

NEW LONDON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

SEPTEMBER 2012

“Yankey Torpedo” Adventures (Part One) by Andrew German

When Congress approved the declaration of war against Great Britain in June 1812, it was committing a very small standing army and navy to fight against the world’s largest navy and a professional army of long experience. Even if the British Army and the Royal Navy were largely engaged in confining and defeating Napoleon’s forces in Europe, if the US had any chance of achieving its aims in the war, a civilian effort would be necessary. The first step was calling up each state’s militia to support the regular army, which was done immediately (and was resisted by several New England states that opposed the war, including Connecticut). A second step, initiated a week after the declaration of war, was to legislate the use of private armed vessels—privateers and letter-of-marque traders—to make war on Britain’s merchant marine. These privateers fought for a combination of profit and patriotism. The third step, in March 1813, was passage of “an act to encourage the destruction of the armed vessels of war of the enemy,” popularly known as the Torpedo Act, to reward civilian attacks on British warships.

In North America, the idea of using a waterproof underwater bomb to destroy

a ship was introduced by David Bushnell of Westbrook, Connecticut, during the American Revolution. Bushnell designed and built a one-man wooden submarine to attach a waterproof bomb with clockwork detonator to a warship’s hull. Operated by Sergeant Ezra Lee of Lyme, Connecticut, Bushnell’s submarine, the *Turtle*, made several attempts in New York Harbor in 1776 to attach the bomb—which Lee called a torpedo—to a warship’s keel, but Lee was unable to drill a hole to attach his bomb. Bushnell also developed floating mines—waterproof kegs of gunpowder—that were used unsuccessfully on several occasions, including the “Battle of the Kegs” on the Delaware River in 1778.

Thanks to inventor Robert Fulton, these

efforts would be renewed in the second war with Great Britain.¹

Pennsylvanian Robert Fulton experimented with submarines and underwater munitions in both France and Great Britain, attempting to blow up vessels with floating mines, or torpedoes, before returning to America in 1806. In 1807 Fulton demonstrated a successful torpedo in New York Harbor. In 1812 he recommended the use of torpedoes, and the award of prize money for their successful use, to Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton, asking “How can government get rid of 74 or 80 Gun Ships so Cheap as by this means?”²

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Thames River Cruise Visits War of 1812 Site of Refuge for Decatur’s Squadron ~ Tickets Available Now

Join us on Saturday afternoon 20 October for a fabulous time of fall foliage, wine-tasting, and history! Board the Cross Sound Ferry *SEAJET* for a leisurely cruise up the Thames River to Norwich and back. This year we will focus on the War of 1812 and sites associated with Commodore Stephen Decatur whose squadron of three ships ended up trapped on the Thames River from June 1813 through March 1815. You can listen to historians, or to music from the War of 1812, or you can simply relax and enjoy the scenery and the flight of wines that will be offered by Gordon’s Yellow Front Wines and Spirits. Loading begins at 12:30 pm, we’ll leave the wharf at 1 pm and be back at 4 pm. Tickets: \$40 for members and \$50 for non members. Make your reservations today!

“Ye Towne’s Antientest Buriall Place”

Jonathan Prentis, Esq., and Some Family Members, (Part One)

There were a good many Prentises in New London in the early eighteenth century, and several of those have gravestones in the Antientist Burying Ground. Like the Latimers, the subjects of the last two of these articles, their name was spelled a variety of ways, including Prentis, Prentice, Prentiss, Prenties (several of the gravestones), and Prentts (Joshua Hempstead). In this newsletter we will look at Justice of the Peace Jonathan Prentis and a few of his family, and next time at family members of two of his brothers.

Jonathan Prentis was born in New London July 15, 1657. His father, John, had moved from Roxbury, Massachusetts, after being offered grants of land for setting up shop as a blacksmith in New London. Jonathan was the third child of eleven, two of whom died young. He began his adult life as a merchant and seaman, eventually buying the Lakes Pond farm with his brother Stephen. They divided it between them.

Jonathan married Elizabeth Latimer, younger half sister of Ann Jones, who married his older brother, John. Elizabeth had been born November 14, 1667. Their first child was born in 1692, with six more following. They did not live on the Lakes Pond farm, but at Black Point in what is now East Lyme.

