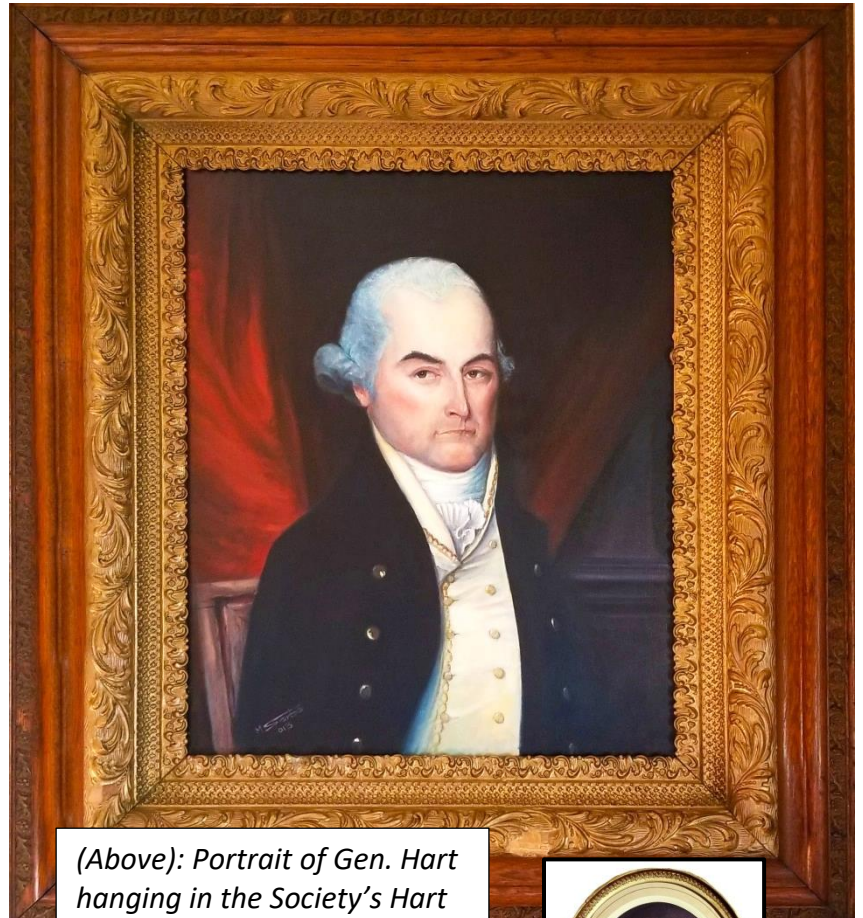


Gen. William Hart, the Most Famous of the Hart Brothers (part I)

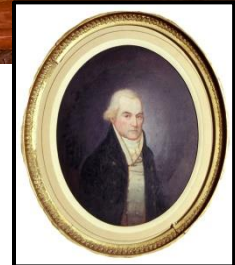
(By Lamar LeMonte, OSHS November, 2022)

The resume of Gen. William Hart (Jr.) (1746-1817):

A successful young merchant who along with his brothers owned several carriage trade emporiums, two of which were in Old Saybrook. A Revolutionary War cavalry officer who supported George Washington's newly formed Continental Army. A very wealthy post-war shipping magnate, who owned a fleet of over 30 sailing vessels trading with the West Indies. An even wealthier post-war land speculator who helped purchase half of the state of Connecticut. An unsuccessful 5-time candidate for governor of Connecticut. At his death in 1817 his estate was estimated be worth more than \$12-million in today's dollars. His former Saybrook residence is now the headquarters of the Old Saybrook Historical Society. He was the wealthiest and the most famous of the five Hart brothers of Saybrook.



(Above): Portrait of Gen. Hart hanging in the Society's Hart House. Repainted by noted portrait artist Marek Sarba from a two-inch locket (Right) found in the collection of the Wadsworth Atheneum.



