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## Remembering the USS Chesapeake: The Politics of Maritime Death and Impressment

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# Remembering the USS *Chesapeake*

## The Politics of Maritime Death and Impressment

ROBERT E. CRAY, JR.

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On June 27, 1807, several thousand mourners assembled in Norfolk, Virginia, to witness Robert MacDonald's internment. An ordinary mariner, MacDonald belonged to a class of maritime laborers, people who hoisted sails, stored cargoes, swabbed decks, and followed orders. Dead sailors normally rated scant attention and modest funerals when they died ashore, while death at sea meant burial over the side. MacDonald stood out because his death transcended normal conventions. A broadside from the HMS *Leopard* had wounded MacDonald aboard the USS *Chesapeake* on June 22, a time of peace between Great Britain and the United States. Three Americans died that day from the British guns, and eighteen others, among them MacDonald, were injured. MacDonald's death several days later at the Norfolk Marine Hospital spurred an elaborate ceremony. A flotilla of boats, their flags at half-mast, accompanied MacDonald's casket from Hospital Point to Merchant Wharf to the sounds of minute guns. An assemblage of civic officials, military figures, and common citizens almost 4,000 strong marched through Norfolk streets following MacDonald's remains to Christ's Church, where the Reverend Davis delivered an "appropriate, impres-

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sive, and patriotic discourse.” Robert MacDonald received a hero’s burial, transformed by patriotic outrage into a symbol of American resolve.<sup>1</sup>

The bombardment of the USS *Chesapeake* by the HMS *Leopard* not only led to the commemoration of a common sailor, but also inspired a call to arms shaped by revolutionary recollections. Norfolk and nearby Portsmouth residents had met on June 24 to declare their readiness to defend those “sacred rights which our forefathers purchased with their blood.” The revolutionary generation’s sacrifice prompted citizens of the young nation to uphold the “Spirit of 76,” those principles that had underlined American independence. National honor demanded no less. The June meeting requested all citizens to wear crepe for ten days to honor the *Chesapeake*’s dead, “who have fallen victim to British tyranny and premeditated assassination.” The slaughter of American sailors created powerful images, and early republic Virginians wished to emulate their revolutionary forebears. A subsequent public dinner in Norfolk in early July attracted close to 700 persons, military and civilian, who paid further homage to the *Chesapeake* dead. Participants toasted the president, the navy, and the heroes of the Revolution. They then raised tankards to the men “wounded and slaughtered on board the *Chesapeake*—Their blood cries for vengeance, and when our Government directs, vengeance it shall have, till then we can only mourn their loss and sympathize in their suffering.” Four guns and four cheers followed the libation.<sup>2</sup>

Public indignation over the *Chesapeake* incident moved swiftly beyond Virginia. Americans treated it as a national insult, an affront to sovereignty perpetrated by an odious Great Britain unwilling to accord them the rights of a free and independent country. Not surprisingly, national-

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1. *Norfolk Gazette and Public Ledger* (VA), June 29, 1807; John C. Emmerson, Jr., comp., *The Chesapeake Affair of 1807* (Portsmouth, VA, 1954), 32–33; Ira Dye, *The Fatal Cruise of the Argus: Two Captains in the War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD, 1994), 53–54, 64. On burials consult Robert E. Cray, Jr., “Commemorating the Prison Ship Dead: Revolutionary Memory and the Politics of Sepulture in the Early Republic, 1776–1808,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 56 (July 1999), 565–90.

2. *Norfolk Gazette and Public Ledger* (VA), June 26, 1807; Emmerson, *Chesapeake Affair of 1807*, 66–67; Glen Wallach, *Obedient Sons: The Discourse of Youth and Generations in American Culture, 1630–1860* (Amherst, MA, 1997), 56–57.

ism spread across the country: citizens rallied together, held meetings, formed committees of correspondence, and penned resolutions. Federalists and Republicans temporarily abandoned partisan differences to display a united front. The attack upon the *Chesapeake* especially angered naval officers. Distressed by the *Chesapeake's* swift surrender, they took the matter deeply to heart; it was not something they could easily forget—their honor had been compromised, the navy disgraced. For them, as for many Americans, redress was paramount.<sup>3</sup>

Historians have treated the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair as a precursor to the War of 1812. It was an “engagement impossible to overlook or forget,” remarked Robert Ferrell. According to Reginald Horsman, the “country cried for war with a revolutionary fervor,” and Bradford Perkins added that the “whole nation demanded satisfaction.” Relations between Great Britain and the United States, unsettled by previous disputes over neutral trading rights and the impressment of seamen, had reached fever pitch. The *Leopard's* demand to search the United States frigate for British deserters, a demand rejected by the *Chesapeake's* commander, Commodore James Barron, had resulted in the bloody engagement. Compounding matters, the *Leopard's* boarding party had removed four sailors from the damaged vessel, one of whom, Jenkin Ratford, was later executed by British naval authorities. The American flag offered sailors little protection.<sup>4</sup>

Yet American indignation over the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair also reveals political and social responses to mariners. As a diplomatic incident, the *Chesapeake* tragedy subjected the American Navy in general and sail-

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3. Bradford Perkins, *Prologue to War, 1805–1812: England and the United States* (Berkeley, CA, 1961), 142–44; Spencer C. Tucker and Frank T. Reuter, *Injured Honor: The Chesapeake-Leopard Affair June 22, 1807* (Annapolis, MD, 1996), 100–101, note.

4. Robert Ferrell, *American Diplomacy, A History* (1959; 3rd ed., New York, 1975), 130; Reginald Horsman, *The Causes of the War of 1812* (1962; rep., New York, 1979), 103; Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 142–43; Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana, IL, 1989); Alfred T. Mahan, *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812* (2 vols., Boston, 1905), 2: 155–56, 168, 170; Marshall Smelser, *The Democratic Republic, 1801–1815* (New York, 1968), 157–58; C. E. S. Dudley, “The Leopard Incident, 1807,” *History Today*, 19 (July 1969), 468–74; Edward M. Gaines, “The Chesapeake Affair: Virginians Mobilize to Defend National Honor,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, 64 (Apr. 1956), 131–42; See Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*.

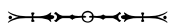
ors in particular to official and popular scrutiny. In the wake of the *Leopard's* attack, sailors came to occupy a symbolic niche within a charged political atmosphere where national honor had been compromised. But what sort of niche would that be? Seafarers had traditionally inspired ambivalence in the early republic, with sailors' rowdy, independent behavior and modest social origins juxtaposed with their contributions to overseas trade and national defense. When ashore, sailors figured prominently in crowd actions, conspicuous by their garb and gait and easily identified by worried civil authorities. Sailors' tenuous attachment to coastal communities—they came and went as work demanded—not only made them denizens of an Atlantic world but also subjected them to threats of impressment by the Royal Navy. If thousands found themselves caught in the British maritime dragnet of the Napoleonic Wars, many mariners found little sympathy among government officials and merchants. The hazards of their occupation did not always register deeply.<sup>5</sup>

American outrage over the *Chesapeake* affair and its aftermath dramatized both the contours and limits of American compassion toward sailors. Although angry, politicians and citizens required additional British provocations to keep mariners in focus. The absence of a British invasion fleet eased fears by summer's end, and the passage of the Embargo Act in December 1807, shifted attention toward the economy. The killing or impressment of Americans was not forgotten; however, the political currents pulled public attention toward new and different channels. The *Chesapeake* affair took a backseat to protracted diplomatic negotiations between Great Britain and the United States. Yet Americans created heroes and villains following the attack that reflected perceptions about

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5. See Daniel Vickers, "Beyond Jack Tar," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 50 (Apr. 1993), 418–24; Simon Newman, "Reading the Bodies of Early American Seamen," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 55 (Jan. 1998), 59–82; Paul A. Gilje, "On the Waterfront: Maritime Workers in New York City in the Early Republic, 1800–1850," *New York History*, 77 (Oct. 1996), 395–426; Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in the Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 25 (July 1968), 371–407; Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston, MA, 2000); Paul A. Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia, PA, 2004).

naval personnel, British and American, officers and common tars. The names and personalities remembered or ignored also showed the very real class constraints at work. MacDonald, an ordinary seaman, achieved brief recognition as a naval martyr, his burial a rallying cry against Great Britain. But would the sailors removed from the *Chesapeake* be transformed into patriotic icons too? Or would naval commanders, the men on the quarterdeck, overshadow common seamen and attract greater notice? Who and what people recalled about the *Chesapeake* affair elucidates the politics of maritime death and impressment in the early republic.<sup>6</sup>