Like many of that era, Prentis turned his hand to a variety of jobs to make his living. Joshua Hempstead mentions in his diary surveying Bartlett’s Neck with “Justice Prenttis” among others, selling him bars of iron (whether for his own

use or resale is not clear), and borrowing his boat, with disastrous consequences. The boat, loaded with plank, went aground in Four Mile River. It had to be unloaded and mended. When this was almost accomplished a bad storm came up and “ye Boat Stove to peices.” (Nov. 27, 1715) An arbitration the following January found that Hempstead owed Prentis nothing. There were apparently no hard feelings, for the two continued to do business and work together. In June of 1723 Hempstead “went into Town in ye morn to Justice Prenttis. I pd him for 1 gall Tar yt wee had to Mark Sheep & he pd me for 1 pr Sheep Sheers.”

Prentis enjoyed a high standing in town even before his first annual appointment as justice of the peace in 1710. He was called “Jonathan Prentis, Esq.” when he served temporarily on the Governor’s Council in 1707. Besides being a justice, Prentis was an overseer of the Niantic Indians, sometime representative to the General Court, one of the town agents to recover money of Mr. Winthrop, and later one of the committee to sell land, both to benefit the schools.

On July 21, 1727, Hempstead “was writing for Justice Prentts.” Quite possibly this was his will, as Hempstead notes on July 28 “Joshua Plumbs Child died about 12 at noon & Justice Prenttis about 12 at night.” He was buried after the Sunday meeting. “C. Christophers Esqr & Mr Adams [the minister] Justice Plumb my Self Dea: Green & Mr Miller Bearers & had a pr Gloves & Scarff.” Hempstead mentions being one of

those who went to Black Point “to Divide ye Estate of Justice Prenttis decd between his two Sons.” This was in March of 1729, a delay of well over a year. Perhaps the brothers could not agree, or perhaps there had been no hurry. The estate was valued at £6,814 9s 4d, quite a substantial sum for the 1720s.

Elizabeth Latimer Prentis mostly disappears from view after her husband’s death. She apparently did not need to make a living, and does not show up in Hempstead’s diary as keeping a tavern or other place for meetings. He says on January 7, 1728, that “an Negro Man of Justice Prentts’s Wid died,” so she was able to keep servants. Hempstead mentions a “Ms prenttis” several times, but unfortunately there were at least two, and possibly three, Prentice

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“Excessive hot....So hot no Stiring.”

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Trust Joshua Hempstead to help me get started on writing my quarterly letters! The words above are his, written in July of 1734, but they describe the summer of 2012 pretty accurately and kind of describe me, and probably many of you as to the “no stiring” part. I have always loved fall and winter and honestly, this year I yearn for the change of season more than ever. Possibly I was an Eskimo in a prior life.

There are reasons other than cooler weather for me to look forward to fall this year. One is a bit bittersweet, as I will be leaving the Presidency of the New London County Historical Society at our Annual Meeting on September 16. It has been an interesting, busy and enjoyable five (5!) years, but I am ready for a break and will be turning over the gavel (actually we don't have a gavel – an oversight to be sure) to Nancy Steenburg, our current Vice

President. We hope to see you all at our Annual Meeting at the Shaw Mansion for the changing of the guard, the election of new board members, nice refreshments and good company. [Editor's note: We have a number of gavels, but they are all part of the collection.]

My “going away” request of all our members and friends is that you support Nancy, our board, and our Director Edward Baker, by coming to our events, by volunteering at the Shaw Mansion to help us out with visitors and projects and researchers, and by joining one of our committees if your time permits. Publications, Programming, Education, Marketing, House and Grounds, Gardens – there are lots of opportunities to get involved and we really would love to have you on board.

Also coming this fall is our second Fun(d) Raising Cruise on the Thames River. Mark your calendar for **October 20**; the boat ride is a generous donation from Cross Sound Ferry; there will be delicious food and a wine tasting sponsored by Gordon's Yellow Front. The theme this year is the War of 1812 in New London County and in addition to our entertainment, we will have speakers aboard to tell you all about Commodore Decatur's holed-up fleet, the blockade of New London Harbor and much more! So please get your tickets soon. You can purchase them on our web site, or give Edward a call at 443-1209. Make a day of it to view fall foliage and enjoy the company of friends on the beautiful Thames!

