

WILLIAM MANTHORPE

Creation of the American Navy

When the Second Continental Congress convened in Philadelphia in May 1775, the Revolutionary War was already underway, the battles at Lexington and Concord less than a month old. Among the first acts of the Congress was to resolve that the New England colonies “be immediately put into a state of defense.” The Continental Army thus was formally established, with General George Washington taking command of the troops in Boston. Overlooked at the time, however, was the formation of a naval counterpart to the infantry. After all, the British forces in Boston were heavily supported by its navy, the largest and most powerful at the time, anchored in the harbor and off the coast. Instead, Congress placed maritime defense in the hands of colonial governors, resolving that

each colony, at their own expence [sic], make such provisions by armed vessels or otherwise . . . for the protection of their harbors and navigation on their coasts against all unlawful invasions, attacks and depredations, from cutters and ships of war.

By then, it was now July, the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety had begun to consider the defense of the port of Philadelphia, the largest in the colonies. A seven-member subcommittee, accompanied by a prominent citizen with military background, took an inspection tour of the area, and the next day received the distinguished guest’s opinion:

Gentlemen: Having considered the state of the River Delaware since I had the pleasure of examining part of it with you

yesterday, I am sorry to say any effectual defence [sic] thereof, so as to protect this city from an Insult by water, appears to me very difficult, tho' not impossible.... I am induced to think that the only effectual opposition that can be made to ships of force, is by ships of force.

Accordingly, the committee established another subcommittee, called the Construction of Boats and Machines, to begin building a force that would become the Pennsylvania State Navy—which, over the next six months, evolved into America's navy.

On July 7, the subcommittee ordered the design of an armed galley from the shipyard of Wharton and Humphreys, where twenty-one-year old Joshua Humphrey was the operating partner. The design was delivered within twenty-four hours and the vessel—called *L'Experiment*, suggesting it was the first step in Humphreys's career as a ship designer—eleven days later. The committee, contracting with virtually every other shipbuilding firm along Philadelphia's Delaware riverfront, approved the building of twelve galleys, including one by Manuel Eyre. Eyre's second boat, named *Bulldog*, was to be commanded by Charles Alexander, who within a year was in command of the Continental frigate *Delaware*.

The armed galleys or gunboats, being built by several shipyards, were slightly different but shared common design features: They were about fifty feet in length, broad of beam, and of shallow draft; they were propelled by double banks of twenty oars and a single mast, which could be fitted for one or two lateen-rigged sails; and they carried at least one 18- or 24-pound gun in the bow, along with swivel guns and muskets. By August, thirteen galleys had been completed at a cost of £550 per boat. Construction then began on half galleys or armed boats, which were smaller with fewer oarsman and no sails, but equally well armed.

Besides Pennsylvania, Rhode Island had also begun creating a navy, arming two merchant ships, and twice over the summer of 1775 the colony unsuccessfully petitioned Congress to create a Continental Navy.

While Congress turned its attention to debating international trade, two merchant captains, on ships owned by a syndicate that included Robert Morris and other members of Congress, arrived on October 5 in Philadelphia carrying letters from English friends to Americans and the latest British newspapers: Captain Thomas Read of the *Aurora*, the middle son of a prominent New Castle, Delaware, family; and Captain John Barry of the *Black Prince*, an Irishman from Philadelphia.



Washington Commissioning Captain John Barry. Public Domain.

They had sailed from Philadelphia just after the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord and as the Second Continental Congress was about to convene in Independence Hall, reaching London in late June. As their cargos were slowly sold and unloaded, and as they negotiated to get their ships refitted and ballast aboard, they learned that Congress had passed the Continental Association banning all trade with Great Britain. It was to take affect in September. Thus, on August 11, Read and Barry were the last American captains to embark from London.