The memory of the American Revolution pervaded and often defined the politics of the early republic. Citizens of the young republic, heirs to the “Spirit of 76,” trumpeted the virtues of liberty achieved against cruel, odious Great Britain. Independence Day celebrations offered patricians and plebeians alike a chance to reaffirm republican values, often bolstered by revolutionary notables in attendance. If Federalists and Republicans chose to present a partisan gloss to the past, anxious to shape the Revolution’s legacy for their own political purposes, they nonetheless championed their identity as freeborn American citizens liberated from British tyranny. Parades and marches marked by fiery oratory gave a nationalistic overlay to an otherwise disparate populace divided by region and class, gender and race, parties and ideology. What policies the new nation should adopt to preserve its revolutionary birthright naturally

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6. Horsman, *Causes of the War of 1812*, 107–108; Joseph F. Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen* (1925; rep., Port Washington, NY, 1966), 137–38; Emmerson, *Chesapeake Affair of 1807*, 17–18. For revolutionary memory, see Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* (Boston, MA, 1999); Young, “George Robert Twelve Hewes (1742–1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 38 (Oct. 1981), 581–623; Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991); Kammen, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York, 1978); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1992); Sarah J. Purcell, *Sealed with Blood: War, Sacrifice, and Memory in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia, PA, 2002). This essay examines the memory of citizens in the early republic to a very recent event.

inspired debate that resulted in clashing proposals and heated arguments.<sup>7</sup>

The United States Navy figured in the discussion. Federalists took pride in the newly commissioned frigates of the 1790s as a bulwark against French aggression; Republicans by contrast found the navy useful against Barbary pirates in the early 1800s. As a military force, the United States Navy was modest, a collection of a dozen or more frigates, sloops, and schooners, complemented by a number of smaller gunboats. Yet as a symbol of the new nation's independence the navy's significance transcended its size. The ships protected American commerce, flew the flag of an independent republic, and demonstrated the nation's resolve to preserve freedom in a chaotic, war-torn Atlantic world. The men aboard these vessels might receive praise or condemnation: the heralded inspired poetry, songs, and toasts, the despised court-martials and ignominy.<sup>8</sup>

Naval exploits captivated the public and elevated the status of seamen. When the Quasi-War erupted between France and the United States, people cheered American victories and saluted American commanders. In early 1799, Commodore Thomas Truxtun, commanding the USS *Constellation*, earned public acclaim by capturing the French frigate, *Insurgente*. "Huzza for the Constellation," specially composed for the occasion, entertained Philadelphia theatregoers. Another song, "Truxtun's Victory" was sung "everywhere, in private and at public gatherings." One of three versions of "Truxton's Victory" materialized intoned

Then raise high the strain. Pay the tribute that's due  
To the Fair *Constellation*, and all her brave Crew;

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7. David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997); Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, PA, 1997); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, MA, 1997); Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia* (1986; rep., Berkeley, CA, 1988); James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis* (New Haven, CT, 1993).

8. See William M. Fowler, Jr., *Jack Tars and Commodores: The American Navy, 1783-1815* (Boston, MA, 1984); Craig L. Symonds, *Navalists and Anti-Navalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1787-1827* (Newark, DE, 1980). For popular celebrations and the navy, see Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812* (New York, 1869), 104, note 2.

Be Truxton revered, and his name be enrolled,  
 'Mongst the chiefs of the ocean, the heroes of old.

Truxton's subsequent encounter with the *La Vengeance* in 1800 added to his laurels, and Congress presented him with a gold medal. The navy became a bulwark of national defense. For young men such as James Lawrence, Stephen Decatur, William Allen, and others, naval service offered more than a life at sea; it tested courage, affirmed patriotism, and governed renown. Naval officers eagerly pursued a path to glory.<sup>9</sup>

Common sailors in the navy saw maritime life differently. Unlike merchant service, which usually offered better conditions and pay, naval seamen faced harsher discipline; some captains employed the lash and put sailors in irons for minor infractions. Petty Officer William McNally criticized Commodore Isaac Chauncey for mistreating his men, and he condemned whippings by tyrannical officers. Teenaged midshipmen would even impose their authority by forcing older tars to stoop and receive physical punishment. Popular praise for valorous service did not ameliorate stark discipline. Consequently, the navy depended upon a large influx of recent immigrants to man the fleet. "Penury" and "rum," not glory and renown, were the inducements according to one American-born marine.<sup>10</sup>

Some accolades bestowed on officers also mentioned the common seamen. Sailors may have been bullied afloat and socially suspect ashore

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9. Lossing, *Pictorial Field Book*, 103–104; Robert Neeser, ed., *American Naval Songs and Ballads* (New Haven, CT, 1938), 56–60, verses on 60; Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the United States Navy Officers Corps, 1794–1815* (Annapolis, MD, 1991), 47–48; Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi-War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France, 1797–1801* (New York, 1966), 209–210; John Hoxse, *The Yankee Tar: Authentic Narrative of the Voyages of John Hoxse* (Northampton, MA, 1840), 52–54, 57–59; Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street*, 177–83.

10. William Ray, *Horrors of Slavery or, the American Tars in Tripoli* (Troy, NY, 1808), quote on 25, 33–34, 39; Gilje, "On the Waterfront," 422; James R. Durand, *An Able Seaman of 1812: His Adventures on Old Ironsides and as an Impressed Sailor in the British Navy*, ed. George S. Brooks (New Haven, CT, 1926), 17–19; James E. Valle, *Rocks and Shoals: Order and Discipline in the Old Navy, 1800–1861* (Annapolis, MD, 1980); Christopher McKee, "Foreign Seamen in the United States Navy: A Census of 1808," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 42 (July 1985), 383–93.



but their courage won notice. The launching of the USS *Constitution* in 1798 inspired *The Spectator*, a Federalist New York City newspaper, to salute the “brave and hardy Yankees” manning the ship. Such plaudits were easier to compose when men of rank and distinction commanded seafarers. Class and hierarchy, the Federalist sine qua non, would be preserved. Balladeers and poets touted sailors as “Columbia’s Sons” and “brave Yankee boys,” mentioning the “brave crew” in naval encounters or singling out particular individuals. Tom Bowline, the mythical sailor as everyman, garnered a poetic epitaph as the “darling of our crew,” who “faithful below . . . did his duty.” His virtues were such that

Death, who kings and tars dispatches  
 Tom’s life has vainly doff’t,  
 For tho’ his body’s under hatches  
 His Soul is gone aloft.

Reuben James, a quartergunner in the Barbary Wars, later gained acclaim for positioning himself between an attacker and his officer, the “brave Decatur,” his superior, in the 1804 assault on the USS *Philadelphia*. As the Arab pirate’s “scimeter like lightning o’er the Yankee captain swung,” the wounded James received the blade upon his “fenceless forehead.” Taking a blow for one’s commander put a common sailor (in verse at least) on the same level as his superior.<sup>11</sup>

What did the ordinary sailor think of this attention? That is more difficult to discern. Naval crews and merchant seamen had little time for writing. Indeed, many could only write their names with difficulty; they communicated more by deeds than words. On land, sailors usually stayed near the docks awaiting a new posting. Some sailors eventually left the sea to become part of a coastal labor force; others continued afloat until no longer fit to do so, while many died at sea. Sailors understood and valued liberty highly; the tattoos on their limbs and torsos contained patriotic words and symbols that conveyed republican fellowship. These plebeian seafarers took insults to the flag and themselves

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11. *The Spectator* (New York), July 4, 1798; Neeser, *American Naval Songs and Ballads*, 56–57, 62, 69–70; Burton E. Stevenson, *Poems of American History* (1908; rep., Boston, MA, 1922), 282–83. Charles L. Lewis, “Reuben James or Daniel Frazier?” *Maryland Historical Magazine*, 19 (Mar. 1924), 30–36, argues that Frazier, not James, saved Decatur.

seriously. As always, their actions spoke for them—if impressed, they might refuse to fight against their countrymen; if imprisoned, they might defy jailers; if enslaved, they might resist would-be masters. The sailors' code of honor prompted them to remember past indignities.<sup>12</sup>

