

Gen. William Hart, the Most Famous of the Hart Brothers (Part II)

(By Lamar LeMonte, OSHS December, 2022)

The Connecticut Navy

During the Revolutionary War the five Saybrook Hart brothers fought the British on both land and sea. Three were fighting as cavalry officers, commanded by William Hart (1746-1817), then a major. Two others were building sailing vessels as part of the Connecticut Navy's fleet of privateers. Elisha Hart, the youngest Hart brother, was the only brother to actually sail as a privateer against the British. Unlike his cavalry brothers, he was captured twice by the British but both times managed to escape unharmed.

The five Hart privateers were all 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 in 1782 just a year before the end of the war. Elisha Hart, the youngest Hart brother, 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).



(Above): The Continental Navy sloop "Providence," was typical of the five privateers the Harts built in Saybrook from 1778-1782. Flying the new Continental Navy ensign.

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 Indies merchant traders that would bring the five Hart brothers substantial wealth in the decades following the war.

The Hart vessel commanders

The Harts employed numerous Saybrook masters or captains to command their vessels, first as privateers and later as civilian merchant traders. The first master, Azariah Whittlesey (1741-1806) was also the most famous. Born in Saybrook and well known to the Harts, Azariah was famous because he was the first successful Connecticut Navy privateer, with several prizes already to his credit.

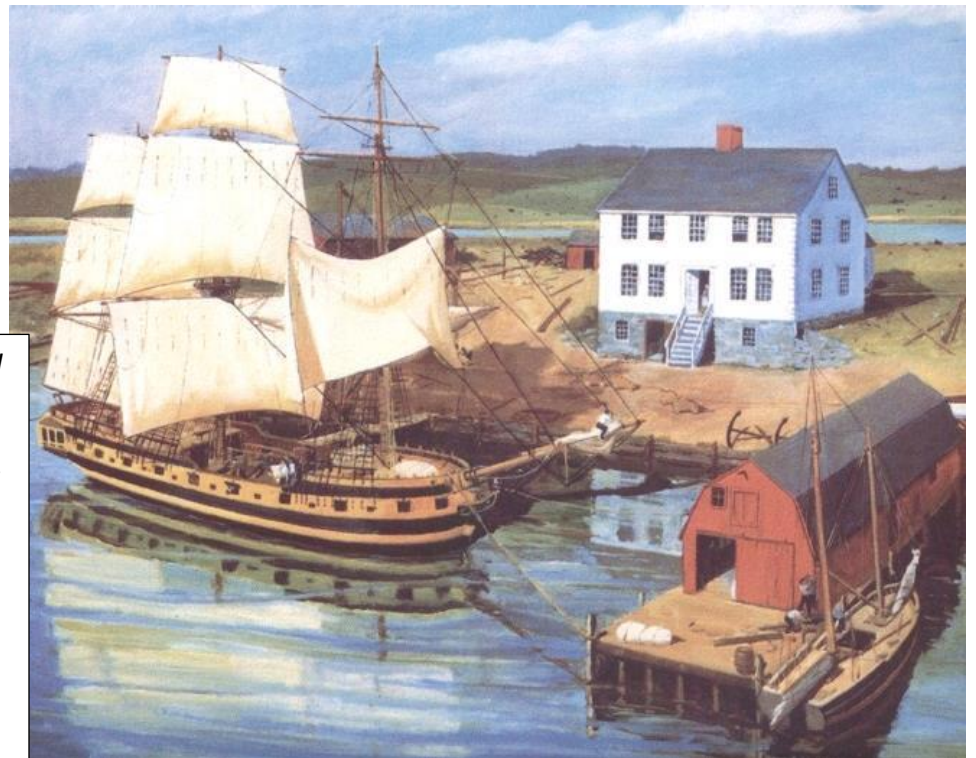
**Captains of
Hart vessels:**

Hezekiah Canfield
William Beebe
Barnabas Chipman
John Clapp
Samuel Dickinson
James Endicott
Worthington Ely
Edward Griffin
David Griffin
Samuel Hurlbut
John Ingraham
Willoughby Lynde
Sylvester Mather
Andrew McComb
George Pratt
Ichabod Smith
David Strong
Issac Tracy
Ambrose Whittlesey
Azariah Whittlesey
Charles Whittlesey
John T. Whittlesey
Samuel Williams

