. The *Lion of Baltimore* is reported to have seized or destroyed 15 English prize ships along the coast of Brittany in 1814, amassing a huge cargo which she brought into the French port of L'Orient. There, with the sanction of the United States consulate, she sold the cargo for the equivalent of \$400,000 in silver. At this point her trail goes cold, and we have no formal record of her return to Baltimore.

The story picks up again in the form of historical documentation from a British frigate that was on patrol as part of the Chesapeake Campaign. HMS *Menelaus* was a 38-gun fifth-rate, captained by Sir Peter Parker. In a report to Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane on August 30, 1814, Parker recounted the burning of a schooner off Bodkin Point, south of the Patapsco River:

"...on the 24<sup>th</sup> inst. Lieut. Warre with two Boats burnt a Schooner in Narrows creek close to Bodkin point."

Additional description of this event was discovered in the log



Sir Peter Parker, Commander of HMS *Menelaus*.

of *Menelaus*' Master which was recently located in a library in Ohio by Kim Nielsen, Director of the U.S. Navy Museum in Washington, D.C. The Master, identified as R. Collins, noted the following:

Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> August 1814. Winds South by West. AM, Weather squally. At 7 sent a Barge [a large ship's boat] in chase of a schooner in shore. At 9 Barge returned, the chase having escaped.

The schooner had spotted *Menelaus* and, unsure that she could escape up the Patapsco to Baltimore, headed for the shelter of Bodkin Creek. But although hidden behind Bodkin Point, the schooner's masts were eventually seen by the warship. The Master's log continues:

PM – At 1:00 Observed a schooner at an anchor under the land. Sent 2 barges with the *Jane* Tender after her. At 2:00 Observed the schooner in flames – a 4 the Tender and Boats returned. Bodkin Pt. NW.

Lieutenant Benjamin G. Beynon, head of the Royal Marine detachment assigned to *Menelaus*, also kept a journal during the Bay campaign. He too recorded the burning of the schooner near Bodkin Creek, reporting “the destruction of a fine schooner called the *Lion of Baltimore*.”

Unable to escape, the schooner's crew appears to have abandoned the vessel and presumably made for the nearby turnpike to Baltimore. Along with the valuable cargo, they took the vessel's sails, to make her useless to the English. The crew of the tender *Jane* from *Menelaus* burned the abandoned vessel and returned to their ship.

And so, we have two lines of information. We know from records that there was a Baltimore clipper referred to as the *Lion* that operated very successfully as a privateer off the coast of France. She is known to have set out for a return voyage to Baltimore with \$400,000 in silver. There is no additional record of the vessel. We also have the log from the warship *Menelaus* and the journal of Lt. Beynon, both of which describe in detail the discovery, capture, and burning of a schooner called the *Lion of Baltimore* near the mouth of Bodkin Creek. We are missing an unequivocal connection between the two lines of evidence. Was the schooner *Lion of Baltimore* that was burned by the crew of *Menelaus* the same as the privateer that had so successfully raided British shipping off the coast of France?

This is where archaeology comes in. The discovery of physical evidence of a copper-bottomed vessel in or around Bodkin Creek would establish the necessary link. Steve Bilicki, formerly with the Maryland Maritime Archeology Program, conducted side-scan sonar surveys of portions of Bodkin Creek in 2005 and 2007, but found



Wreck on the bay shore of Bodkin Point, probably a cargo hauler from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Photo by A. Aiken.

no solid evidence. There are several known wrecks in the area, and thus far MAHS volunteers have had a chance to look at only one, a wreck reported on the Bay shore of Bodkin Point. The photo above shows the wreck as it appeared in a blow-out at low tide several years ago, prior to our archaeological investigation. Unfortunately, we have not experienced the same low water conditions, and this has made detailed recording of the wreck more challenging. Conditions are difficult at best, with shallow, choppy water and poor visibility. Historical records in fact suggest that this wreck is the *Harriet P. Ely*, a cargo hauler built in 1876 that grounded and was abandoned in a nor'easter or hurricane in 1933.

And so, the search continues. The War of 1812 essentially marked the end of privateering – the practice was finally outlawed by the European states as part of the Treaty of Paris in 1856. The *Lion of Baltimore* represents an important part of the history of Maryland, the War of 1812, and the long history of privateers. If found, the remains of the *Lion* – however incomplete or deteriorated – would be the remains of one of the last of the great privateers, and the only surviving example of the famed Baltimore clippers. ⚓

Thanks to Kim Nielsen of the U.S. Navy Museum for historical information used in this article, and to Andy Aiken, who provided pictures of the wreck site and allowed MAHS the use of his property for access to the site.