The navy attracted criticism and partisan sniping in the early republic political arena. Congress debated the size and cost of the navy. Republicans questioned the need for frigates because of further expense. Blue-water Federalists argued that the larger ships offered tangible security. The crosscurrents of public opinion, stirred by partisan disagreements, put the navy on an uncertain heading. Whereas many Federalists saw the navy as the nation's best hope of maritime defense, many Republicans held reservations about its expense. The assault on the *Chesapeake* thus occurred during a period of contentious debate.<sup>13</sup>

The *Chesapeake's* earlier encounters were unexceptional. After a raucous sendoff from Norfolk in spring 1800, the *Chesapeake* captured only one French privateer before returning to Virginia at the Quasi-War's end. Service against the Barbary pirates in the Mediterranean comprised of routine patrols before the government put the *Chesapeake* in ordinary in 1803. Jefferson's naval austerity measures left the ship so seriously neglected that it required a refitting at Hampton Roads, Virginia, when ordered to sea in January 1807. The *Chesapeake* now included three deserters from the HMS *Melampus*, David Martin, John Strachan, and William Ware. Martin and Ware were African Americans, while Strachan, a white man, had been born in the United States. The fourth recruit, Jenkin Ratford, was a British deserter from the HMS *Halifax*.

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12. Newman, "Reading the Bodies," 59–82; Ira Dye, "Seafarers of 1812, A Profile," *Prologue: Journal of the National Archives*, 5 (Spring 1973), 3–13; Vickers, "Beyond Jack Tar," 418–24; Gilje, "On the Waterfront," 395–426; Durand, *Able Seaman of 1812*, 75–76; Clement Cleveland Sawfell, "Impressment of American Seamen by the British," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 76 (Oct. 1940), 318–19; Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, 23–32; Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783–1860* (1921; rep., Boston, MA, 1961), 105–118; W. Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African-American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), esp. 102–130.

13. Albert Gleaves, *James Lawrence, Captain, United States Navy, Commander of the Chesapeake*, intro. George Dewey (New York, 1904), 64–65; Symonds, *Navalists and Anti-Navalists*, 135–36. See Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Cooperstown: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York, 1995), 256–67, for the Federalist relationship to the voters.

British protests to the State Department about the situation went unheeded. The *Chesapeake's* captain, James Barron, considered the three men from the *Melampus* impressed Americans, and Ratford had employed an alias, John Wilson, to escape detection. The British wanted the loss of their sailors to American ships stopped, and an annoyed Vice Admiral Sir George C. Berkeley ordered his captains to search for the deserters at sea.<sup>14</sup>

When Captain Salusbury Pryce Humphreys's ship, the HMS *Leopard*, bore down on the USS *Chesapeake*, ten miles off the Virginia coast on June 22, 1807, Commodore Barron noticed it but neglected to beat to quarters, the standard practice when a foreign warship approached. Despite previous British protests, Barron expected no repercussions, even when the *Leopard* sent an officer with a copy of Vice Admiral Berkeley's order to muster the crew to search for the deserters. Barron declined the request—no American officer could comply with such an order—and responded, "I know of no such men as you describe." The messenger returned to the *Leopard*. Growing concerned, Barron quietly ordered his men to general quarters, but it was too late. The *Chesapeake* remained unprepared for action: the deck cluttered with equipment and the marines without cartridges. Barron tried to rally his men, but after several British broadsides, he ordered the ship to strike its colors. The *Chesapeake* had fired only a single gun. The British boarded the ship, searched the compartments, and removed Martin, Ratford, Strachan, and Ware. Humphreys declined Barron's surrender and left the *Chesapeake* to limp home to Virginia.<sup>15</sup>

News of the attack astonished and angered Americans. Virginia and

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14. Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores*, 24, 151–53; Charles B. Cross, Jr., *The Chesapeake: A Biography of a Ship* (Norfolk, VA, 1968), 24–27, 51; Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*, 70–74, 83–87; Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen*, 135–36; A. L. Burt, *The United States, Great Britain, and British North America: From the Revolution to the Establishment of Peace after the War of 1812* (1940; rep., New York, 1961), 241–42; Scott Thomas Jackson, "Impressment and Anglo-American Discord, 1787–1818," (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1976), 262–68.

15. K. Jack Bauer, ed., *New American State Papers, Naval Affairs* (10 vols., Wilmington, DE, 1981), 2: 3; Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 141; Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores*, 153–55; Leonard F. Guttridge and Jay D. Smith, *The Commodores: The United States Navy in the Age of Sail* (New York, 1969), 126–30; Jackson, "Impressment and Anglo-American Discord," 269–70.

its environs voiced some of the loudest denunciations, as citizens prepared for a possible invasion. Norfolk residents destroyed water casks intended for the HMS *Melampus* and began strengthening local defenses. In Alexandria, the local rifle corps proclaimed that Great Britain's action "justly rendered her odious among all civilized powers." Borrowing from the Declaration of Independence, Williamsburg citizens resolved "that we pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honour to support our governor." A Washington, DC, group announced that "no sacrifice is too great to maintain our independence, national honor, and character." Militia units readied themselves for war, as President Jefferson ordered British naval ships to leave American waters.<sup>16</sup>

Condemnation of the British action resounded throughout the nation. In words that echo the Declaration of Independence, Bostonians held a mass meeting to rally behind the national government "with our lives and fortunes." One Massachusetts newspaper declared that the "Spirit of 75 (was) Rekindled." Philadelphians appointed a committee of correspondence to condemn Great Britain, while less-restrained waterfront residents sawed the rudder off a British merchant ship and paraded it in front of the British consul's residence. In Savannah, Georgia, a meeting decreed that residents wear crepe on their left arms in sympathy with the "death of unfortunate seamen." New Yorkers vigorously demonstrated their disapproval of all things British: one English representative, Augustus John Foster, had to travel incognito after angry New Yorkers threatened to "throw his curricule and horses into the North River." Police had to protect the home of the British consul in New York City, Thomas Barclay, and Manhattan residents removed the rudder and sail from a British ship. Crowd actions permitted people to display patriotic unity, much as they had done in the Revolution. Memories of British injustice died hard in Gotham.<sup>17</sup>

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16. *Norfolk Gazette and Public Ledger* (VA), June 29, July 8, July 10, 1807; Gaines, "The Chesapeake Affair," 131-42; Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*, 101-103; Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 144-45; Cross, *Chesapeake*, 58.

17. Boston meeting quoted in Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (1949; rep., Westport, CT, 1981), 140-41; *Sun* (Pittsfield, MA), July 18, 1807; *Norfolk Gazette and Public Ledger* (VA), July 27, 1807; Richard B. Davis, *Jeffersonian America: Notes on the United States of America, Collected in the Years, 1805-6-7 and 11-12 by Sir Augustus John Foster* (1954; rep., Westport, CT, 1980), 293; *Paulson's American Daily*

Such ardor stimulated revolutionary remembrances from the nation's leaders. For some, the sense of déjà vu proved overwhelming. President Jefferson wrote, "Never since the Battle of Lexington have I seen this country in such a state of exasperation as at present and even that did not produce such unanimity." It was an apt comparison. British troops marching across the Massachusetts countryside in 1775 had fired upon Lexington freeholders; now British sailors had blasted a broadside against the USS *Chesapeake*, a community afloat in the new republic's service. John Adams seethed with resentment. George III, he wrote, "promised he would be the last to disturb our Independence." Adams went on to ask "Can American seamen bear? Ought they to bear? Ought they to submit to the tyranny of British seamen? Will not such impressions break their hearts and put petticoats on them all?" The United States and Great Britain appeared headed again for war, and Americans prepared to defend their rights.<sup>18</sup>

The *Chesapeake* incident stimulated public discussion. Reports about the outrage had denounced the British aggressor, citing the dead and wounded, and this detail assumed special significance. Newspapers printed the names of injured and slain mariners, listed their home ports, or identified their nationality if foreign-born. Hitherto anonymous seamen emerged as more than "brave Yankee boys" or "Columbia's sons"; now their identity blended patriotism with a name and a locality. The citizens of Washington, DC, for example, learned that two of the slain, Joseph Arnold and Robert McDonald, were "said to have been our neighbors," and uncertain if the men had families, the citizens promised to raise a subscription. Although other hometowns of the dead and wounded may not have considered charitable intervention, a point had

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*Advertiser* (Philadelphia), July 2, 1807; Joanne Lowew Neel, *Phineas Bond, A Study in Anglo-American Relations, 1786-1812* (Philadelphia, PA, 1968), 72; Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 143; *New York Evening Post* (New York, NY), July 3, 1807.