In 1776 Governor Jonathan Trumbull commissioned the building of the *Oliver Cromwell* to be part of the Connecticut Navy. Azariah Whittlesey decided to join the ship as an officer. The ship was a 300-ton, 80-foot, heavily armed vessel. It was the largest ship in the Connecticut Navy and the largest ship to ever cross over the shallow sandbar at the mouth of the river. It carried 20 guns and a crew of 180. Unfortunately the maiden voyage of the ship was delayed in New London while final provisioning and paycheck negotiations were underway. These frustrating delays caused several officers and crew, including Azariah, to leave the ship in search of better pay. That is when Elisha Hart hired Azariah to command the first Hart-built privateer, *Neptune*. Azariah also took over command of Elisha Hart's second privateer, *Retaliation*, which Elisha had initially commanded. Both Elisha and Azariah enjoyed financial success as Connecticut Navy privateers.

(Right): The Oliver Cromwell launched in Essex in 1776. The largest ship in the new Connecticut Navy. Captured in 1799 and renamed the "HMS Restoration." Its ultimate fate is unknown.

*Painting by Richard Brooks,
courtesy of the
Conneticut River Museum.*



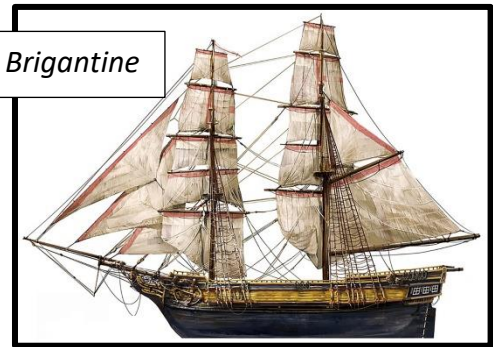
Many American privateers made large fortunes during the war, but historians claim the Hart family did not. Historian Stuart Frank summarizes the end of the war as follows: *By and large, privateering did not bring sound prosperity and large overall profits. It brought color and excitement, occasional rich prizes, many fruitless cruises, and frequent complete loss of vessel and capture of its crew. No seaport in Connecticut grew wealthy from privateering—not even New London, the center. In fact, the vast majority of individuals probably lost money.* The Hart brothers' wealth came after the war.

The post-war prosperity of Hart's fleet

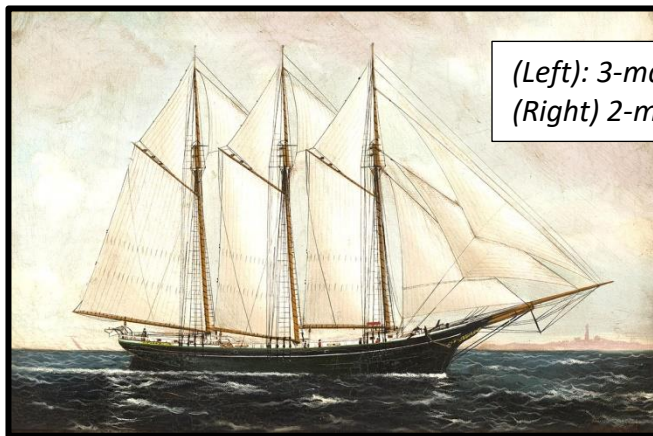
When the war ended in 1783, three of the Hart privateer vessels had survived and they were refitted as merchant trading vessels.