The first Hart in America

The Hart family started in what is now Hartford in 1636. In Saybrook a century later, the Rev. William Hart Sr. and his wife Mary gave birth to nine children, one being William (Jr.). They were the fifth generation of American Harts. By this time numerous extended Hart families were well established in Connecticut towns, both along the Connecticut River and the Connecticut shoreline.

The first Hart in America was Stephen (1605-1682), born in England. He landed in Braintree, Massachusetts in 1632 as a 27-year old minister and joined the church of the famous Rev. Thomas Hooker in Boston. In 1636, the same year John Winthrop Jr. ventured to the mouth of the Connecticut River to establish the Saybrook settlement, both Rev. Hart and Hooker ventured to the Connecticut River to what is now Hartford. Rev. Hooker co-founded Hartford and later the Connecticut Colony, which then purchased Winthrop's Saybrook settlement.

Just like the naming of Saybrook, there are competing legends about the naming of Hartford. Originally called Newtown, the name was changed to Hartford in 1637. One legend claims the name was in honor of "Hertford," the English birthplace of one of Rev. Hooker's assistants, the Rev. Samuel Stone.

The other legend more popular among Connecticut

historians is that it was named after Rev. Hart's property on the banks of the Connecticut River. His property was a popular place to ford the river at low water and was known as "Hart's ford."



(Above): Depiction of Rev. Thomas Hooker's 1636 arrival at Hartford. Painted by Hartford-born Frederic Edwin Church in 1846. The painting hangs in the Wadsworth Atheneum.

Rev. Stephen Hart later settled in the rich farmlands of Farmington, Connecticut, just west of Hartford, where he raised his family. His grandson, John Hart (1682-1732), also became a minister and after briefly attending Harvard, moved to Saybrook and attended the Collegiate School, which had not yet become Yale. He graduated in 1703 and became the first pastor of the Congregational Church in East Guilford in 1707. His only son, William Hart Sr. (1713-1784), was one of the first graduates from what had become Yale in 1732. In 1736 he became pastor of First Congregational Church in Saybrook, replacing the Rev. Azariah Mather. He was the father of the wealthy and famous General William Hart Jr.

Rev. William Hart (Sr.) married Mary Blague (1729-1800) who became the matriarch of the Saybrook Harts. They had 9 children, 4 girls and 5 boys. The famous William Hart (Jr.) was their 3rd child and eldest son. None of their five sons became ministers. They all became successful merchants, the most famous being General William Hart, and one also became an unlikely bank robber.

The young Saybrook merchant

Historians claim William (Jr.) got involved in the family's mercantile business early and this afforded him the ability to build a grand house for his bride, Ester Buckingham (1745-1811). This was in 1767 when William was 21 years old. The backyard property of that Main Street house originally extended down to the shore of North Cove where it is said the numerous ships of the "Hart fleet" could be seen at anchor. The view of the Hart fleet from the house was undoubtedly true, but not in 1767 when he built the house, because the fleet did not yet exist. Where and how he accumulated his wealth to build his house as a 21-year old is unclear, but it was not from his sailing vessels. The Hart fleet came later and was part of the post-war company William founded with his brothers and it made William a wealthy import-export shipping magnate.



Very likely there could have been dowry money from his bride, Ester Buckingham, whose grandfather, Rev. Thomas Buckingham of Old Saybrook, had been a founder of the Collegiate School, later to become Yale. He was also an owner of considerable town land. William's parents were also relatively well to do and very well connected. Many members of both extended families were in the dry-goods business, which meant they were connected to various stores and the business of importing and exporting materials from Europe and the Caribbean islands.

These early family connections very likely started William in the import-export business and could have afforded him enough money to build his house. Later in life he certainly excelled in that business and was known, along with his brothers, to be the owner of several stores described as high-end, carriage trade emporiums, catering to the wealthy residents of both Saybrook and Hartford.