Taking different courses, they arrived off Cape Henlopen and to their surprise were not met by pilots, the skilled mariners who navigated the shoals along the waterway to Philadelphia. In their absence while abroad, the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety, as one of its actions in preparing the defenses of Philadelphia, had directed that "all Pilots of the Bay and River Delaware ought to lay up their Boats." Read took *Aurora* up the channel anyway, while Barry's *Black Prince*, a much larger ship with a deeper draft, needed a pilot and had to wait. On the afternoon of the next day, after the two ships docked in Philadelphia, the letters brought from England were read with eager anticipation by their recipients. In addition to welcomed personal news, the letters contained information vital to American defenses. According to the correspondence, British ships were on the way: "the Sailing of two north Country built Briggs, of no force [unarmed], from England, on the 11 of August last, loaded with Arms, Powder and other Stores for Quebec, without Convoy." In response to that intelligence, it was

Resolved that a Committee of three be appointed to prepare a Plan for intercepting two Vessels . . . and that the Committee proceed on this Business immediately . . . [Soon] the comee appointed to prepare a plan for intercepting the two vessels bound for Canada brought in their report.

The Committee consisted of “Mr. Deane, Mr. Langdon, and myself [John Adams], three members who had expressed much zeal in favor of the motion,” which “carried, not without great difficulty.” The Congress also resolved

That a letter be sent by Express to Genl Washington, to inform him, that . . . he apply to the council of Massachusetts bay, for the two armed vessels in their service, and despatch the same . . . to intercept s[ai]d two Brigs and their cargoes, and secure the same for the use of the continent; Also, [intercept] *any other transports*. . . . Also that the General be directed to employ sd vessels *and others if he judge necessary*. . . . That the sd ships and vessels of war to be on the *continental risque and pay, during their being so employed*. [Emphasis added.]

The Committee of Naval Advocates, who undoubtedly already had given considerable thought to establishing a navy and had apparently prepared materials in advance, saw this as the first opportunity to pursue their agenda. Realizing the opposition, they recommended a number of initial cautious steps that started movement toward a Continental naval force. Washington was authorized to take action, not only against the two brigs but against other transports as well, and he called on state ships while acquiring additional ones. In short, Congress had, unwittingly to most members, authorized Washington to establish a Continental Navy under his command. Little did they know that he already had begun a month earlier.

Historian William Bell Clark has pointed out that “[t]his was the first naval legislation enacted by the Congress and, as such, is a truly significant event in the genesis of American naval power.” Committee member Silas Deane believed this the first step toward creating a Continental Navy.

The timing was critical. Read had also brought intelligence that “transports were taken up by Government to carry several regiments from Ireland to New York, that 17 of the transports lay at Deptford [in the Thames] when he left England; [and] that he expected they would sail from Ireland by the last of Septr.” General Washington, informed by John Hancock, was aware of this threat.

Finally focusing on the need for a navy, Congress, on October 6, began to debate the Rhode Island petition. Support was not unanimous. The coastal New England colonies wanted a seagoing navy to protect their ports and help their merchant ships evade attack as they ran for the relative safety of the open sea. The mid-Atlantic colonies were wary. The debate began with Samuel Chase of Maryland expressing the view of the objectors when he said, “it is the maddest idea in the World to think of building an American Fleet.” George Ross, a Pennsylvania delegate originally from New Castle, Delaware, also spoke against the idea of a national navy, pointing out that the Pennsylvania State Navy was having trouble manning the galleys it was building. According to John Adams, Maryland and Pennsylvania objected because

All the trade of Pennsylvania, the Lower Counties, [i.e., the future State of Delaware] a great Part of Maryland and N. Jersey Sails in between the Capes of Delaware Bay. And if a strong [enemy] Fleet should be posted in that Bay, prior to our Fleet, it might obstruct all the Trade of this River.

Before the session got out of hand, Adams took the initiative, and the “Committee appointed to prepare a Plan &c. brought in a *further* [emphasis added] report which was read. Ordered to lie on the Table for the Perusal of the Members.” The debate was put off until the next day.

On October 7, Congress resumed consideration of the Rhode Island resolution. Debate began with Samuel Chase, who had previously opposed a navy, indicating that the plan on the table was acceptable. Reaction was mixed, with Adams declaring that the opposition was “loud and vehement.” The debate was put off for a week.

