

Continental Navy

At the outbreak of the American Revolutionary War in 1775, the British navy was the largest and most experienced navy in the world, and it was essential to the survival of the British empire.

The Royal Navy numbered over 250 vessels of all sizes. These ranged from massive ships-of-the-line to tiny sloops and coastal vessels. By the end of the war that number would nearly double as the navy expanded to meet the threat posed by other European powers fighting alongside the Americans.

The navy served as Britain's "wooden walls," protecting the home islands from invasion by much larger continental powers. Britain also relied on her navy to defend trade flowing in from her far-flung colonies.

Despite some restrictions, American colonists benefited from Britain's mercantilist system, which provided Royal Navy protection and a steady market in Britain. While most colonists remained subsistence farmers, more and more became connected in one way or another with maritime commerce.

By the eve of the American Revolution, maritime commerce had become a major factor in the economic, social, political, and cultural development of the American colonies.

During the American Revolution, the British Navy played a critical role in supporting its Army's attempts to crush the American rebellion, allowing the army to strike anywhere along the coast.

Formation of Continental Navy

In an October 5, 1775 letter, read to Congress on October 13, 1775, General Washington stated, in part,

I shall now beg leave to request the determination of Congress as to the property and disposal of such vessels and cargoes as are designed for the supply of the enemy, and may fall into our hands.

There has been an event of this kind at Portsmouth, as by the enclosure No 3 , in which I have directed the cargo to be brought hither for the use of the Army, reserving the settlement of any claims of capture to the decision of Congress.

As there are many unfortunate individuals whose property has been confiscated by the enemy, I would humbly suggest to the consideration of Congress the humanity of applying, in part or in the whole, such captures to the relief of those sufferers, after compensating any expense of the captors, and for their activity and spirit.

I am the more induced to request this determination may be speedy, as I have directed three vessels to be equipped, in order to cut off the supplies; and, from the number of vessels hourly arriving, it may become an object of some importance.

In the disposal of these captures, for the encouragement of the officers and men, I have allowed them one-third of the cargoes, except military stores, which, with the vessels, are to be reserved for the publick use. I hope my plan, as well as the execution, will be favoured with the approbation of Congress.

Within a few days of Washington's letter, the first legislation of the Continental Congress in regard to an American Navy directed the equipment of one vessel of 10 guns and another of 14 guns as national cruisers.

At the same time, an act was passed establishing a 'Marine Committee,' consisting of John Adams, John Langdon and Silas Deane, which was chosen by Congress from among its own members, and was to be in complete control of naval affairs.

Washington chartered the fishing schooner Hannah to raid British shipping of valuable military supplies. Though Washington had no intention of establishing an American navy, the Hannah became the first of eleven vessels chartered to aid the revolutionary cause.



The initial fleet included the brigantine Washington and seven schooners, the Hannah, Lynch, Franklin, Lee, Warren, Harrison and the Hancock. But these were army vessels under the command of General Washington.

General Washington commissioned John Manley of Massachusetts to command the schooner Lee with 6 carriage guns, 10 swivel guns and a crew of 30 men, total weight 74 tons. In November 1775 Manley captured the British ship Nancy laden with military stores.

All of these commissions were in the army.

On November 25, 1775, Congress authorized the capture and confiscation of all British armed vessels, transports and supply ships, and directed the issuing of commissions to captains of cruisers and privateers.

1. That all such ships of war, frigates, sloops, cutters, and armed vessels as are or shall be employed in the present cruel and unjust war against the United Colonies, and shall fall into the hands of, or be taken by the inhabitants thereof, be seized and forfeited to, and for the purposes hereinafter mentioned.

2. That all transport vessels in the same service, having on board any troops, arms, ammunition, cloathing, provisions, or military or naval stores, of what kind soever, and all vessels to whomsoever belonging, that shall be employed in carrying provisions or other necessaries to the British army or armies, or navy,

that now are or shall hereafter be within any of the United Colonies, shall be liable to seizure, but that the said cargoes only be liable to forfeiture and confiscation, unless the said vessels so employed belong to an inhabitant or inhabitants of these United Colonies; in which case the said vessel or vessels, together with her or their cargo, shall be liable to confiscation. ...

On December 22, 1775, the Marine Committee appointed the following officers, with the approval of Congress:

Commander-in-Chief: Esek Hopkins

Captains: Dudley Saltonstall, Abraham Whipple, Nicholas Biddle, John B. Hopkins

First Lieutenants: John Paul Jones, Rhodes Arnold, Eli Stansbury, Hoysted Hacker, Jonathan Pitcher

Second Lieutenants: Benjamin Seabury, Joseph Olney, Elisha Warner, Thomas Weaver, James McDougall

Third Lieutenants: John Fanning, Ezekiel Burroughs, Daniel Vaughan

The Marine Committee was given full powers in the direction of the fleet under Commodore Esek Hopkins, on January 25, 1776.

The committee also drafted subsequent naval legislation and prepared rules and regulations to govern the organization. The first American squadron was launched on February 18, 1776. The size of the Continental navy peaked in 1777 with a total of 31 ships.