And one more thing – if you have not yet visited the Lyman Allyn Art Museum to see the terrific exhibit on the War of 1812, “The Rocket's Red Glare,” now's the time! This may be a once in a lifetime chance to see the truly unique Stonington Battle Flag that flew in the Borough as its doughty residents fought to save their homes from the British Bombardment in September 1814. The rest of the exhibit is pretty darn good too, by the way.

So, time to *stir* myself to turn on another fan and to await September. Thanks for all your support during my tenure as President and I look forward to seeing you on September 16 and October 20 to celebrate another year at the New London County Historical Society.

~Deborah Donovan

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Prentis (continued)

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women who were widowed or had a husband at sea and so could have been the one referred to. She is probably the “old Ms Prenttiss, who was taken with the numpalsie on Tuesd last. She cannot go. one Side is Lame” whom he visited in March of 1754. The widow of Jonathan Prentis referred to in December of 1755 was probably her daughter-in-law, whose husband had died several months before. Elizabeth outlived her husband by 32 years, dying August 14, 1759, “In the 92^d year of her age.”

Jonathan and Elizabeth’s gravestones are very different in appearance but close together. Justice Prentis’s is a table stone, a flat stone held up by pillars at the four corners. Although it is a soft brownstone, the lettering is still legible. It was lettered by Joshua Hempstead, who mentions in November of 1734 that he had been “most of the day engraving at the Tomb of the Late Jonathan Prentis Esqr.” Elizabeth’s headstone is next to one of the pillars of her husband’s stone. It is granite and in very good condition.

Another daughter-in-law and one of her sons are buried near Jonathan and Elizabeth. Both have large standing brownstones with verses. Sarah Prentis is described as the “Wdo & Relict of John Prentiss Esqr., Late of New London and Daughter of the Honble. Christopher Christophers Esqr. of New London & Mrs. Sarah his Wife.” Her husband was a sea captain (I can find no evidence that he was called “Esquire” during his lifetime), who commanded the colony’s sloop *Defence* during the 1745 expedition against Cape Breton. They apparently

captured some rich prize ships, but there was confusion about the payments, which were withheld by the British Admiral Warren. Capt. Prentis went off to London to resolve the matter in April of 1746, and died there “with the Small Pox in June.” (Hempstead) There are several entries in the colony records of sailors suing his estate for the prize money, which Sarah was unwilling to pay, apparently because she had not received her husband’s share yet. The matter was not resolved until a son-in-law discovered the appropriate documents carelessly stored as scrap paper, rescued them, and made the necessary arrangements with the holder of the money in Boston. It is not clear from either the Prentis genealogy or Caulkins’ account (p. 394fn) just when this happened, but it appears to have been after Sarah’s death.

Sarah Prentis died February 12, 1773, “in the 53^d year of her age.” Her stone has a large hole in the middle where the brownstone front has spalled, but the rest is still legible.

John Prentis, “an Infant Son of Capt John Prentis Decd” was baptized December 14, 1746. (Hempstead) He married Esther Richards December 25, 1766, and they had seven children, all of whom lived to adulthood, married, and had children. John “died Novr. 22^d, A. D. 1780, in the 34th year of his age.” (The Prentis genealogy lists an eighth child, Henry Leonidas Prentis, but with a birthdate of 1788, which is clearly impossible.) There is no information in the Prentis genealogy or

Caulkins on John’s occupation or whether he participated in any way in the Revolution. His widow married first, Samuel Hempstead, and then William McLeary of West Virginia, and moved to Virginia.

~Patricia M. Schaefer

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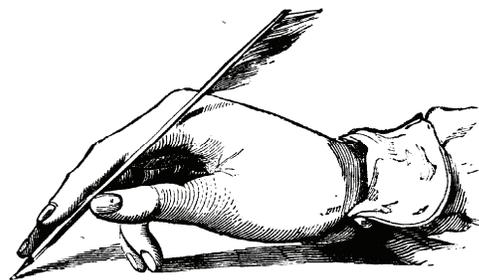
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Torpedoes (continued)

(Continued from page 1)

Fulton's proposal was embodied in the Torpedo Act, which specified that during the war it was lawful for anyone to "burn, sink, or destroy" British warships, for which the public treasury would pay them half the value of the vessel and its contents. In effect, it legalized and encouraged a maritime version of "asymmetric" or guerrilla war on the American coast.³

Captain Thomas Masterman Hardy's squadron established itself off New London in April 1813 and moved in close once Captains Decatur, Jones, and Biddle brought the USS *United States*, *Macedonian*, and *Hornet* into the Thames River on June 1. With the British warships anchored so near, and British barges seizing so much coastal commerce on Long Island Sound, there was both reason and opportunity for civilians to attack.