Meanwhile, while Congress delayed, Read and Barry “walked the streets together . . . visiting the Committee of Safety, and finally the newspaper offices.” They missed the deadline for the weekly Wednesday issue of the *Pennsylvania Journal* which, a week later, on October 11, printed their report:

Since our last, arrived here the Captains Reed [sic] and Barry from London, by whom we have the following advices (culled from various issues) . . . August 4 . . . Eight men of war, from forty to fifty guns each are ordered for the American station . . . To keep cruising the American Coast three squadrons, each consisting of three 74-gun ships, three armed sloops, three schooners, three bomb vessels and a battalion of Marines . . . These three maritime pendulums moving upon the American Coast, would support the three garrisons, maintain the power of government, prevent illicit trade, and give full protection to fair and just Commerce.

Despite that alarming news of a naval blockade, the Congress after its week recess continued to argue trade, while the plan for Washington to intercept the two brigs had failed—which President Hancock and the Rhode Island delegates knew.

Activated by that news, the committee on October 13 reintroduced the resolution that had already been put on the table and debated, and Congress promptly resolved:

That a swift sailing vessel, to carry 10 carriage guns, and a proportionable number of swivels, with eighty men, be fitted with all possible dispatch, for a cruise of three months . . . for intercepting such transports as may be laden with warlike stores and other supplies for our enemies, and for such other purposes as the Congress shall direct. . . .

That a Committee of three be appointed to prepare and estimate of the expence [sic], and to contract . . . to fit out the vessel.

That another vessel be fitted out for the same purposes and that said committee report an estimate of the expence. [sic]

The authorization of these two ships was the first official step toward the creation of a Continental Navy, and October 13 is marked as the birthday of the United States Navy.

By the end of October, the committee returned with a proposal for procuring, arming, and operating a small number of ships for a limited time. After debate, acting cautiously and realistically, Congress authorized two additional ships, one of 20 guns and the other not to exceed 36 guns. The membership of the committee was increased to seven members, and it became known as the Naval Committee. This was the first step toward a Navy Department.

Coincident with the initial stages toward development of a Continental Navy, the Pennsylvania Navy was taking shape. The original thirteen galleys had been fitted out and armed. Additionally, there were twenty-one half galleys, four fire ships, two floating batteries, two sloops, and one shallop plus support ships. Under construction were the 6-gun brig *Convention*, the schooner *Delaware* at the Eyre Brothers shipyard, and the 14-gun frigate *Montgomery*—designated the navy's flagship. More than 750 sailors were in naval service.

Realizing that a blockade of Delaware Bay was imminent, Captain Thomas Read volunteered for service with the Pennsylvania Navy and was ap-

pointed its commodore. As such, he has gained recognition as “[t]he First to Attain the Rank of Commodore in Command of an American Fleet.” The navy’s base of operations was the fort on Mud Island, also known as Fort Island (Fort Mifflin). It guarded the entrance to the Delaware River from the bay.



Commodore Thomas Read. Public Domain.

For procuring and fitting out the first ships of the Continental Navy, the Naval Committee relied on the arrangements already established by Pennsylvania. During the fall of 1775, four merchant ships were purchased. The first, to be renamed *Alfred*, was moved to the Wharton and Humphreys shipyard, where it had been built, for conversion. Captain John Barry was placed in charge of re-rigging, and Nathaniel Falconer was named ship chandler. Joshua Humphreys supervised thirty-four men working over 600 hours strengthening the hull, timbers, and bulwarks, in addition to opening gun ports. The other ships, renamed, *Andrea Doria*, *Cabot*, and *Columbus*, received similar conversions by Barry and Humphreys. To oversee the contracts, James Read, the youngest son of the Read family who had worked for Robert Morris and the Pennsylvania committee, was appointed as “Paymaster to the Fleet.”

These four ships were the first American naval ships. For John Barry and Joshua Humphreys, creating them was the beginning of illustrious careers. Barry would be appointed by President George Washington the first captain of the United States Navy and become known as the “Father of the United States Navy.” Joshua Humphreys, who designed *Constitution* and other famous frigates, would be the U.S. Navy’s first Naval Constructor. Moreover, each would be associated with naval ships named *Delaware*.