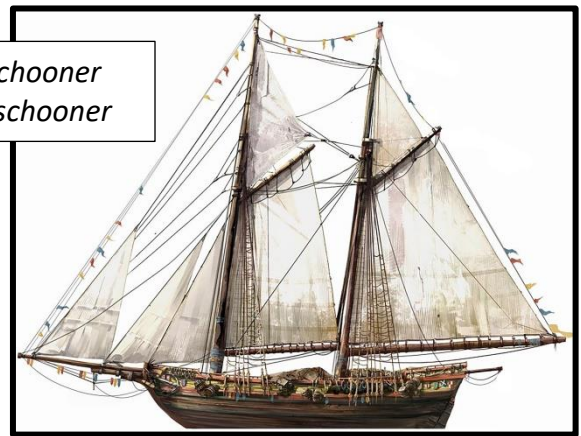
Recently retired Maj. William Hart then formed his import-export trading business, "William Hart & Co. of Saybrook." This was a West Indies trading company run by all five brothers. It was obviously a



lucrative enterprise affording the brothers the funds to build and outfit additional vessels. From the end of the war until William's death in 1817, the brothers added at least two dozen new sailing vessels to the surviving privateer sloops. 13 were 70 to 80-ton sloops, about 60 to 70 feet in length, 8 were larger brigantines, 100 to 150-ton, two-masted ships from 70 to 90 feet in length. Several others were rigged as two and three-masted schooners, and the largest named *Fanny & Almira*, was 236-ton and 95 feet in length.



(Left): 3-masted schooner
(Right) 2-masted schooner



The Hart fleet trading in the West Indies was typical of the many Connecticut traders. The business of these ships was cargo, not passengers. According to historian Brenda Milkofsky, *cargo typical of the island trade were barrels of salted beef, pork, shad, and pickled codfish. There was cheese, butter, beans, potatoes, corn, onions, and apples, barrel staves, hoops, hoop poles, lumber, shingles, and oak planks. Live animals included geese, turkeys, hogs, and sheep. Every year between 1796 and 1820 an average of 500 cattle were shipped to the West Indies "live on deck" from the Connecticut River ports.*

On the return trip, the most lucrative and most common returning import was molasses, used for distilling Connecticut rum, a major state enterprise. But the Caribbean islands were also key trans-shipment ports for European, Indian and Asian goods like fine fabrics, tea and other Asian spices, leather goods, shoes, boots, and items made of glass and porcelain.

Most of the Hart ships were built in Saybrook shipyards, one of which was located in the town's North Cove. The last and largest Hart ship was built five years after



A three-masted, square-rigged ship similar to the Hart's "Niagara," built on Saybrook Point in 1822.

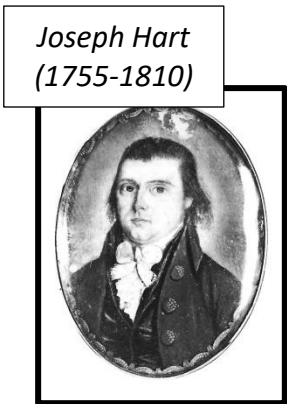
William Hart died. Named *Niagara*, it was a 320-ton, three-masted, square-rigged ship, approximately 100 feet long, built on Saybrook Point near where the Saybrook Resort and Spa now sits. It was larger than the *Oliver Cromwell* built upriver 41 years earlier. The vessel was registered for foreign trade (versus coastal trade), which probably meant they designed it for trans-Atlantic commerce. Presumably the brothers still managed the

import-export business after the death of their older brother and they were going to enter the lucrative but very competitive trans-Atlantic trade. Dozens of new sailing companies were being established starting in the 1820s to take advantage of the growing number of immigrants coming to America from Europe.

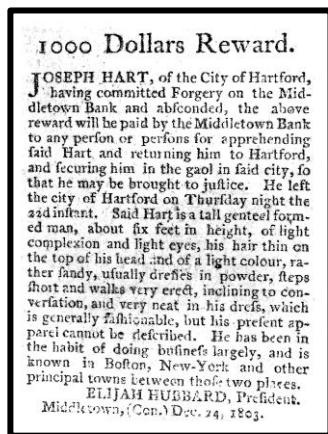
What ultimately happened to the *Niagara* and the Hart import-export business as well as the Hart vessels is not recorded. By the time the *Niagara* was built in 1822, most of the Hart fleet was 20 years old or more, and the West Indies trade no longer represented the profitable trading opportunities it once did. William Hart's only son, Richard, inherited his father's wealth, but much of that wealth was based on his father's Ohio land speculation, not his import-export business which Richard apparently did not continue. He was however a retail merchant like many in his family and ran a successful store in Saybrook; perhaps it was another high-end emporium similar to those of his father and uncles.