In local waters, most of the men who attempted to operate under the Torpedo Act held personal grudges against Great Britain in general or the Royal Navy specifically. The first attempt, in June 1813, was more an improvised explosive device than a high-tech weapon. Enraged about civilian deaths in the west where his relatives lived, for which he blamed the British and their Indian allies, New Yorker John Scudder Jr. was persuaded by Commodore Jacob Lewis of the New York gunboat flotilla to outfit the coasting schooner *Eagle* as a floating bomb. New York Captain Riker sailed the *Eagle* down the Sound and anchored her off Millstone Point in Waterford. As the expected British barges surged in, Riker retired ashore with just enough resistance that

the British cut the anchor cable and towed the *Eagle* off toward Hardy's flagship, the 74-gun HMS *Ramillies*. But wind and tide prevented them from bringing her alongside the *Ramillies*, so they finally moored her next to a small vessel about three-quarters of a mile away. An officer and ten men began to inspect the *Eagle's* cargo of food and naval stores. Apparently, they did not notice cords running from small flour barrels in the hatch to a large cask in the hold. Those cords were attached to flintlocks on the heads of the cask, which was filled with 400 pounds of gunpowder, together with combustible sulphur and turpentine. At some point they moved the small casks, the cords fired the flintlocks, and the *Eagle* and the men on board were blown to fragments.⁴

The next day, a shaken Captain Hardy sent a letter in militia General Jirah Isham of the Connecticut Militia at New London, warning, "I am under the necessity of requesting you to make it publicly known that I cannot permit vessels or boats of any description (flags of truce excepted) to approach or pass the British squadron, in consequence of an American vessel having exploded yesterday, three hours after she was in our possession."⁵

Only days later, the *Ramillies* was targeted from underwater. Captain Silas Plowden Halsey, 25, had no clear grudge against the British except for the Royal Navy making his livelihood difficult. The son of a Preston, Connecticut, lawyer, militia officer, and Revolutionary War veteran, Halsey had gone to sea in 1804 and was a captain at age 19, usually commanding schooners in the West Indies and transatlantic trades. Late in June 1813 he became captain and crew of a very different vessel, variously called a "diving boat"

and a "diving bell." Unnamed "proprietors"—probably New London merchants—financed the boat in hopes of loosening the blockade of New London and profiting from the estimated \$150,000 return for sinking the *Ramillies*.⁶

Samuel Colt drew a picture (many years later) of Halsey's submarine that included a water cock to let in water to submerge, a hand-operated force pump to evacuate the water and return to the surface, a hand-operated propeller crank that also served as an auger to attach a torpedo to an enemy ship's hull, a "conning tower" with some kind of windows around the operator's head, and an air tube. These features were similar to David Bushnell's Revolutionary War submarine *Turtle*. It was reported that Halsey's propelling "paddles" were efficient enough to move the craft at three miles an hour, making a trip out to the *Ramillies* feasible. New London metalworker John Sizer built Halsey's torpedo, presumably with a trigger as in Bushnell's and Fulton's designs.⁷

While the *Connecticut Gazette* indicated that the submarine was for defensive purposes, in case British vessels tried to enter New London Harbor, Halsey reportedly made three voyages into the Sound to attach his torpedo to the keel of the *Ramillies*. Robert Fulton doubted the reports of Halsey and his boat. "Did you see him and it?" he asked Decatur. He claimed that New Yorkers thought it was "a farce to create alarm in the enemy," and he doubted that the craft could withstand the pressure of descending to the 22-foot depth of the *Ramillies's* keel. Per-

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haps he was correct, as Halsey drowned in his submarine during his last attempt.⁸