The young Revolutionary War soldier

Historians claim William was an early convert to the colonial cause in the struggle leading to the American Revolution. He had already become a member of the Saybrook train-band, the name of the local militia of most colonial towns. In early 1772 at the age of 26 he was commissioned ensign, the lowest



Colonial train-band reenactors

ranking officer of the first company of Connecticut's 7th Regiment. The next year he was made a captain of the regiment's horse troop. Two years later the American Revolution began with the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The state then consolidated all the horse troops into five light horse regiments and promoted Hart to major and commander of the Connecticut 1st Regiment.



Depiction of Danbury burning in 1777

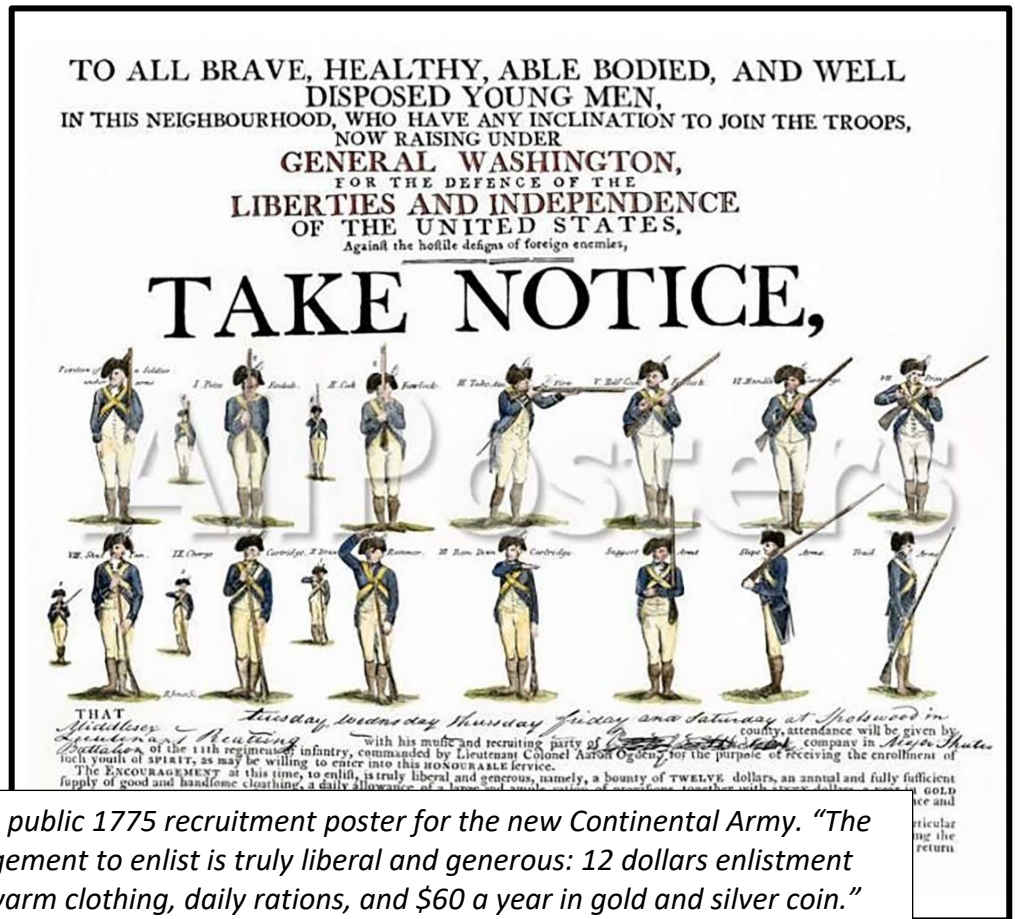
It was 1776, he was 30-years old, and he commanded the largest cavalry unit in the state. Under his command was his next younger brother Samuel Hart (1748-1823) two years his junior, and Joseph Hart (1755-1810) nine years his junior. Major Hart was also in command of 10 captains, 3 lieutenants, numerous quartermasters and petty officers, and 6 companies of cavalry, about 500 men, horses and equipment.