The Bank Robber

The Hart fleet brought comfortable wealth to all five Hart brothers and their families. Unfortunately for brother Joseph, the wealth also brought some despair. Joseph ended the war as a cavalry captain and became William's closest partner in Saybrook, more so than the youngest Elisha, the former privateer. By 1785 Joseph had "married well," and moved to Hartford to establish a highly successful downtown wholesale company, with imported merchandise supplied via the Hart ships. He became involved with numerous philanthropic endeavors and worked closely with notables such as Jeremiah Wadsworth in founding the Hartford Library.



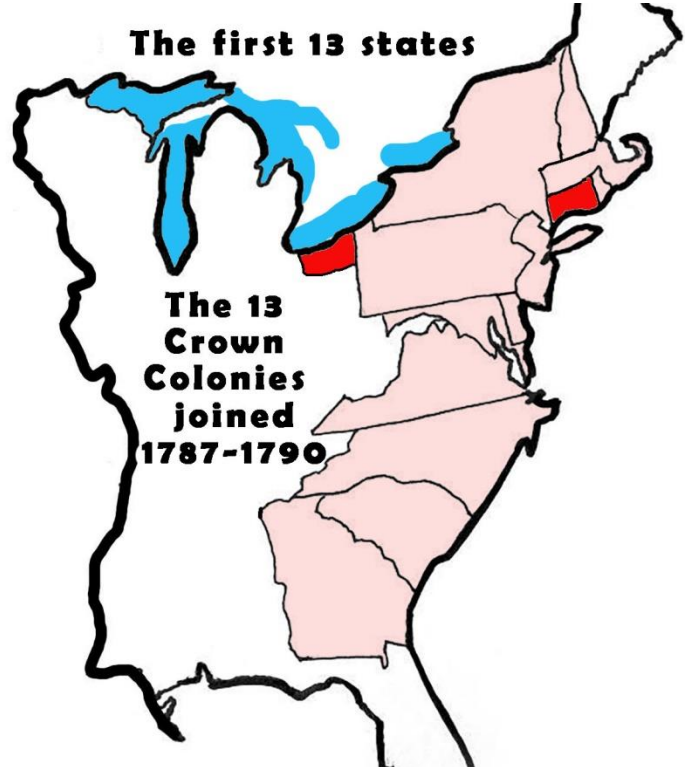
Then in 1803, much to everyone's surprise and family embarrassment, the president of the Middletown Bank published a wanted poster offering a \$1,000 reward for the capture of Joseph Hart. He had robbed his bank's Hartford branch and disappeared. Joseph Hart, respected businessman, father of 7 children,



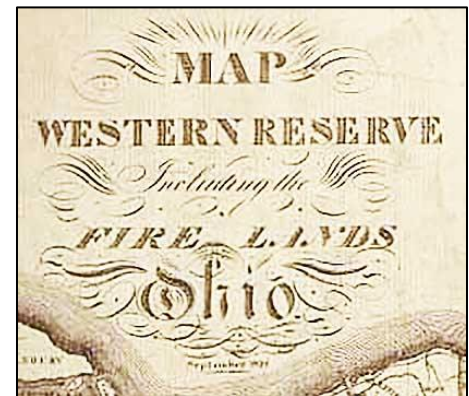
member of Hartford's City Council, was never mentioned again until his mysterious death 7 years later. The assumption is that the family settled the bank debt and helped him escape to the Caribbean island of St. Bartholomew (St. Barts/Barthelemy) where he was employed as the commercial agent for the Hart ships. Then around 1810 there was a brief notice in the local island paper that a Captain Hart had been lost overboard at sea. By this time brother William was profiting from his land speculation business and entering state politics.