18. Jefferson quoted in Nathan Miller, *Broadsides: The Age of Fighting Sail, 1775-1815* (New York, 2000), 303. Adams quoted in Page Smith, *John Adams*, (2 vols., New York, 1962), 2: 1091-92. Also see Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Times* (6 vols., Boston, MA, 1948-1977), 5: 425-26. Burton Spivak, *Jefferson's English Crisis: Commerce, Embargo and the Republican Revolution* (Charlottesville, VA, 1979), 97, notes that Jefferson "was almost reliving the crusade of an earlier generation."

been made—they were no longer nameless seafarers. Sailors had become friends and neighbors.<sup>19</sup>

Funerals offered additional public recognition. Death by British cannons transformed slain sailors into potential icons of resistance, whose burials inspired political theater. Seaman John Pierce was killed off the New York coast in 1806, when the HMS *Leander*, commanded by Captain Henry Whitby, shot at the United States merchant ship *Richard*, and popular reaction was swift. The *Leander* and Whitby were vilified as Anglophobia surged in New York City. Pierce received a stage-managed interment, courtesy of the Tammany Society, a Jeffersonian political club. Manhattan Federalists joined the procession to blame the Republicans for inadequate naval defenses. The funeral train went from City Hall to St. Paul's Chapel, the place of interment, led by the clergy, with the captains of coastal vessels serving as pallbearers. Behind the casket followed Pierce's brother, the *Richard's* commander, the vessel's crew, seamen in port, civil officials, and the citizenry. Tammany instructed its members (known for their Indian regalia) to "have the tomahawks well sharpened, the arrows pointed, and the bows well strung." No longer an obscure sailor, Pierce had become a recognizable name in New York politics.<sup>20</sup>

Robert MacDonald's story was similar. He assumed iconic status in the highly charged political atmosphere that followed the *Chesapeake* debacle. He received an impressive funeral that the *Norfolk Gazette and Public Ledger* reported in detail. MacDonald's funeral train listed the order of march, the participants, and the attendant honors. A detachment of junior volunteers led the way with the minister and the committee in charge of the proceedings behind. The surgeons of the hospital and the

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19. *Norfolk Gazette and Public Ledger* (VA), July 10, 1807. See note 12 for references to "brave Yankee boys" and "Columbia's sons." For the names of the dead and wounded sailors, see *American Citizen* (New York, NY), July 1, 1807; *New York Evening Post* (New York, NY), June 30, 1807; *Sun* (Pittsfield, MA), July 11, 1807; *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth), July 7, 1807; *Richmond Enquirer* (VA), July 1, 1807.

20. *Commercial Advertiser* (New York, NY), Apr. 28, 1806; *Daily Advertiser* (New York, NY), Apr. 28, 1806; Harvey Strum, "The Leander Affair," *American Neptune*, 43 (Jan. 1983), 40–50; Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 106–108; Basil Hall, *Voyages and Travels of Captain Basil Hall* (London, 1895), 118.

“Corp” came next ahead of the coffin, with “masters of vessels” positioned alongside the casket. Captains, mates, and seamen followed in ranks of four. A band with muffled drums came behind them. United States officials, volunteer companies, local city officials, and the general public brought up the rear. No family members were mentioned—perhaps none existed—but MacDonald’s interment had drawn the community together, assembling civilian and military figures in a dramatic show of patriotic unity. Those unable to attend could read the *Norfolk Gazette and Public Ledger* and appreciate the funeral’s pomp. Other newspapers copied the news item. Like Pierce, MacDonald had become a potent symbol, his interment a reminder of the *Chesapeake* disaster and Britain’s perfidy.<sup>21</sup>

Commodore James Barron failed to win similar plaudits. Unlike martyred sailors, live commanders needed to justify their conduct, especially if their ship had been bested. Barron’s handling of the *Chesapeake* disturbed many Americans. That the British had killed American sailors, evoking revolutionary memories, was horrific enough, but the ship’s lack of response embarrassed the citizens. Barron had held command, and whatever his subordinates’ shortcomings, the responsibility fell upon his shoulders. The *Chesapeake*’s officers blamed their captain for the vessel’s poor showing, as the naval fraternity by and large closed ranks against the commodore. Naval officers were touchy on points of honor and remembered real or perceived insults. Barron had previously run afoul of John Rodgers and Stephen Decatur. The two served as judges against Barron, among a larger group of five at the court-martial, and suspended Barron from service for five years in 1808. Barron’s disgrace left him struggling to find employment and fading into near oblivion.<sup>22</sup>

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21. *Norfolk Gazette and Public Ledger* (VA), June 29, 1807. Among the other newspapers that covered the funeral, see *New York Evening Post* (New York, NY), July 3, 1807; *Richmond Enquirer* (VA), July 1, 1807; *National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), July 3, 1807; *Sun* (Pittsfield, MA), July 18, 1807. On processions and politics consult Davis, *Parades and Power*; Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Streets*; Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*. On interments as political theater see Cray, “Commemorating the Prison Ship Dead,” 584–85.

22. Guttridge and Smith, *The Commodores*, 143–49, 151–71, *passim*, for the charges and trial. Valle, *Rocks and Shoals*, 147–48; William Oliver Stevens, *An Affair of Honor: Biography of Commodore James Barron, USN* (Norfolk, VA, 1969), 35–36, 50–51, 56–58. On honor, consult Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, CT, 2001).

The *Chesapeake's* officers felt tarnished too. If some, notably Commander Charles Gordon, could rely on personal connections to absolve them of blame at their court-martial, they could not ignore the disdain of colleagues and the general public. People's memory of the *Chesapeake* carried consequences: Gordon fought a duel against two civilians, and two *Chesapeake* midshipmen defended themselves against critics with pistols on the field of honor. The stigma of disgrace carried consequences. Lieutenant William Allen, who was credited with firing the only gun against the *Leopard*, judged Barron's actions "base and cowardly," and resolved to act more courageously in like circumstance. If not, he wrote, "May I die unpitied and unforgotten, no tear be shed to my memory on some barren shore may my bone whiten in the sun, pelted by the pitiless storm and the name of Allen blotted with infamy."<sup>23</sup>

British naval officers also generated abuse. Long before Barron's court-martial, newspapers lambasted George III's officers. The *Norfolk Gazette and Public Ledger* reprinted a story from the Baltimore *Spectacles* the summer of 1807, when a group of artisans raised tankards for barbed toasts aimed at prominent British targets. One tailor announced that Captain Humphreys of the *Leopard* should "be stitched in buckram and pricked to death by needles. And may the *Leopard*, when she puts to sea, be overtaken by an enemy and pierced full of eyelet holes." With his later use of the word "pierced," he may also be recalling John Pierce, the slain sailor of 1806. A cooper took on Admiral Berkeley and suggested "his eyes be bunged up, so that he may not see to write more order for the murders of Americans," and a sword-cane manufacturer said of Captain Whitby: "may his heart be pierced before he kills another American." Sharp-eyed readers would have again noted the references to Pierce and seen the villains of the piece, the British naval officers, as symbols of abuse.<sup>24</sup>

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23. W. E. Apgar, "Our Navy: 1800–1813, From the Letters of Captain William H. Allen," *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, 53 (Apr. 1935), 101, 103. Christopher McKee, "The Pathology of a Profession: Death in the United States Navy Officer Corp, 1797–1815," *War & Society*, 3 (1985), 9–14; Guttridge and Smith, *The Commodores*, 143–45; Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*, 99–101.

24. *Norfolk Gazette and Public Ledger* (VA), July 27, 1807; Strum, "The Leander Affair," 40–50; *Sun* (Pittsfield, MA), July 11, 1807; *Richmond Enquirer* (VA), June 27, 1807.