Editor Samuel Green of the *Connecticut Gazette* reported on July 21, 1813, “Since the attempt of the renowned *Halsey* of Preston, in a Torpedoe, the British ships have taken new ground for anchorage; & for some time before tripped their anchors every few hours. The commodore [Hardy] has frankly confessed that the apprehensions of some yankee trick has given him great anxiety. He knew of the *Halsey* Torpedoe, and mentioned the names of persons whom he said were the proprietors. He confesses that the torpedoes are among the acknowledged weapons of national warfare; altho’ personally opposed to them. He never having used even hand grenades in any vessel he has commanded.”⁹

But Hardy was learning about Yankee ingenuity and this new form of warfare. Over by Three Mile Harbor on the south fork of Long Island, Captain Joshua Penny nursed a grudge against the Royal Navy that had impressed him back in 1793, considering it the

“scourge of the terrestrial globe.” By July 1813 Penny was working for Captain Stephen Decatur and piloted the unsuccessful attempt to capture Captain Hardy on Gardiner’s Island late that month. Hardy was more concerned about Penny’s participation in a torpedo scheme led by Thomas Welling of Sag Harbor. Hardy had been informed that Welling had obtained a torpedo in New York and was readying a whaleboat to tow it out and attack the *Ramillies*. Welling is probably the same man as “your man Welden” mentioned by Captain Decatur in a letter to Robert Fulton early in August. Decatur confirmed that Welden/Welling, whom he considered “prudent & perceiving,” was in New London, but he reported, “the moon (unless overcast) will prevent any immediate attempt” at a night attack.¹⁰

Hardy sent a force to seize Joshua Penny on August 20, confining him on the *Ramillies*. Incensed by the threat of Welling’s torpedo boat, “a mode of warfare practiced by individuals from mercenary motives, and more novel than honorable,” three days later Hardy threatened “the inhabitants of the towns along the coast of Long Island, that wherever I hear this boat or any of her description has been allowed to remain after this day, I will order every house near the shore to be destroyed.” No more was heard of the torpedo, but Hardy made an example of Penny, carrying him to Halifax where he was imprisoned for nine months.¹¹

NOTES

1. See Alex Roland, *Underwater Warfare in the Age of Sail* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979).
2. Mark Collins Jenkins and David A. Taylor, *The War of 1812 and the Rise of*

the U.S. Navy (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2012), 222, 224

3. An act to encourage the destruction of the armed vessels of war of the enemy. “Be it enacted &c., That, during the present war with Great Britain, it shall be lawful for any person or persons to burn, sink, or destroy, any British armed vessel of war, except vessels coming as cartels or flags of truce; and for that purpose to use torpedoes, submarine instruments, or any other destructive machine whatever: and a bounty of one-half the value of the armed vessel so burnt, sunk, or destroyed, and one-half the value of her guns, cargo, tackle, and apparel shall be paid out of the Treasury of the United States to such persons who shall effect the same, otherwise than by armed or commissioned vessels of the United States.” Approved, March 3, 1813.

4. Lewis to Secretary of the Navy Jones, June 28, 1813, in William S. Dudley, *The War of 1812: A Documentary History*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1985), 161.

5. *Connecticut Gazette*, June 30, 1813.

6. *Niles’ Register*, July 17, 1813, 326-27; *Connecticut Gazette*, July 21, 1813

7. Colt’s notes are discussed in Roland’s *Underwater Warfare in the Age of Sail*; Halsey was referred to as “Bushnell the second” in the *Connecticut Gazette*, July 21, 1813.

8. *Connecticut Gazette*, July 21, 1813; *Niles Register*, July 17, 1813, pp. 326-27; Fulton to Decatur, August 5, 1813, Dudley, *The War of 1812*, 2:211.

9. *Connecticut Gazette*, July 21, 1813.

10. Jenkins and Taylor, *The War of 1812*, 9-11, 90-91; *Niles’ Register*, September 11, 1813, 27; Decatur to Fulton, August 9, 1813, Dudley, *The War of 1812*, 2:212.

11. Guernsey, *New York City and Vicinity during the War of 1812-15*, 1:283-87; Jenkins and Taylor, *The War of 1812*, 90-91; *Connecticut Gazette*, September 15, 1813.

New and Renewed Members

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