They were first called by George Washington to assist his fledgling Continental Army in defending New York City from a British attack. The next year Hart's command was sent to help defend Danbury against General Tryon's raids. Those raids were where the British burned numerous Connecticut homes, factories, schools and churches and created a population of Connecticut civilians who later became known as "the fire sufferers" with whom Hart would deal when he became a post-war land speculator and politician.

A year later Hart's command was sent to help General Israel Putnam defend Peekskill against General Burgoyne's southward march. Specific details of Hart's enemy engagements do not exist. Historians agree that he obviously suffered the typical deprivations of colonial warfare -- foul rations, deplorable living conditions, a chronic dearth of horses, lack of uniforms for his troops, plus inadequate ammunition and ordinances. One historian politely summarized his war time record as, "substantial and long-tenured, unblemished but undistinguished."

Many years after the war, William Hart was named Major General of the state's 2nd Division of Militia. This was a peacetime gesture of social status, not military achievement, but it anointed William with the lasting title of General.

At the outbreak of the war there were two categories of armies--- soldiers fighting as members of their state militia and soldiers fighting as members of the newly formed Continental Army. Brother John Hart (1750-1828) was the only brother who enlisted in the Continental Army. John Hart was part of George Washington's retreat from New York to New Jersey. He later fought the British in Peekskill under the command of New York's Governor Clinton. He took part in the expeditions against Long Island, Rhode Island, and Morristown, New Jersey.



(Above): A public 1775 recruitment poster for the new Continental Army. "The encouragement to enlist is truly liberal and generous: 12 dollars enlistment bounty, warm clothing, daily rations, and \$60 a year in gold and silver coin."

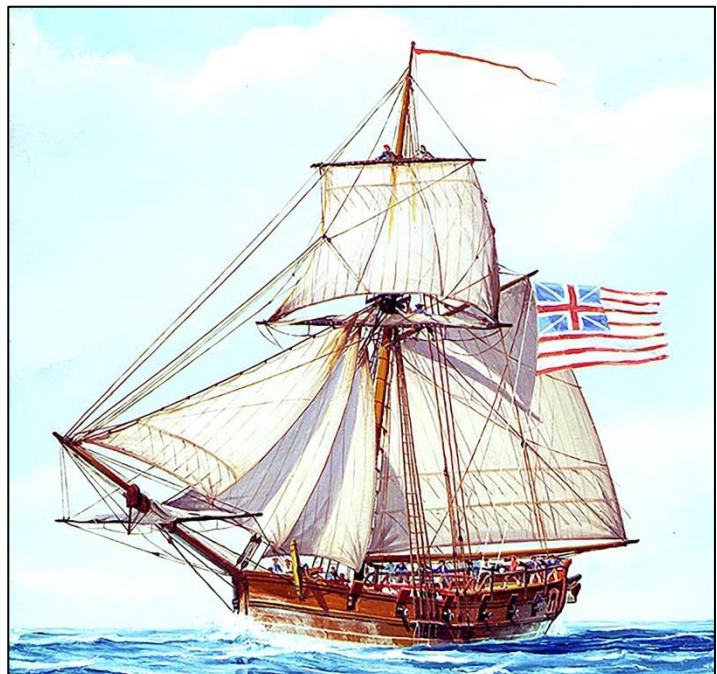
After 3 years of fighting John Hart resigned (which was allowed) and returned to Saybrook. As a Regular Army veteran, he was the only Hart brother entitled to a Federal post-war pension. While back in Saybrook he joined Elisha, the youngest brother, with the building of the Hart's first sailing vessels. Records show that during this time the older brother, Maj. William Hart, purchased a dozen 4-pound cannon from the Salisbury Foundry in January 1778. Since cavalry officers did not carry cannon it is most likely these were shipped to brothers Elisha and John in Saybrook for the decks of their new Connecticut Navy privateer vessels.



(Above): Authentic Revolutionary War 4-pound cannon that would fire a 4-pound cannon ball. The barrel weighed 600 pounds. (Right): Depiction of the cannon mounted on the deck of a privateer, similar to the Hart's privateers.