Other newspapers joined the clamor. Independence Day celebrations were spiced with a definite anti-British flavor. The parades and marches, toasts and libations of July 4, 1807, contained highly charged political messages. When listing the dead and wounded sailors aboard the USS *Chesapeake*, the *Sun* of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, disparaged Henry Whitby, the commander of the HMS *Leander*. Whitby, who had been acquitted of all charges at his London trial, had said “he would be off Sandy Hook again in a few months, to kill another John Pierce.” A July 4th toast in Whippany, New Jersey, blasted the British Navy as a “gang of pirates” and castigated Whitby and Humphreys as “two murderers unhung.” In Dumfries, Virginia, attendees of an Independence Day gathering met in a tavern and averred that Admiral Berkeley “like Nero and Caligula, has erected a monument of infamy to his memory, which will descend to the latest posterity.”<sup>25</sup>

The House of Representatives issued defiant statements over the *Chesapeake* episode. Federalist congressman Barent Gardenier announced on November 10, 1807, that “The attack on the *Chesapeake* made on the 22 of June last, has called from the nation one universal expression of abhorrence; one burst of execration at that daring insult, had resounded from every port of the Union.” John Montgomery, a Republican, remarked that “The reeking blood of our fellow citizens, and the insulted dignity of the nation called for satisfactory retribution or speedy retaliation.” A Republican maverick, John Randolph, went Montgomery one better and suggested invading Canada, Nova Scotia, and Jamaica. On November 17, 1807, a congressional committee declared the *Leopard*’s attack a “flagrant violation of the jurisdiction of the United States.” The removal of John Strachan, William Ware, Daniel Martin, and Jenkin Ratford was noted with depositions affirming the first three men’s American identity. But the four sailors would not unite the nation against the British, as the *Chesapeake* incident and the slain American seamen had. There was limited American interest toward the seized sailors.<sup>26</sup>

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25. *Sun* (Pittsfield, MA), July 11, 1807; *Centinel of Freedom* (Newark, NJ), June 30, July 28, 1807; *National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), July 8, 1807. See Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth*, 50–52.

26. *Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 10th Congress, 1st Session, 833–34, 847, 849; *American State Papers, Foreign Relations, Documents, Legislative and Executive of the Congress of the United States* (38 vols., Washington, DC, 1831–61), 3: 6–7, 13–18; Smelser, *Democratic Republic*, 182–83.

Impressment from British ships predated independence, as Royal Navy commanders seized mariners for their undermanned vessels. When Commodore Charles Knowles sent a press gang into Boston in 1747, rioting resulted. Clashes between a man-hungry British Navy and colonials were not uncommon. With independence, the British searched American merchantmen at sea for erstwhile subjects of the King. The United States responded in 1796 with certificates of citizenship; however, these “protections” did not always shield American seamen. As George W. Erving, American consul to London, commented to Secretary of State James Madison in 1803, the

men really entitled to them [the certificates], sometimes by accident or neglect either do not procure or leave them behind; they are frequently sold or transferred; as frequently worn out or lost; a change in the description of the person as to marks complexion or otherwise may happen and render the certificate on that ground questionable.

British authorities refused to recognize other nations’ naturalization procedures—once a British subject, always a British subject—negating the documents’ effectiveness. War in 1803 between France and Britain revived the impressment issue. Thousands of British sailors found work aboard American vessels, but perhaps as many as 6,500 American sailors ended up on British ships.<sup>27</sup>

Inevitably, disputes over sailors’ nationalities arose. Commodore John Rodgers, who tried to free an impressed seaman aboard the HMS *Prince* in 1806, found his British counterpart uncooperative. The *Prince*’s captain replied that the sailor in question had no certificate. He instructed Rodgers to contact Lord Collingwood, his commander-in-chief, and sug-

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27. David B. Mattern et al., eds., *Papers of James Madison, Secretary of State Series, volume 3: 1 March 1802–6 October 1802* (Charlottesville, VA, 1995), 26–27; Jackson, “Impressment and Anglo-American Discord,” 156–57; John Lax and William Pencak, “The Knowles Riots and the Crisis of the 1740s in Massachusetts,” *Perspectives in American History*, 10 (1976), 163–216; Lemisch, “Jack Tar in the Streets,” 378–89; James H. Kettner, *Development of American Citizenship, 1680–1870* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1978), 269; DeConde, *Quasi-War*, 201–202; Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 91–93; Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, 104–105, 157–61; James McLean, *History of the Life and Suffering of James McLean, An Impressed American Citizen and Seaman* (Hartford, CT, 1814), 7, 11, 16; *Observations on the Impressment of American Seamen* (Baltimore, MD, 1806).

gested that Rodgers should “discharge such British subjects as may be serving in the Squadron under your command.” Rodgers later admitted in 1808 that it was “very difficult to distinguish a native American from a British subject, where the distinction must depend upon their own assertions.” Isaac Chauncey, a former naval officer in command of a merchant ship, the *Beaver*, found it “outrageous” in 1806 that a British warship had removed a sailor, who the British captain claimed “was recognized as a British subject” by former crewmates.<sup>28</sup>

American consuls engaged in similar struggles. In London, George W. Erving tried to protect American mariners against seizure and asked the British Admiralty to release captured seamen. But Erving had qualified appreciation for sailors, telling Secretary of State James Madison in 1803 that it would be better if crewmen remained on ships while in foreign ports, hence “their wages would not be wasted in dissipation but might benefit their families at home; their health would not be so much exposed; & upon the whole the morals of our seafaring people would be very essentially improved.” A year earlier Erving had informed Admiralty Secretary Sir Evan Nepean that concessions had to be made “for the stupidity and ignorance” of American mariners, in particular, black sailors, “who scarcely knew months from years or recollected the names of the Ships in which they had served.” Class and racial attitudes thus tempered official concerns about seafarers.<sup>29</sup>

Impressed sailors vexed Jefferson diplomatically. Dismayed by the proposed Monroe-Pinckney Treaty of 1806, which offered modest neutral trade concessions, Jefferson had hoped to secure the release of American sailors from British ships. If the British agreed, the United States would reciprocate. But an astonished Jefferson learned that such an arrangement, if negotiated, would decimate the American Merchant Ma-

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28. John Rodgers to Commander of the HMS *Prince* in the Mediterranean, May 28, 1806, Rodgers Papers (New York Historical Society, New York, NY); Isaac Chauncey to James Madison, Secretary of State, New York, June 9, 1807; John Rodgers to Robert Smith, Apr. 13, 1808, Letters from Captains, M125, RG 45 (National Archives, Washington, DC); *American National Biography*, s.v. Chauncey, Isaac; Brian DeToy, “The Impressment of American Seamen during the Napoleonic Wars,” *Consortium on Revolutionary Europe, 1750–1850, Selected Papers* (1998), 492–501; Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen*, remains the classic account.

29. Hackett, ed., *Papers of James Madison*, 4: 42, 363, note 1; 6: 27.

rine, since the British constituted half of the able seamen involved in American foreign trade. Perhaps America's overseas trade, although hampered by British policies, was better left separate from the impressment issue. Jefferson clearly thought so. Economic realities doomed the diplomatic efforts to resolve the issue.<sup>30</sup>

The public responses to impressment varied according to class and politics. Interest in captured mariners was expressed; but so too was indifference. Prior to the *Chesapeake* affair, the British removal of five sailors from the USS *Baltimore* in 1798 prompted widespread publicity, compelling President John Adams to dismiss the *Baltimore's* captain and register a diplomatic protest. The return of Jonathan Robbins, an alleged American sailor, to the British in 1799 to face charges of mutiny generated stronger emotions. Although Robbins was actually a British subject named Thomas Nash, his subsequent execution as a mutineer turned him into a naval martyr and Republican cause celebre. The death of Robbins/Nash heightened the partisan discord and may have aided Republican success in Pennsylvania. In 1805, when Jefferson was in power, the removal of three sailors from Gunboat #6 barely registered, except with the ship's commander, Lieutenant James Lawrence. As British subjects, the three crewmembers wished to transfer their allegiance to the British warships alongside the American vessel. Lawrence refused while aboard a British vessel, but his second-in-command, midshipman John Roach, acceded during his commander's absence, and the three men left the gunboat. A sudden gale separated the vessels without any shots fired, and Rodgers later suspended Roach from the service, but there was little public fallout. American outrage seemed to oscillate depending on the mode of impressment.<sup>31</sup>

David Martin, Jenkin Ratford, John Strachan, and William Ware reflected these attitudes. Although physically removed from the *Chesapeake*, Martin and his comrades attained only modest notoriety. Early accounts about the *Chesapeake* had cited the attack and the casualties.