As work was progressing on the four ships, the Congress on Decem-

ber 11 authorized a committee consisting of one member from each colony to devise ways and means of creating a navy. Two days later and after a short debate, the committee reported that Congress had resolved

That five ships of thirty-two guns, five of twenty-eight guns, three of twenty-four guns, making in the whole thirteen, can be fitted for the sea.

The thirteen members became known as the Marine Committee, and it soon absorbed the functions of the Naval Committee, marking further development of a Navy Department. The group was so devoted to their assignment that Delaware's George Read, although in favor of reconciliation with Britain and ultimately against independence, wrote his wife that he would be delayed coming home for Christmas:

I was yesterday put upon a committee . . . which may be obliged to sit regularly for ten days to come, and as I am considered a great absentee hitherto, I must attend constantly for a while.

The thirteen ships approved on December 13 would be the first American ships designed and built as warships. William Whipple, delegate to the Congress from New Hampshire, reported that Joshua Humphreys "laid the plans of several men-of-war" before the Marine Committee.

Plans for the construction of the ships were drawn up by Humphreys, approved by Congress, parceled out to the colonies, and built under the close supervision of the Marine Committee. Four of the ships were assigned to shipyards along Philadelphia's Delaware riverfront: the 32-gun *Washington* to Eyre Brothers and a second 32-gun named *Randolph* to Wharton and Humphreys; the 28-gun *Effingham* to Grice; and the 24-gun *Delaware* to Warwick Coates.

To exercise its control, the Marine Committee formed a Commission for Building the Philadelphia Frigates, with Robert Morris as chairman and J. M. Nesbitt, John Nixon, and John Wharton as members. Functioning under the commissioners were four subcommittees. A letter to the yards explained the bureaucratic control under which the first ships of the Navy were to be built:

As we are appointed Commissioners under Authority of Congress for having these Ships Built and Fitted, we have empowered Messrs. William Pollard, Francis Grice, Samuel Penrose, and David Thompson to act as Timber Commissioners with powers to buy and take charge of all Timber, Planks, &c., necessary for completing these ships. . . . We have appointed

Messrs. James Craig, James Martin, Nathaniel Falconer, and William Davis Commissioners for providing Rigging, Ship Chandlery, and other stores. . . . Messrs. Benjamin Fuller, Thomas Fitzsimmons, Isaac Hazelhurst, and Clement Biddle are appointed Commissioners of accounts and the accounts that relate to those ships are to undergo their inspection and correction.

In addition, a superintendent was appointed for each shipyard and a clerk was assigned to procure, supervise, keep time, and pay records of the workers. The Marine Committee had begun to establish the close Congressional oversight process for naval shipbuilding.

As construction was underway on the new frigates, another four ships being converted and fitted out were commissioned. They left Philadelphia in January 1776 and, after being joined by ships from Providence and Baltimore, sailed from Delaware Bay in mid-February as the first fleet of the Continental Navy. In late March, however, as had been feared by the mid-Atlantic delegates to Congress, a British squadron arrived to block the Delaware Bay. It was under the command of Captain Andrew Snape-Hamond in the 44-gun frigate HMS *Roebuck* and supported by the 24-gun frigate *Liverpool* and their tenders. Still, by the beginning of 1776 and with a powerful enemy force close at hand, all the institutions required for creating an American navy—the first operating forces, a naval bureaucracy, a construction program, and Congressional oversight—had been established. 

Notes

1. Continental Congress, "Resolution of May 26, 1775," *Journals of the Continental Congress 1774-1789* (Hereafter, *JCC*) (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1905), 2: 65. "American Memory," Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov>.
2. Continental Congress, "Resolution of July 18, 1775," *JCC* 2: 189.
3. "Lewis Nicola to the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety, July 6, 1775," *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Hereafter, *NDAR*), ed. Michael J. Crawford (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Navy, Naval History Center, 2005) 1: 831. Naval History and Heritage Command, <http://history.navy.mil>.
4. Tim McGrath, *John Barry: American Hero in the Age of Sail* (Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2010), 48-49. McGrath's accounts of the voyages are based on the "Log of Black Prince," in the library archives of the Independence Seaport Museum on the Philadelphia waterfront.
5. "Minutes of the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety, [Philadelphia] September 16th," *NDAR*, 2: 120-122.
6. "Thursday October 5, 1775," *JCC*, 3: 227. "Journal of the Continental Congress, [Philadelphia] Thursday, October 5, 1775," *NDAR*, 2: 307.
7. John Adams, "[Thursday, October 5, 1775] [From the Autobiography of John Adams]," *Founders Online*, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-03-02-0016-0034. Only Adams records the committee members and that there was any debate following the report of the committee preceding the resolution, and he does so only in his autobiography.
8. Continental Congress, Thursday October 5, 1775, 276. "Journal of the Continental Congress, [Philadelphia] October 5, 1775," *NDAR*, 2: 307-308. John Adams, "[Thursday, October 5, 1775] [From the Diary of John Adams]," "[Notes of Debates, Continued] Octr. 5," *Founders Online*, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-02-02-0005-0004-0002.

