

Privateers and the Navy

The Creation of the Rhode Island Navy and Continental Navy

About Privateers

1. An armed private ship.
2. That has been given a license by a government
3. To capture the merchant ships or war ships of the enemy.

The usual arrangement is that the privateer is paid a percentage of the sale of the captured ship or goods captured.

The profits of the voyage are divided between the government that licensed the privateer and among the privateer crew, captain, and ship owner

The total of Rhode Island ship captains commissioned by Rhode Island or the Continental Congress during the Revolutionary War is probably about 140 privateering ships.

In short a privateer is a form of legalized pirate.



Silas Talbot as Privateer

Right after the Battle of Rhode Island a plan was made to capture a British schooner that had been blocking Narragansett Bay. Because Silas Talbot knew the waters, he was asked to be in charge. As he was preparing for the attack, Talbot met with Nicholas Cooke, the Governor of Rhode Island. Cooke owned a ship called "Hawke" and with the help of local Providence merchants, the Hawke was fitted out and armed for the mission. Talbot had made a deal. Talbot and his men, fifty percent / Cooke and his associate, fifty-percent.

On the night of October 28, 1778, the Hawke sailed from the Taunton River to the Sakonnet River. The British sentries did not see her. When the Hawke got within sight of the Pigot, Talbot positioned his craft so he could ram the enemy ship and push an anchor through the netting on its deck. He captured the ship and brought it into harbor in Connecticut. This was a profitable venture for Talbot. The Rhode Island General Assembly voted him a silver sword and the Continental Congress promoted him to Lieutenant Colonel. His share of the sale of the Pigot was 500 pounds.

Silas Talbot would go on to further adventures with the Pigot. In the spring of 1779, the Navy Board at Boston purchased the prize Pigot, and she operated under Talbot as the Argo guarding Narragansett Bay. During Argo's cruises she alone kept these important waters open to vital American coastal shipping.



RI and the Beginning of the American Navy

Rhode Island played an important role in the creation of the U.S. Navy. On June 12, 1775, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed a resolution creating the continent's first state navy. They armed and chartered two sloops, the *Katy* and the *Washington*. Under Commodore Abraham Whipple,

Rhode Island's first fleet was successful, so our representatives at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia suggested that the Patriots create a united naval force for all the colonies. On October 13, 1775, Congress passed this Rhode Island-initiated resolution, officially establishing the Continental Navy. Rhode Islander Esek Hopkins (pictured above) was appointed as the Navy's first Commander-in-Chief. Congress ordered him "to follow such courses as your best Judgment shall suggest to you as most useful to the American cause and to distress the Enemy by all means in your power."

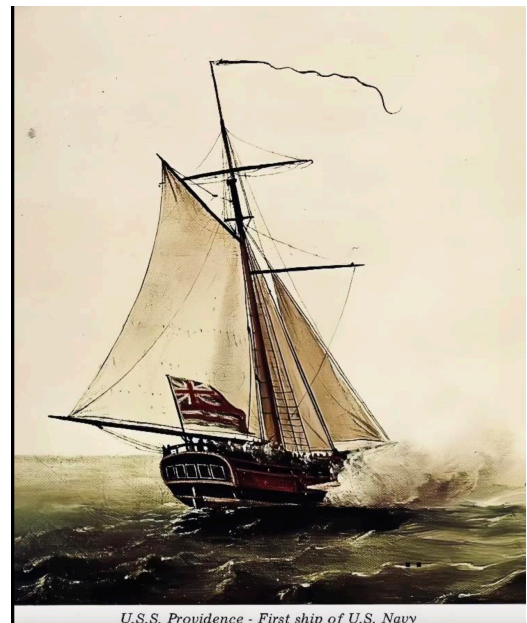
First Naval Battle

When and where was the first naval battle of the American Revolution? You might not be surprised to know that battle took place off of Newport. The date was the 15th of June in 1775, not long after the Colonial General Assembly enacted a resolution to charter and arm two vessels for the protection of trade on June 12, 1775.

In 1774, the British frigate, the *Rose*, under the command of Sir James Wallace, was sent to Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island. The *Rose* was successful in ending the smuggling that had made Newport wealthy. John Brown and other leading merchants advocated for the protection of Rhode Island trade. The Rhode Island Assembly directed the committee of safety to charter two vessels for protection. This action created the Rhode Island Navy, the first American Navy of the Revolution.

Merchant Brown chartered one of his sloops, the *Katy*, to this new Navy. Abraham Whipple, one of Brown's best captains, assumed command of the *Katy* and a smaller vessel – the *Washington*. As the new commodore, Whipple lost no time in trying to clear the smaller ship tenders of the *Rose* from their positions in Narragansett Bay. Whipple had more fire power than the tenders and he was able to fire on the sloop *Diana* and take her as a prize on June 15, 1775. This was the first naval engagement of the Revolutionary War.

Whipple towed the *Diana* back to Providence and when the *Rose* sailed up the Bay to investigate what happened to the *Diana*, Newport citizens were able to recapture five out of the six Newport merchant ships that Wallace had confiscated.



U.S.S. Providence - First ship of U.S. Navy