

The Capture of Richard Smith's *Polly*, Feb. 1st, 1783

Richard Smith, builder and owner of the forge at Robertsville, went back to England and the Continent, about the outset of hostilities leading to the War of Independence, on a business trip. The timing of this departure led many colonists to believe that this was sufficient proof that he was a Tory, or British sympathizer, and as such was an enemy of the American Colonies. Actually, our research has shown that for much of that time period Smith was in St. Petersburg, Russia, aiding the Czarina Catherine in establishing an iron and steel industry, as well as establishing hemp plantations to be used in the manufacturing of rope. This information apparently was never made available to the general public on this side of the Atlantic, thus the assumption he was an avid British supporter and enemy of the Colonies.

We did not know one important bit of information eventually supplied to us by our researcher in Great Britain until the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, and it cleared up a major mystery: why did Gov. Trumbull stand so solidly behind Smith throughout the difficult times following the end of the war?

Smith, even though he was in Europe during the hostilities, had made arrangements to supply the Colony of Connecticut with all their needs for black powder for the duration of the war. Smith must have had plans to eventually retire back to his homeland, and if his dealings with Gov. Trumbull had become known, in all likelihood he would not have been welcomed back with open arms. When his active business years were over, he did take his wife back to London, where he purchased a row house, which still exists, on Colebrook Row. (This name was purely coincidence, as it is unlikely that the name Colebrook had any special meaning for him.)

When Smith did return to North America, he took up residence in New London, Conn., but his household furnishings and other possessions were in what is today Astoria, Queens, directly across the East River from Manhattan. Throughout the war, the metropolitan area of New York was under British control, a fact that did not go unobserved by many of the colonists. One such group was the government of Rhode Island, which placed his name on a list of enemies of the state who were denied the right to set foot in Rhode Island again.

Connecticut seems to have had a more reasonable society than their neighbors to the east, although many here must have believed Smith to have been a Tory, in view of the fact his iron works in Salisbury and Colebrook were seized by the Colony during the War of Independence.

Smith, however, upon his return, went before the Connecticut General Assembly and Governor Jonathan Trumbull and successfully pleaded his case; i.e. that he was a loyal citizen of Connecticut and always had been. He then (January, 1783) took all the necessary oaths of allegiance and pledges making him a citizen in good standing.

There were some, however, who remained convinced that he was a British sympathizer, or worse, and vowed to exact their own vigilante justice.

At this point we have to take a quick peek at Rhode Island and the prevailing attitudes there. Rhode Island had the reputation (justified) of being only too happy to close one eye to pirates, privateers and others who might not have been tolerated by other colonies. Rhode Island's court system seems to have been compromised also, as the outcome of Richard Smith's legal problems at their hands indicate.

Newport was the northern point of a trade triangle that saw trade goods from New England and the Caribbean used to buy African slaves and transport them to the Caribbean and southern colonies.

Thomas Wickham, a Connecticut resident and owner of a brigantine named the “Hampton Packet”, had her fitted out in New London expressly for the purpose of capturing Smith’s sloops when and if he attempted to move his possessions into Connecticut. [A brigantine is a three-masted ship, in this case rigged with canon, making her a warship; a sloop is a smaller vessel having one mast with a triangular sail, mostly used for transportation, much as a tractor-trailer is used today.] Wickham had a license from the fledgling Continental Congress commissioning him as a privateer, which allowed him to prey on vessels on the high seas (meaning more than three miles off shore) that were owned by or were carrying cargo belonging to our enemies.

When the news reached the ears of Gov. Trumbull, he had an edict read aloud on a wharf in New London stating that Smith was to be left strictly alone. Wickham’s followers said immediately and loudly that the governor and the General Assembly could go jump in the lake; they had a license from Congress, sitting in Philadelphia, to raid enemy (British) shipping, and they fully intended to capture Smith’s vessels.

This might have been legally accomplished, but the term “high seas” means beyond the three mile limit in international waters, not 1 ½ miles off Niantic, where Smith’s sloop, the “Polly” was captured.

Many of the so-called pirates in those days had licenses from various kings, Queens or legislative bodies to plunder on the high seas. Quite often the descriptive terms “pirate” and “privateer” had to do with who is telling the story. Read the Spanish accounts about Sir Francis Drake, and you won’t see the word “privateer” anywhere, whereas the English accounts never refer to him as a “pirate”. The same is true of Capt. Kidd, who maintained to his dying day that he had always operated within the limits of British law, and that his legal problems were the result of political intrigue and favoritism.

Thomas Wickham may have had a privateering document from the Continental Congress, and most likely was thought of as a privateer in Rhode Island and New York, but as far as Connecticut was concerned, in this case at least, he was a pirate, pure and simple.

Events unfurled in this manner: On March 31, 1783, three sloops belonging to Smith left Hallets Cove, N. Y. and headed for New London. After an overnight passage, as they approached the mouth of the Thames River, they were set upon by Wickham’s warship, and one of them, the “Polly”, was captured. A prize crew was put on board, and set sail for Newport and the safety of Rhode Island. The trouble had been anticipated, however, by Connecticut warships, which pursued and recaptured the “Polly” just off the southwest coast of Rhode Island.

All that day the wind from the northwest continued to increase, until by late afternoon a full-blown storm was howling, and all thought of returning to New London had to be abandoned, and shelter was sought in a small bay in Washington County, Rhode Island. Here they remained pinned down for 80 hours, until the storm abated enough for them to escape to the safety of Connecticut waters.

What transpired after will be a subject of a later report.

Historic Bytes

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