9. The portion of the resolution quoted contains only the key pertinent extracts. The resolution itself was 437 words long. It consisted of specific instructions for fitting out the ships, providing orders to commanders, recruiting sailors, and dividing prize money. Although a report has not been found, these details must have been prepared in advance by members of the committee. It would not have been possible to do so in the short time they had during the session. They certainly could not have been developed by Congress in debate. (See note 1 to “Resolutions of the Congress on Intercepting British Vessels,” John Adams, “[Thursday, October 5, 1775] [From the Diary of John Adams],” “[Notes of Debates, Continued] Octr. 5,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-02-00-0005-0004-0004. Further suggesting the committee had prepared materials in advance is that the letter Hancock sent to Washington contained an enclosure that provided other guidance, which he said he didn’t have the time to copy into the letter as he was ordered to send it immediately.

10. See “George Washington’s Instructions to Nicholson Broughton, 2 Sept.” in *NDAR*, 1: 1287-1289. Broughton was to command *Hannah*, which is acknowledged to be the “first Armed Vessel to be fitted out in the Service of the United States.” See note 3. Washington had been acquiring and fitting out ships with vigor. See “Colonel Joseph Read’s Report on Washington’s Armed Vessels, Salem and Marblehead, October 29, 1775,” *NDAR*, 2: 637. See also “George Washington to John Augustine Washington, [Extract] Camp at Cambridge, October 13, 1775,” “I . . . am fitting out, several Privateers with Soldiers (who have been bred to the Sea).” *NDAR*, 2: 436. Washington’s navy was comprised of schooners: *Hancock* commanded by Capt. Nicholson Broughton, *Franklin* commanded by Capt. John Selman, *Lee* commanded by Capt. John Manley, *Warren* commanded by Capt. Winborn Adams of New Hampshire, *Washington*, commanded by Capt. Sion Martindale of Rhode Island, and *Harrison* commanded by Capt. William Coit of Connecticut.

11. William Bell Clark, ed., “American Theater, Summary,” *NDAR*, 2: 2..

12. He wrote: “A Naval Force is a favorite object of mine, & I have a prospect now, of carrying that point, having succeeded in getting Our Connecticut and Rhode Island Vessels into Continental pay; which motion I was seconded in beyond my expectations.” “Sils Deane to Thomas Mumford, Philadelphia, Octo. 15th, 1775,” *NDAR*, 2: 464.

13. “To George Washington from John Hancock, [Philadelphia] Octbr 5, 1775,” *NDAR*, 2: 311.

14. John Adams, “Notes of Debates, Oct 7, 1775,” *Letters of Delegates to Congress* (Hereafter, *LD*) (September 1775-December 1775), 2: 131. “American Memory,” Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov>.

15. “John Adams to James Warren, October 19, 1775,” *NDAR* 2: 528.

16. John Adams, “[Fryday October 6, 1775],” *Founders Online*, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-03-02-0016-0035. “Journal of the Continental Congress, [Philadelphia] October 6, 1775,” *NDAR*, 2: 328-32. While the Journal does not indicate that the report brought in by the committee was a “*further*” report, as committee member Adams knew that it was and said so. Like the report of the previous day, that report has not been found.