The Connecticut Navy

Just as there were two categories of armies during the Revolutionary War, the state militia and the new Continental Army, there were also two categories of navies, the state navies of privateers and the new Continental Navy. The youngest Hart brother, Elisha (1758-1842) was only 17-years old when the war began. He decided to join the Connecticut Navy as a privateer under the command of Governor Jonathan Trumbull. While his brothers were on horseback, he was on the deck of his ships.



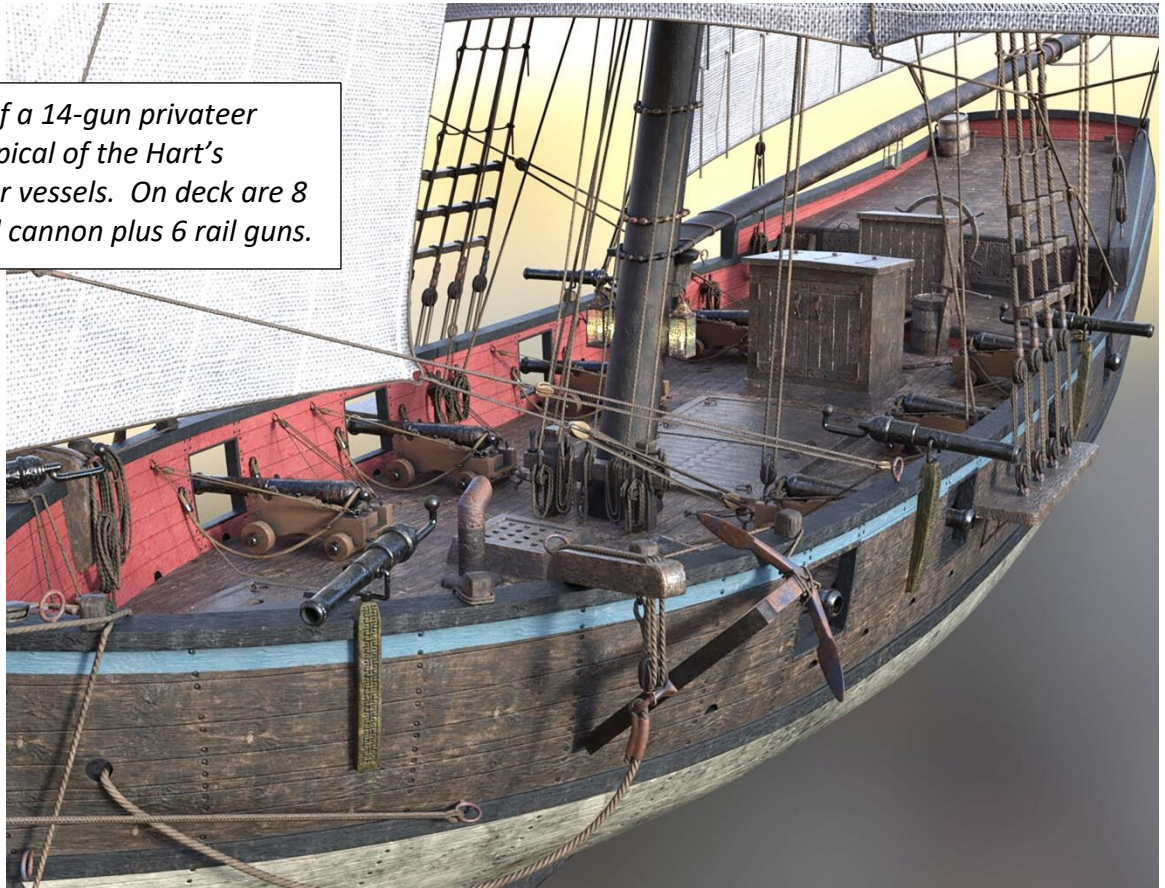
Continental Navy sloop "Providence," typical of the five privateers the Harts built in Saybrook from 1778-1782. It flies the (then) new Continental Navy ensign.