William Hart Jr. buys half of Connecticut

When Connecticut officially entered the newly formed United States in 1788, Hart was a member of the ratifying convention that voted to make Connecticut the 5th state to ratify the constitution. The new U.S. government recognized the Connecticut land on Lake Erie as part of the state of Connecticut. That land was referred to as New Connecticut or the Connecticut Western Reserve; it was land originally granted to Connecticut by King Charles II in the famous charter brought back by Governor John Winthrop Jr. in 1662. The land area of both parts of Connecticut, Old and New, were approximately the same size. Earlier, the western portion of New Connecticut had been given to “the fire-sufferers.” These were the Connecticut families that cavalry officer Maj. Hart had defended (unsuccessfully) during the British retaliatory raids 12 years earlier.



After the war, several petitions were presented to the Connecticut legislature by those who lost their property. They were called the “Fire Sufferers.” William Hart helped present their case to the state legislature. A legislative committee then reported back in 1792 that the sufferers ought



to be paid with Western Reserve lands for compensation in lieu of cash. A major problem was paying off the Indian tribes who owned the land and then surveying it. That took so long that very few of the actual Fire Sufferers ever saw the Fire Sufferers Lands, a name soon shortened to the Firelands.

But William Hart and other war veterans saw an opportunity to make some money with the rest of the land in New Connecticut. Connecticut was broke and needed money after the Revolutionary War. Hart and 57 other wealthy Connecticut investors, several from Saybrook, formed the Connecticut Land Company which bought the 3.3 million acres of New Connecticut from Old Connecticut for \$2.1 million. They wisely bought on credit, using the land as collateral. Few of the investors intended to move west; their intention was to make a profit in land speculation. Hart made a small fortune selling the land to one speculator after another. But Hart's profits were the exception. Most investors lost their investment money.

Hart and his investors had purchased acreage that equaled half of the new state of Connecticut. What few people realized at the time was that by purchasing the land, the state of Connecticut gave up its legal right to govern the land. After 7 years, New Connecticut was no longer part of the state of Connecticut. No one then governed the land which made it easy

for the government to make that land part of the new state of Ohio in 1803. The Connecticut Land Company was mismanaged and went bankrupt in 1809. By that time William Hart had already made his profits and had entered state politics.