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30. Spivak, *Jefferson's English Crisis*, 59–67; Donald R. Hickey, "Monroe-Pinckney Treaty of 1806," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 44 (Jan. 1987), 65–88.

31. Michael A. Palmer, "The Dismission of Captain Isaac Phillips," *American Neptune*, 45 (Spring 1985), 94–103; DeConde, *Quasi-War*, 202–205; Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*, 65–67; Gleaves, *James Lawrence*, 58–61; Jackson, "Impressment and Anglo-American Discord," 137–38.

Consequently, Americans responded with resolutions, protests, meetings, and toasts—none targeting impressment. People focused on the men killed and honor compromised, not the sailors taken. Subsequent information about the four impressed men materialized slowly. In Washington, DC, Benjamin Latrobe did raise a glass on Independence Day to the “American seamen impressed in the service of our enemies—May the victories of their messmates restore to them their freedom,” but this rather oblique reference to the four men was the exception. Indeed, Latrobe may have been referring more generally to impressment.<sup>32</sup>

The four men taken from the USS *Chesapeake* apparently remained unnamed in the press until late July, but thereafter their identity became a contentious issue. As American indignation over the *Leopard's* attack abated, questions about the four men's origins and status materialized. The *National Intelligencer*, the administration organ, discussed three of the men, Martin, Strachan, and Ware on July 29th, based upon Commodore Barron's information supplied several months previously in response to British complaints about deserters from the HMS *Melampus*. Their appearance and circumstances were detailed—Martin, a Westport, Massachusetts, inhabitant, as a “colored man,” and Ware, a Maryland resident, as an “Indian looking man.” Strachan, a white man, was listed as five feet, seven inches tall from Queen Anne County, Maryland. Barron gave no information on Ratford. Citizens in Maryland and Massachusetts gathered depositions identifying Martin and Ware, the two persons of color, and forwarded them to the federal government. British authorities, on the other hand, were disturbed by the men's role as deserters and troublemakers. Captain Crofts, Ware and Martin's former commander, informed British consul Barclay that Secretary of Treasury Albert Gallatin had told him to keep quiet about the men's British connection.<sup>33</sup>

Federalists raised doubts about the men's identity. An “Old Soldier of 76,” writing in the *Providence Gazette*, argued that the United States intended war against Great Britain, since the government permitted all

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32. *National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), July 8, 1807.

33. *Ibid.*, July 29, 1807; Deposition of Benjamin Davis, Deposition of Nancy Haviland, in William/Romulus Ware Folder, Box 10, Miscellaneous Correspondence Regarding Impressed Seamen, Records on Impressed Seamen, 1794–1815, RG 59 (National Archives, Washington, DC); Anthony Steel, “More Light on the Chesapeake,” *Mariner's Mirror*, 29 (1953), 247–53.

sorts of persons, “bad as well as good,” to demand the protection of the United States flag. After the *National Intelligencer* ran Barron’s statement on sailors, “Old Soldier” countered by describing the impressed sailors as “men of doubtful character.” As deserters, he averred, they qualified as “British subjects and no impartial person can doubt they ought to have been given up,” and he contended that certificates of citizenship offered no safeguard in their case, since “such reports as these are fabricated by every deserter who obtains a protection.” Harrison Gray Otis, a prominent Boston Federalist, thought the whole issue absurd, especially since large numbers of British sailors acquired protections to escape detection. “This whole controversy respecting sailors,” wrote Otis, “was practically to us not worth mooted, we have always had ten to their one. It was a farce for a government who disregarded national honor in all essentials to make such a bustle upon a secondary question.” As a New England patrician, Otis could afford a cavalier attitude toward impressed mariners.<sup>34</sup>

Ironically, Jenkin Ratford, a man without claim to American citizenship, attracted the most notice. The British-born Ratford had deserted from the HMS *Halifax* in Norfolk and enlisted on the USS *Chesapeake* using the alias John Wilson. He, along with Martin, Strachan, and Ware were court-martialed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and the three American tars were sentenced to 500 lashes, but their penalties were remitted. Ratford’s case was adjudged to be too serious. In Norfolk, Ratford had prevented a fellow deserter from rejoining the navy, proclaiming “they were in the land of liberty,” and made a “contemptuous gesture” before a British officer. Desertion, mutiny, and contempt warranted no reprieve from the Royal Navy. Ratford was sentenced to death and executed aboard the *Halifax* on August 31, 1807.<sup>35</sup>

News of the execution soon reached the United States, where newspaper editorials condemned the proceedings. The *Centinel of Freedom*, a Newark, New Jersey paper, headlined the episode with the word “Murder!” and identified Ratford as John Wilson, “one of the seamen lately

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34. *Providence Gazette* (RI), Aug. 8, Aug. 15, Sept. 8, 1807; for the Otis quote see Samuel E. Morison, *Harrison Gray Otis, 1765–1848: The Urbane Federalist* (Boston, MA, 1969), 281.

35. Quoted in Emerson, *Chesapeake Affair of 1807*, 76–77; H. F. Pullen, *The Shannon and The Chesapeake* (Toronto, 1970), 14–17; Cross, *Chesapeake*, 58; Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*, 113–14.

taken” from the *Chesapeake*. “As was expected,” the *Centinel* noted, “the poor fellow was convicted of all these crimes, and the judge advocate pronounced his sentence—Death! He was strung on the yard-arm on the sloop of war Halifax on the Monday following.” The *New Hampshire Gazette*, without naming Ratford, described him as “one of the four unhappy men” removed from the *Chesapeake* and remarked that “the other three prisoners of war remain to be hanged in due season.” In Norfolk, the *Gazette and Public Ledger* reprinted the trial proceedings and execution of Ratford: “it will be recollected that this was one of the seamen found on board the *Chesapeake*.” Determined to disparage Republican efforts, some Federalist papers considered Ratford’s punishment just, with his identity as a British subject transcending any American objections.<sup>36</sup>

The relative inattention toward Martin and his companions reveals the essential distinction between slain and impressed tars—the former attained martyrdom, the latter represented an unpleasant reminder of an ongoing practice. However horrific, death by British cannons qualified as a rare occurrence, hence newsworthy; impressment remained too common to elicit more than minor notice. Only a death sentence might stimulate a strong response. And even that could be moderated by particular circumstances, as with Ratford’s execution.

Ratford’s execution did little to resolve the diplomatic stalemate between Great Britain and the United States. Jefferson insisted upon his three companions’ return. Indeed, the *Chesapeake* affair strengthened his resistance to impressment: he wanted the British boarding of American ships stopped. Jefferson also requested reparations to the families of the dead and injured crewmen and Admiral Berkeley’s removal from command. James Monroe, United States Minister to Great Britain, presented the proposals, but was hamstrung by the linkage of impressment to the *Chesapeake* outrage. George Canning, the British foreign minister, balked. Although willing to return the surviving sailors and pay reparations, Canning refused to stop impressment. In Washington, DC, Secretary of State James Madison encountered similar resistance from British

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36. *The Centinel of Freedom* (Newark, NJ), Sept. 22, 1807; *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth), Sept. 15, 1807; *Norfolk Gazette and Public Ledger* (VA), Sept. 26, 1807; Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen*, 148; *The Trial of John Wilson, alias Jenkin Ratford for Mutiny, Desertion, and Contempt* (Boston, MA, 1807); Pullen, *Shannon and the Chesapeake*, 16–17.

representatives. George Rose, the British envoy, asked Jefferson to open American seaports to British ships, but Britain's war with France prevented a simple solution to impressments, leaving the *Chesapeake* affair unsettled.<sup>37</sup>

Jefferson's subsequent actions prevented any quick resolution. In December 1807, he signed the Embargo Act, hoping to pressure England and France to recognize American neutral trading rights, but in vain. The Embargo weakened the economy, left sailors unemployed, and diverted attention from the *Chesapeake*, while Federalists and Republicans geared for battle, alternatively savaging and supporting the Embargo.