Unlike his cavalry brothers, Elisha was captured twice by the British but both times managed to escape unharmed. Historians relate that Elisha Hart “established for himself a brilliant reputation as a dauntless seafarer and courageous privateersman.” This was the start of what became the civilian fleet of Hart merchant trading vessels that brought the Hart brothers their post-war wealth. How Elisha Hart obtained financing for the ships is unclear.

Colonial Privateers

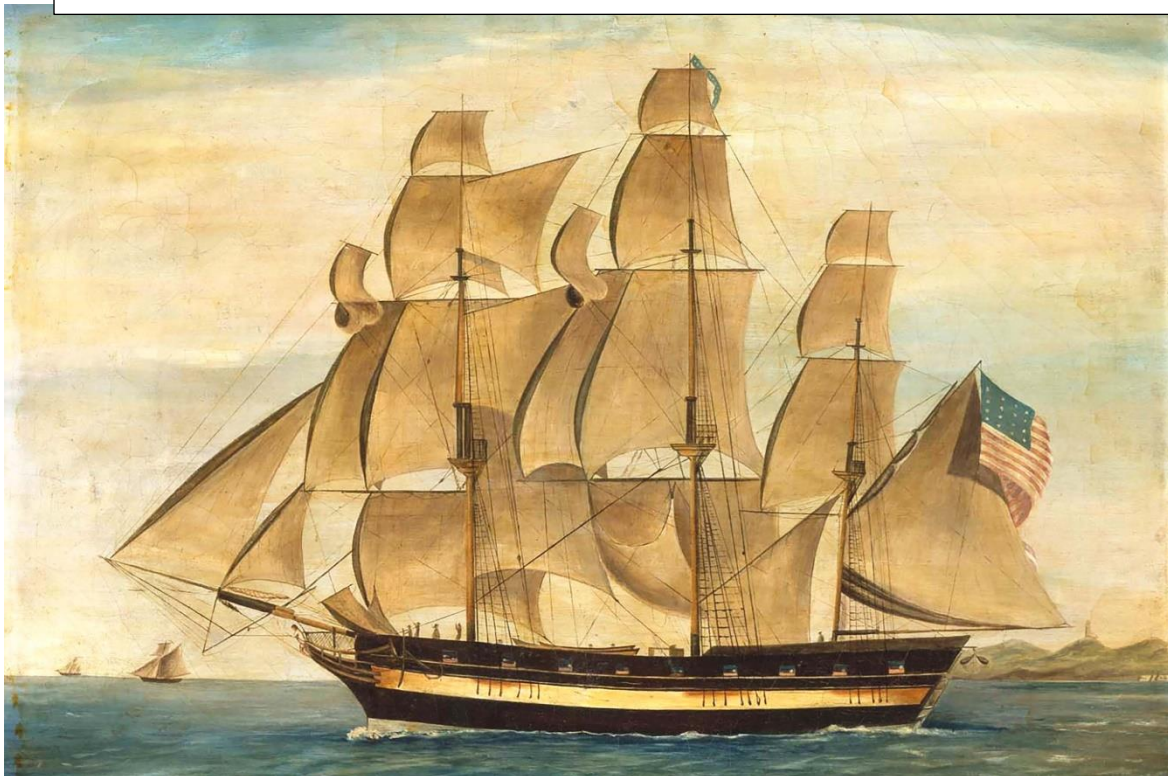
The history of privateering is long and somewhat notorious. A privateer was commonly defined as a pirate with papers (letters of marque) and quite often both the papers and the privateer were of dubious character. Revolutionary War privateers were civilians commissioned by states to carry out quasi-military activities. They would sail in privately owned, armed ships, robbing merchant vessels and pillaging settlements belonging to the enemy. The number of American privateers peaked during the Revolutionary War and substantially declined by the War of 1812, having been replaced by larger, better organized and better armed Continental Navy ships and sailors.

Model of a 14-gun privateer sloop typical of the Hart's privateer vessels. On deck are 8 4-pound cannon plus 6 rail guns.