17. John Adams, “[Notes of Debates, Continued] Octr. 7,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/01-02-02-0005-0004-0004. “Journal of the Continental Congress, [Philadelphia] October 7, 1775,” *NDAR*, 2: 340-341.

18. McGrath, *John Barry*, 53-54. The *Philadelphia Journal* was a weekly paper published on Wednesdays. Thus, the news from British newspapers missed the Wednesday, October 6 edition.

19. “*Pennsylvania Journal*, Wednesday October 11, 1775,” *NDAR* 2: 408.

20. First of all, the ships had probably already arrived under British protection in Canadian waters. The two “northern briggs” were reported to have sailed from Bristol for Quebec, the same day as Read and Barry left London for Philadelphia. The former is a shorter ocean voyage. Barry, according to McGrath and perhaps Read encountered storms that delayed them. See McGrath, *John Barry*, 49 and “*Pennsylvania Gazette*, Wednesday, October 11, 1775,” in *NDAR*, 2: 408, which reports that Read had encountered a severely storm-damaged ship on August 24. No matter Rhode Island could provide no ships. “Nicholas Cook to the Rhode Island Delegates in Congress, Providence, Oct 10th 1775,” *NDAR*, 2: 390. Washington also reported that Massachusetts could not help and that his ships were not yet ready. “George Washington to John Hancock, [Camp at Cambridge] Octbr 12th, 1775,” *NDAR*, 2: 415.

21. “Journal of the Continental Congress, October 13, 1775,” *NDAR*, 2: 441-442.

22. Those words are the title of a lithograph from the only known portrait of Thomas Read according to J. Thomas Scharf, *History of Delaware: 1609-1888* (Philadelphia, PA: L. J. Richards & Co., 1888), 188. Unattributed. Probably by M. Armand Dumaresq after John Trumbull. Also, in Harmon Pumpelly Read, *Rossiana: Papers and Documents Relating to the History and Genealogy of the Ancient and Noble Family of ROSS* (Albany, NY: Press of the Argus Co., 1908), 281. The operational word in the caption is “fleet.” Abraham Whipple of Rhode Island was earlier “commodore” of only two “chartered” ships.

23. This fort had been originally been established by the British during the French and Indian War. It had been abandoned and was being refurbished. In some sources Mud Island or Fort Island is called Liberty Island, “but that name referred to a small island battery downriver from the fort.” Jeffery M. Dorwart, *Fort Mifflin of Philadelphia: An Illustrated History* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 173. Citing Pennsylvania Archives. As early as 1777, the fort was referred to as “Fort Mifflin” in honor of Thomas Mifflin, Continental Army Quartermaster General and Pennsylvania Delegate to the Continental Congress. In 1795, when it was formally acquired by the United States Army it was officially named Fort Mifflin after him, as he had subsequently served as delegate to the Constitutional Convention and Governor of Pennsylvania.

24. “Continental Naval Committee in Account with James Read,” *NDAR*, 3: 961-962.

25. “Wednesday, December 13, 1775,” *JCC*, 2: 425-427.

26. “George Read to his Wife, December 15, 1775,” *NDAR* 3: 117.

27. Lieutenant Commander M.V. Brewington, "The Design of Our First Frigates," *American Mercury* Vol. VIII (January 1948):15. Endnote 27 citing, "William Whipple Correspondence," *Force Transcripts*, ed. Edmund C. Burnett, 1: 83.
28. "John Wharton to Continental Congress, July 25, 1781," *JCC* 21: 178. See also "Robert Morris," *NDAR* 3: 561-562. Also in Eliot Snow, "The Row Galley Bulldog," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, 62, no. 7, (July 1936): 991-994.
29. In his report to the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety of the arrival of the British squadron, Henry Fisher, pilot at Lewes, Delaware had misspelled Hamond's name as "Hammond." Frustratingly, Henry Fisher's misspelling persists in many histories to this day, despite sources that could be checked to indicate otherwise. John Marshall, "Andrew Snape Hamond," *Royal Naval Biography* (London: Longman, et.al., 1824). Wikisource, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Royal_Naval_Biography/Hamond,_Andrew_Snape. His autobiography and other papers form volumes I-IX of the Hamond papers in the University of Virginia, Tracy W. McGregor Library.