Opinions about the Embargo, although numerous, rarely referred to the *Chesapeake* incident. A pro-Embargo essay, *Reasons in the Justification of the Embargo*, did mention the *Chesapeake*, but it only identified Ratford. In 1809, Adams spoke out against King George III's proclamation demanding British deserters return to naval service, evoking the murder of Pierce and the "murders" of the *Chesapeake* crew, but remaining silent about the impressed men.<sup>38</sup>

Class and race also figured in the three sailors' public neglect. Sailors were rarely named unless involved in heroic actions—their commanders typically earned the plaudits. Black sailors, although numerous, were for social and racial reasons even more likely to go unnoticed. However valuable their service, seafarers of color seldom won recognition, remaining unnamed, unacknowledged, and unrewarded. Martin and Ware were black, and since Strachan could not easily be recalled without reference to them, this may explain why he was not recognized. Besides, the three men had been ingloriously captured, a circumstance they shared with thousands of other mariners, black and white. Impressed men generated only modest sympathy after the Embargo Act. Instead, American essay-

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37. Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*, 46, 126–30; Spivak, *Jefferson's English Crisis*, 93–94; William H. Masterson, *Tories and Democrats: British Diplomats in Pre-Jacksonian America*, foreword by Frank E. Vandiver (College Station, TX, 1985), 106–108; Smelser, *Democratic Republic*, 159; Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen*, 137–39.

38. *Reasons in Justification of the Embargo . . . Citizens of Washington County* (Salem, NY, 1808), 28; John Adams, *The Correspondence of John Adams, Esq., . . . concerning the British Doctrine of Impressment* (Baltimore, MD, 1809); Adams, *Inadmissible Principles of the King of England's Proclamation, October 16, 1807* (Boston, MA, 1809), 9; Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen*, 172.



ists attacked the British Orders in Council that restricted neutral trade and affected America's maritime profits.<sup>39</sup>

Remembering the *Chesapeake*, if not the men taken, did resonate among United States naval officers, whose notions of naval honor were compromised by the *Chesapeake's* disgrace. Retired Commodore Joshua Barney was so incensed by the *Chesapeake* affair that he offered his service first to President Jefferson and then to President James Madison. News of the *Chesapeake* rendered the gravely ill Captain Edward Preble speechless and in a state of collapse. Other officers bemoaned missed opportunities for avenging the navy's disgrace. On June 26, 1810, the HMS *Moselle* fired two cannon shots at the USS *Vixen* in the Caribbean, carrying off the American schooner's boom, but the *Vixen* never replied in kind. Responding to this news, Captain David Porter considered discretion the better part of valor, but Stephen Decatur lamented that the *Vixen* had lost a "glorious opportunity to cancel the blot under which our flag suffers."<sup>40</sup>

Memory of the *Chesapeake* disaster resonated at the very top of the chain of command. Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton sent a fiery memo in June 1810 to United States naval commanders:

The inhumane and dastardly attack on our Frigate Chesapeake—an outrage which prostrated the flag of our Country and has imposed on the American people cause

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39. Jackson, "Impressment and Anglo-American Discord," 314–15; Bolster, *Black Jacks*, believes that because Martin and Ware were men of color, the "White-dominated national memory veiled that fact," 103. This point is also made by Martha S. Putney, *Black Sailors: Afro-American Merchant Seamen and Whalers Prior to the Civil War* (Westport, CT, 1987), 90–91. Perkins, *Prologue to War*, notes that by early 1811 Americans evinced "little concern" over impressment, 290. On black mariners also see Harold D. Langley, "The Negro in the Navy and Merchant Service, 1789–1860," *Journal of Negro History*, 52 (Oct. 1967), 273–86, and Julius S. Scott, "Afro-American Sailors and the International Communication Network: The Case of Newport Bowers," in *Jack Tar in History: Essays in the History of Maritime Life and Labour*, ed. Colin Howell and Richard Twomey (Fredericton, NJ, 1991), 37–52.

40. Quoted in Guttridge and Smith, *The Commodores*, 175; Dye, *Fatal Cruise of the Argus*, 77; Hulbert Footner, *Sailor of Fortune: The Life and Adventures of Commodore Barney*, USN (New York, 1940), 244–45; Christopher McKee, *Edward Preble: A New Biography, 1761–1807* (1972; rep., Annapolis, MD, 1996), 351–52.

of ceaseless mourning . . . What has been perpetrated may again be attempted. It is therefore our duty to be prepared and determined to at every hazard to vindicate the injured honor of the Navy and revive the drooping Spirit of the Nation.

Hamilton wanted his captains to respond aggressively to any British provocations, which perhaps explains the accidental (or was it deliberate?) firing of a single gun by the USS *United States* upon the HMS *Eurydice* in June 1811. Some sailors may have wanted to accommodate the secretary's wishes.<sup>41</sup>

By 1811, naval officers could count upon growing public dismay against British depredations. Congressional Republicans considered resolutions to combat impressment. Congressman John Rhea of Tennessee believed such measures "would at least serve to keep alive the remembrance of those who appeared nearly to have been forgotten." Later that year, a congressional committee on foreign relations, concerned by the number of impressed seamen, ruefully noted the "cries of their wives and children in the privation of protectors and parents, have of late, been drowned in the louder clamors at the loss of property." Newspapers increasingly targeted impressment. The *Eastern Argus*, a Portland newspaper, angrily denounced "Man Stealing," inveighing against the British in no uncertain terms: "not content with robbing us at sea, they infest our coast, they molest our vessels at the entrance of our harbors, and drag from them our citizens who are merely passing from one port to another."<sup>42</sup>

Indignation heightened with news of John Diggio's seizure. An apprentice shipwright, Diggio was a Maine native traveling with his master, Jonah Ficket, aboard the merchant brig *Spitfire* between Portland and New York. The HMS *Guerrière* seized Diggio off New York in May 1811. Ficket's entreaties notwithstanding, the British refused to relinquish their captive. As the *New York Evening Post* remarked: "What has it come to this, that the Americans must have written protections to enable them to sail along their own shores." Such an egregious instance

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41. Quoted in Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*, 191; Dye, *Fatal Cruise of the Argus*, 77-78.

42. *Annals of the Congress of the United States*, 11th Congress, 3rd Session, 999; 12th Congress, 1st Session, 375-76. *Eastern Argus* (Portland, ME), May 16, 1811; Jackson, "Impressment and Anglo-American Discord," 310-11, 318-19.

of impressment prompted Thomas Barclay, British consul to New York, to urge Diggio's return.<sup>43</sup>

Diggio also benefited from his employer's protests, which highlighted the familial connection between the two. He won release without naval assistance, returning to Portland with news of other impressed Americans aboard the *Guerrière*. Apprentices were ideally, if not always in practice, members of their masters' household, part of an extended family circle that provided a fictive kinship network, a status that differed from the identity of roving, masterless seamen. Conscientious masters who publicized an apprentice's plight reinforced the bonds of legal consanguinity to assume the role of a patriarchal employer.<sup>44</sup>

David Otis's actions can be viewed in a similar light. As master of the brig *Charles Miller*, Otis witnessed the impressment from his ship of Benjamin Rogers and Henry Brooks, the former a sailor, the latter Otis's steward and a man of color. His letter to the papers warned that "man stealers" lurked off the American coast. We do not know if Rogers and Brooks won release but, like Jonah Ficket, Otis had displayed an almost familial interest—outsiders should not trifle with his people.<sup>45</sup>

Family members offered more dramatic accounts: Jonah Spock, a Salem, Massachusetts, resident, reported the abduction of his fifteen-year-old son, James, by the British, into "servile bondage" that spring. This case prompted one writer in the (Salem) *Essex Register* to report:

When we record the stealing of one American citizen from on board one of our vessels, two from another, four from another, and so on without number, whose names to us are not familiar and with whose characters we are not particularly acquainted, our sensibilities are not excited in so great a degree as when the case is brought home to us—when it becomes our irksome task to stain our annals with the

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43. *New York Evening Post* (New York, NY), May 4, 1811; *National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), May 9, May 14, 1811; *Eastern Argus* (Portland, ME), May 16, 1811; George Lockhart Rives, *Selections from the Correspondence of Thomas Barclay* (New York, 1894), 294–95.

44. *Eastern Argus* (Portland, ME), July 25, Aug. 1, 1811; See Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York, 1984), 134–37, and William J. Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice: From Franklin to the Machine Age in America* (New York, 1986).