Privateers represented the early Connecticut Navy, commanded by governor, Jonathan Trumbull. It was a situation of naval military objectives overlapping with private enterprise and it was not always a well-organized endeavor. Most states were like Connecticut. Under a specific Congressional legislation in 1776, a privateer could be licensed by the state. Blank commissions or letters of marque were sent to each state. Cash bonds of \$5,000 or \$10,000 (depending on the size of the vessel) were required, and the division of prizes was left to the individual states to decide. In Connecticut, the state took half the prize and the privateer divided the other half between owners, officers, and crew. Sharing of the prize varied from ship to ship, but a basic seaman on board a privateer always made far more money than a sailor on one of the newly commissioned Continental Navy ships. This fact greatly frustrated General George Washington, who commanded the early American naval fleet, and who had to compete with the state privateers for sailors. Nevertheless, privateers are credited with playing a critical role in defeating the British during the Revolutionary War.

(Below): A large 3-masted Privateer "Vengeance" from Newburyport, MA approximately 100 feet long. It fought the British fleet from the West Indies to the coast of Europe. Unlike the smaller Connecticut vessels, these larger ships patrolled the entire east coast, plus the coasts of Africa, Europe and the Mediterranean Sea.

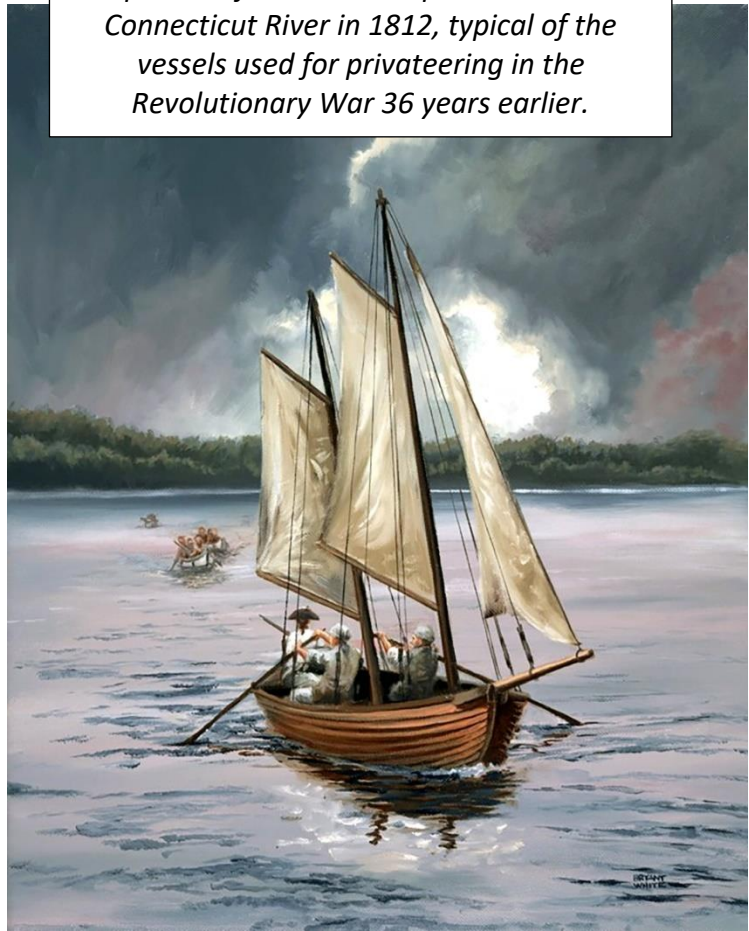


Connecticut whaleboat privateers

Many state privateers sailed with specific orders to harass and capture enemy ships. They sailed large, well-armed, ocean-going sailing ships. They patrolled along the entire coast, from Maine down through the Caribbean islands. They also crossed the Atlantic to harass the coastal shipping of Africa, Europe and the even the Mediterranean Sea.