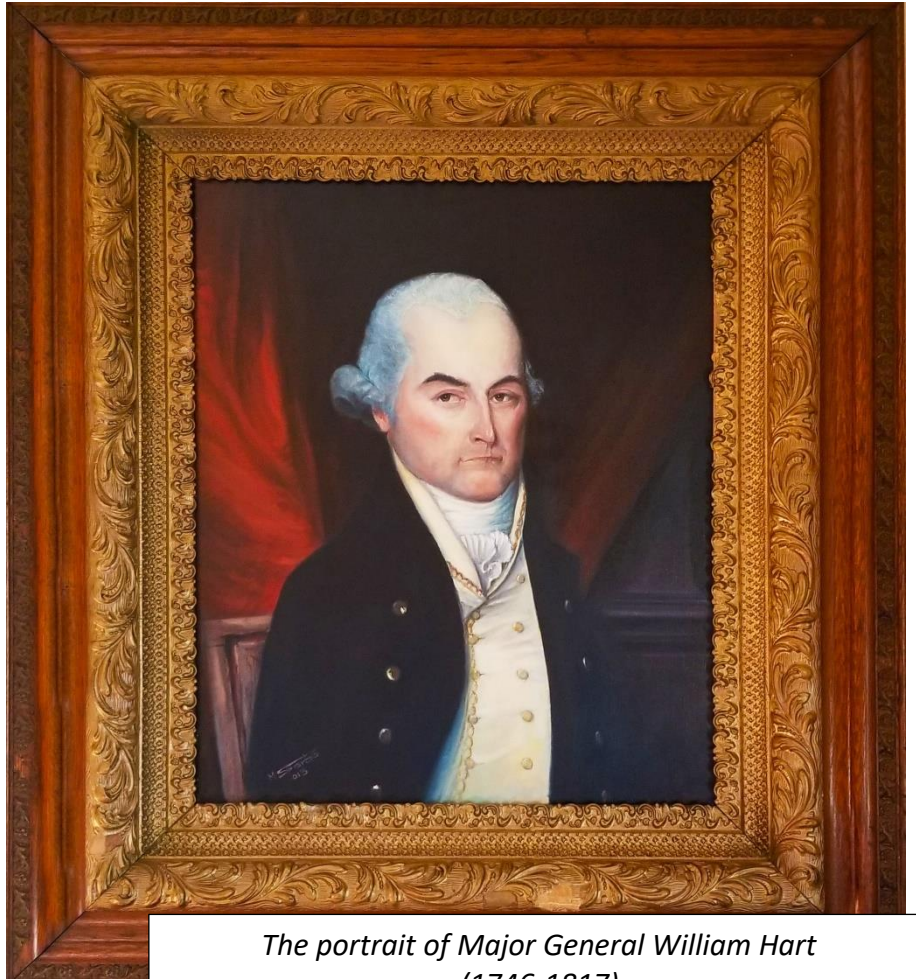
William Hart's political demise

Gen. Hart had embraced the election of the first Republican president, Thomas Jefferson, in 1800. This was surprising because he had always been a staunch Federalist, aligned with the conservative New England principles of John Adams and Congregationalists like his father, the reverend. He had already caused some unrest among conservative state Federalists in the legislature when he supported veterans moving west to the Firelands. These conservatives were against any westward expansion of the state and were quite satisfied to have the new state of Ohio annex the remaining Connecticut Western Reserve land in 1803.

Hart shocked many when he broke ranks with his conservative Federalists and joined the new Republican Party in Connecticut. In 1803 at the age of 57 Hart decided to run for governor as a Republican, and lost. Hart and the new Republicans were up against the well-established conservative Federalists and their statewide supporters in the very powerful Congregational Church. The prominent state Republican politician, Alexander Wolcott, wrote the following:

The Federalists have priests and deacons, judges and justices, sheriffs and surveyors, with a host of corporations and privileged orders to aid their elections. Let it be shown that plain men, without titles or hope of office, can do better than the mercenary troops of Federalists.

Hart ran unsuccessfully for governor every year for five years until he retired from politics in 1808 at the age of 62. Four years later he was widowed. His loving wife, Ester Buckingham Hart, died in 1811 when he was 65 years old. He then married his wife's cousin, Lucy Buckingham. William Hart died 6 years later at the age of 72 and his wife then sold their stately Saybrook home.



*The portrait of Major General William Hart (1746-1817)
It hangs in the Old Saybrook Society's Hart House.
Painted by Society member and noted artist Marek Sarba from a two-inch locket watercolor.*

Major General William Hart Jr. in perspective

At the time of William Hart's death in 1817, four of his eight siblings were still alive, two sisters and two brothers. And Richard, his only son, was living just up the street from him. Also surviving him were dozens of nieces and nephews.

During his lifetime he witnessed the maturing of colonial America through the growth of his hometown, Saybrook. He could very possibly have met and known George Washington personally, with whom he fought the Revolutionary War. He observed the presidencies of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. He saw the center of Saybrook's commerce evolve from the North Cove waterfront, where one of his shipyards was located, to Main Street where he built his home. He voted to ratify the new constitution that legitimized Connecticut as the 5th state in the new union in 1788. He also personally contributed to the loss of half of Connecticut's state land in Ohio. He witnessed the burning of the fleet in Essex during the dysfunctional War of 1812. He participated in the rise of the Republican Party, both nationally and locally. He witnessed the transfer of social and political state power from the venerated, conservative Federalists and Congregationalists like his father, to the growing popularity of the Jeffersonian anti-Federalist Republicans and Episcopalians. He would witness the early growth of steam powered vessels on the Connecticut River, and the consequent demise of sailing vessels that had helped build his family's fortune in the import-export business with the West Indies.

The Hart family's fame in Saybrook would be continued for the next three decades, not by William's son Richard, but rather by William's youngest brother, Elisha, the consummate privateer during the Revolutionary War. This time the Hart notoriety would be focused on Elisha's seven beautiful daughters, "distinguished for their beauty and accomplishments, and who moved in the highest circles of international wealth and honor." But that is a separate Saybrook story.



(Right): Elisha Hart (1758-1842, 84 yrs.) the ex-privateer and youngest Hart brother, father of seven daughters. The original 1833 portrait was repainted by Marek Sarba, noted Old Saybrook artist.