45. *Boston Patriot* (MA), May 18, 1811; *Essex Register* (Salem, MA), May 17, 1811.

atrocious conduct of the British robbers in stealing from our citizens and neighbors their children, yet in a state of infancy and forcing them to board their floating dungeons to assist in robbing their brethren.<sup>46</sup>

Familial ties conferred social identities upon some impressed men and earned them some measure of compassion.

Agitation over impressment climaxed when the USS *President*, a forty-four gun frigate, was sent to American coastal waters. The *Richmond Enquirer* declared: “May the wounds of the *Chesapeake* and the *Vixen* . . . be now washed away.” On May 22, the *President* sighted an unidentified ship, and Commodore John Rodgers, the *President’s* commander, convinced that the vessel had shot at him first, returned fire. When the smoke cleared, the Americans identified their erstwhile foe as the HMS *Little Belt*, a twenty-gun sloop of war captained by Arthur Bingham, which had suffered thirteen dead and nineteen wounded. The *President’s* lone casualty was a wounded ship’s boy. The *Little Belt* sailed to Nova Scotia to report that the *President* had initiated hostilities, while Rodgers insisted that the *Little Belt* had fired first.<sup>47</sup>

Most Americans celebrated the incident as fair recompense for the *Chesapeake* affair. Besting the British ship had restored national pride, and when Rodgers arrived in Manhattan, the *Columbian* announced that Captain Gilbert’s military band would serenade the commodore “as a token of respect for his spirited protection of the honor of his country flag on the late recontre with the USS *Little Belt*.” It asked the people to “applaud” his actions and welcome the *President’s* arrival. In Newark, New Jersey, the *Centinel of Freedom* praised Rodgers for firing his guns: “He used them—and the result is no Barron expedition—no half-way business—but such as reflects the highest honor on our flag, and it is a very tolerable offset to the *Chesapeake* affair.” Balladeers composed patriotic songs, one of which, “Rodgers and Victory: Tit for Tat or The

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46. *Essex Register* (Salem, MA), May 17, 1811. Also see *Eastern Argus* (Portland, ME), May 16, 1811.

47. Quoted in Irving Brant, *James Madison, The President* (6 vols., Indianapolis, IN, 1941–1961), 6: 316. Charles Oscar Paullin, *Commodore John Rodgers, Captain, Commodore, and Senior Officer of the American Navy, 1773–1838: A Biography* (Cleveland, OH, 1910), 224–30; Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 271–73; Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen*, 154–55; Horsman, *Causes of the War of 1812*, 220.

Chesapeake Paid for in British Blood!!” sung to the tune of “Yankee Doodle,” intoned

You all remember well, I guess  
 The *Chesapeake* disaster,  
 When Britons dared to kill and press  
 To please their royal master.

That day did murder'd freemen fall,  
 Their graves are cold and sandy;  
 Their funeral dirge was sung by all,  
 Nor yankee doodle dandy.

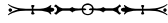
Another version of “Rogers and Victory,” also sung to “Yankee Doodle,” had different verses attributed to one “Mons. Tonson,” the alleged former hairdresser to the French Emperor. In Charleston, South Carolina, Independence Day revelers sang “Rodgers and Bingham,” and the resulting court of inquiry exonerated Rodgers.<sup>48</sup>

And what of the sailors removed from the USS *Chesapeake*? Their identity as impressed men, exacerbated by class and race issues, left them more or less ignored. No songs lamented their fate; no verses anticipated their recovery. As anti-impressment symbols, they elicited faint interest. Nevertheless, British and American diplomats did reach an agreement by November 1811 to return the two surviving men (Ware had died in hospital in 1809) and compensate the families. Whatever satisfaction Americans felt was short-lived. President Madison confided to John Quincy Adams that “the reparations made for the attack on the American Frigate *Chesapeake*, takes one splinter out of our wounds.” By the spring of 1812, Madison’s war message to Congress pointedly noted that “thousands of American Citizens . . . have been torn from their country, and from everything dear to them; have been dragged on board ships of war

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48. See the *Columbian* (New York, NY), May 28, May 29, May 30, May 31, 1811; *Centinel of Freedom* (Newark, NJ), June 4, 1811. Verses quoted in Neeser, *American Naval Songs and Ballads*, 82–83, 85–89. Paullin, *Commodore John Rodgers*, 232–33; Worthington C. Ford, ed., *The Isaiah Thomas Collection of Ballads* (Worcester, MA, 1924), 9, 26, 59, 68. Smelser, *The Democratic Republic*, 109. For a sampling of newspaper opinion see the *Columbian* (New York, NY), June 5, 1811; *Boston Gazette* (MA), May 30, 1811.

of a foreign nation and exposed, under the siverities of their discipline, to be exiled to the most distant and deadly climes.” Both sides had been fighting for a month before the men were returned.<sup>49</sup>



Alfred T. Mahan was later to write about the *Chesapeake* and the naval origins of the War of 1812. This prominent naval authority believed the attack on the USS *Chesapeake* marked a significant turning point in British-United States relations. It dramatized the horrors of impressment, roiled American emotions, and lingered in people’s memories. As Mahan noted:

Left unatoned, the attack on the *Chesapeake* remained in American consciousness where Jefferson and Madison had sought to place it—an example of the outrages of impressment. The incidental violence, which aroused attention and wrath, differed in nothing but circumstance from the procedure when an unresisting merchant vessel was deprived of men.<sup>50</sup>

Yet Mahan did not quite get it right. There was, to be sure, an embedded memory of the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair, impossible to erase totally, but it touched lightly upon impressment and even less upon the men removed. Injured and dead mariners, not impressed sailors, first figured in newspaper accounts and generated attention. Patriotic Americans saluted them, and they mourned the subsequent death of Robert MacDonald. His funeral showed that mariners slain by British cannons merited commemoration.

The four men removed from the *Chesapeake* received less compassion. Like countless other impressed seafarers of modest social origins and mixed racial backgrounds, they were consigned to the sidelines. Ironically, Jenkin Ratford, a British subject, achieved greater notice, because of his execution, than the Americans Martin, Strachan, and Ware, two of

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49. J. C. A. Stagg et al., eds., *Papers of James Madison, Presidential Series, volume 4: 5 November 1811–9 July 1812, with a supplement 5 March 1809–19 October 1811* (Charlottesville, VA, 1999), 17, 432–33; Burt, *United States*, 297, note 61; Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen*, 155; Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 354–55; *National Intelligencer* (Washington, DC), Nov. 14, 1811; *Alexandria Gazette* (VA), Nov. 15, 1811.

50. Mahan, *Sea Power*, 1: 170.

whom were people of color, a cohort who rarely emerged as icons of nationalism in the early republic. Instead, they remained obscured while American demands for satisfaction were assuaged by the USS *President's* engagement with the *Little Belt*.

Perhaps the most telling point about Martin and his fellows was their return. The exchanges between Secretary of State James Monroe and British Ambassador Augustus J. Foster, which concluded the diplomatic stalemate, although covered in the press, never cited the surviving two sailors, Martin and Strachan, by name. They were simply the men taken from the *Chesapeake*. Foster privately recorded that returning the “men impressed by Admiral Berkeley” to the United States ended the affair. Their identities remained unimportant to him—diplomats seldom noticed such details. Indeed, when Martin and Strachan came aboard the *Chesapeake* on July 11, 1812, in Boston Harbor, few papers reported the event. Those that did focused on the transaction, identified the officers, and reported the speech of Commodore Bainbridge, the *Chesapeake's* captain, who welcomed the two men to the quarterdeck: “I trust the flag that flies on board of her, shall gloriously defend you in future.” Three cheers followed from the assembled citizens and seamen. In private, Bainbridge did mention Martin and Strachan in his letter to the secretary of the navy; in public, they went unnamed, and the newspapers followed suit. Like so many impressed men, Martin and Strachan did not rate personal identification.<sup>51</sup>

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51. Quoted in Davis, *Jeffersonian America*, 103; *The War* (New York, NY), July 25, 1812; Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*, 114, 211; Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 355–56, note 18; *Eastern Argus* (Portland, ME), July 25, 1811; *Boston Patriot* (MA), July 11, July 15, 1811; *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth), July 14, 1812. In his letter to Secretary of the Navy Hamilton, Bainbridge identified Martin and Strachan by name. See William Bainbridge to the Secretary of the Navy, July 11, 1812, Letters from Captains, M125, RG 45 (National Archives, Washington, DC).

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