In the Connecticut Navy, however, the privateers mostly patrolled Long Island Sound and the nearby coasts off Rhode Island and New York City. Unfortunately, Long Island Sound quickly became a management problem for Governor Trumbull because the enemy was just across the Sound on Long Island, reachable by what became known as Connecticut's "whaleboat privateers." These were local sailors who were often conveniently ignorant of what constituted an enemy prize. Many were unsanctioned adventurers in small boats which were rowed across Long Island to steal and plunder houses, farms and businesses. Some were brave patriots, others simply fool-hearty thieves. Most but not all resembled saboteurs, burning critical British supplies of food and grain or munitions. Some whaleboat privateers were duly commissioned with letters of marque, but most were not. As Wick Griswold noted in his book, *Connecticut Pirates and Privateers: Their combined exploits provided a panoply of adventure, skullduggery, derring-do, intrigue and bellicosity. Connecticut's governor, Jonathan Trumbull, had his hands full trying to sort out what was legally in-bounds and what wasn't when it came to their cross-Sound forays.*

Depiction of a whaleboat privateer on the Connecticut River in 1812, typical of the vessels used for privateering in the Revolutionary War 36 years earlier.



The damage they did to British supplies on Long Island was substantial and this harassment was one of the reasons for the retaliatory raids the British committed on Danbury and other Connecticut towns, resulting in the civilian population later known as “the fire sufferers.” Maj. William Hart helped defend these civilians during the war and after the war he would deal with their unique compensation plan offered by the state legislature.

The young Hart privateer

The youngest brother, Elisha Hart, was the only Hart brother to captain a sailing vessel. He was not a small whaleboat privateer. He built and sailed larger sloop rigged, coastal-traders, manned with rail guns and cannon. These were the type of vessel ordinarily engaged in the merchant trade with the Caribbean islands, Cuba, and the Bahamas. How he financed his vessels is not clear. They undoubtedly consumed a fair portion of the Hart family finances to build them, bond them in cash, and then provision them with food, armament, men and supplies. Perhaps he and his brother John, who had resigned from the Army and returned to Saybrook, had already ordered these merchant traders to be built as part of a pre-war business venture and then decided to turn them into privateers. Or perhaps the brothers partnered with other wealthy merchants or patriotic investors to build these vessels for the sole purpose of harassing the British as privateers. Regardless of how and why the vessels were originally financed and built, they were apparently the first of what would become the Hart’s post-war fleet of merchant sailing vessels.

New London was clearly ranked as the leading privateer port in Connecticut. It is probably why it suffered the most via British reprisals. The British burned New London in 1781 because it was the largest privateer port.

(Below): Model of an 8-gun privateer sloop, typical of the Hart privateers. They patrolled the coast from Rhode Island to New York.



Painting of the burning of New London in 1781



All of the vessels on the Connecticut River probably represented the second leading source of privateers, with Saybrook being the primary port. Records show Saybrook had at least 11 commissioned privateers, 5 of which were Hart vessels. The ship records of this period are limited since most were destroyed by the British burning of New London during the war in 1781.

The Hart vessels were sloops, (a single mast) probably ranging in length from 60 to 70 feet, carrying anywhere from 4 to 10 guns and 15 to 50 men. They were named *Neptune* built in 1778, *Retaliation* built in 1779, *Restoration* and *Richard* built in 1780, and *Ranger* built just a year before the end of the war in 1782. Elisha Hart, was the first master in command of *Retaliation* (10 guns, crew of 50), and later *Restoration* (10 guns, crew of 30) and *Ranger* (2 guns, crew of 15).

(Below): A privateer sloop similar to the sloops built by the Harts in Saybrook



Three of these vessels would survive the war and be refitted as merchant trading ships. They were the start of the famous Hart fleet of West Indie traders that would bring the five Hart brothers substantial wealth in the decades following the war.

Part II: Read more about William Hart and the post-war prosperity of the Hart fleet; how he turned his privateer fleet into a major trading company, bringing him his post-war wealth as a shipping magnate, land speculator and politician.

Part II: In the December 2022 History Articles, visit: saybrookhistory.org.