American naval forces in the War for Independence took many forms, most of them designed to meet a specific need at a particular moment. The early Continental Navy was designed to work with privateers to wage tactical raids against the transports that supplied British forces in North America.

The Continental Congress purchased, converted and constructed a fleet of small ships to accomplish this mission. These navy ships sailed independently or in pairs, hunting British commerce ships and transports.

Over the six months of the American siege of Boston, "Washington's Navy" captured some fifty-five prizes, provided much-needed supplies to the troops, and boosted the efforts of naval-minded members of Congress who sought to create a national naval force.

Over the course of the War of Independence, the Continental Navy sent to sea more than fifty armed vessels of various types. The navy's squadrons and cruisers seized enemy supplies and carried correspondence and diplomats to Europe, returning with needed munitions.

They took nearly 200 British vessels as prizes, some off the British Isles themselves, contributing to the demoralization of the enemy and forcing the British to divert warships to protect convoys and trade routes. In addition, the navy provoked diplomatic crises that helped bring France into the war against Great Britain.

The French and Spanish Navies Support the American Effort

The naval war changed drastically in 1778 when the French joined the war on the side of the Americans. Faced with a foe with a comparably large navy, the British now had to prepare for large-scale fleet actions.

Even worse was the threat of invasion and the loss of colonies in the West Indies and Asia, which were far more profitable to Britain than the 13 colonies in North America. British fears increased in 1779, when the Spanish joined the war, and the threat of a combined Franco-Spanish invasion of Britain became a very real possibility.

The commitment to supporting the army, protecting trade, and defending the home islands and colonies spread the Royal Navy thin by 1780, allowing the French to send increasing numbers of arms and men to America.

John Paul Jones

John Paul was born on July 6, 1747, in Kirkcudbright, Scotland.

At the age of 12 he entered the British merchant marine and went to sea for the first time as a cabin boy. He became first mate on a slaver brigantine in 1766; he was appointed master in 1769.

In 1773, he killed the leader of his mutinous crew in self-defense at Tobago, in the West Indies.

To avoid trial, he fled to Virginia and was considered a fugitive by the British. He concealed his identity by adding the surname Jones.

At the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775, Jones went to Philadelphia and entered the Continental Navy. Thomas Jefferson and others referred to him as “little Jones” – he may have been 5’5”.

Unlike other merchant seamen, he was well dressed, carried a sword, and conducted himself with practiced decorum. He had a Scottish brogue and light Celtic features. He was intense about his honor and his duties and was a harsh military master, but was also surprisingly sociable.

Jones was commissioned a lieutenant on the first American flagship, Alfred. Jones was quickly promoted to captain in 1776, and was given command of the sloop Providence. While on his first cruise aboard Providence, he destroyed British fisheries in Nova Scotia and captured sixteen prize British ships.

In 1779, an American naval squadron under the command of John Paul Jones took the American Revolutionary War to Great Britain.



Challenged by a large combined French and Spanish fleet, the British Navy was too preoccupied to prevent American interference with its merchant marine in the Atlantic. Operating from French bases, Jones led a small fleet around the British Isles from August to October 1779.

Sighting two enemy ships of war conveying merchantmen loaded with naval stores, Jones's Bonhomme Richard engaged the British frigate Serapis, commanded by Captain Richard Pearson, in a memorable 3 ½-hour fight on September 23, 1779.

Jones uttered, according to the later recollection of his first lieutenant, the legendary reply to a taunt about surrender from the British captain,

“I have not yet begun to fight!”

The slaughter on both sides was great; an estimated 150 Americans and nearly as many British were killed or wounded. The British Captain Pearson finally surrendered, fearing any additional length to the battle would destroy his vessel and his men.

Though certainly a messy naval exchange, the victory of the USS Bonhomme Richard in a battle of attrition against the seemingly invincible British Navy brought an immense amount of legitimacy to the United States and inspired his medal.

The Future United States Navy

In 1785, two years after the end of the war, the money-poor Congress sold off the last ship of the Continental Navy. But with the expansion of trade and shipping in the 1790s, the possibility of attacks by European powers and pirates increased

In early March 1794, news arrived that attacks on American ships were increasing. In addition to the merchant ships Thomas, Hope, Dispatch, George, Olive Branch, Jane, President, Polly, and Minerva having been taken by Barbary pirates in late 1793, still more American vessels were now falling victim to privateers and ships of war – both British and French – much closer to home.

On March 27, 1794, President Washington signed the “Act to provide a Naval Armament.” It authorized the President to acquire six frigates, four of 44 guns each and two of 36 guns each, by purchase or otherwise. In addition, it specified how many crew members would be necessary and what their pay and daily rations would be. It launched the new US Navy.

Information here is primarily from US Navy; Mariners' Museum; National Park Service; American Battlefield Trust; Military Advantage; Museum of the American GI; Order of Founders and Patriots of America; Northern Illinois University; Britannica

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young