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OUR  
PATRIOTS

# COMMODORE JOSHUA BARNEY

*Heroism on the High Seas*

By Daniel S. Marrone, Ph.D.

**B**orn on July 6, 1759, in Baltimore, Md., Commodore Joshua Barney has been venerated for his heroic deeds in both the Revolutionary War and War of 1812. We know about many of these adventures from his own perspective: He painstakingly detailed events of his life in numerous naval logs, notes, diaries and assorted scraps of paper. Fourteen years after his death in 1818, his daughter-in-law, Mary Chase Barney, edited and supplemented the commodore's notes into a monograph titled: *A Biographical Memoir of the Late Commodore Joshua Barney*. Published in 1832 by Boston bookseller Gray and Bowen, the volume also includes commentaries and reference notes written by Mary, who was married to the commodore's son, U.S. Marine Corps Major of Dragoons William Bedford Barney. Through her pioneering efforts, the U.S. Library of Congress lists Mary Barney among the nation's early biographers. She certainly picked a worthy subject.

#### **A Take-Charge Naval Officer**

In February 1776, 16-year-old Joshua Barney joined the Continental Navy as a master's mate aboard the USS *Hornet*. Under the command of Commodore Esek Hopkins, Barney took part in the March 1776 raid for armaments and munitions at the port of New Providence in Nassau, Bahamas. The raid was necessary to obtain vital war materiel demanded by General George Washington, who was leading troops against British-held Boston. The "Hopkins Raid," as it was known, resulted in the Americans gaining 88 cannons, 15 mortars and hundreds of pounds of gunpowder. After the raid, Barney, still only a teenager, served as second-in-command aboard the USS *Wasp*. Again he displayed valor and steady leadership in the battle between the *Wasp* and the British brig, HMS *Betsey*. After returning to Philadelphia, Barney was promoted to lieutenant. He later served in the defense of communities near the Delaware River.

In between military engagements, Barney met Anne Bedford. Mary writes that her father-in-law became acquainted with the family of Gunning Bedford, "a respectable alderman of Philadelphia, and was introduced to his daughter, a young lady of great beauty and personal accomplishments, to whose fascinations he for the first time 'struck his colors,' and surrendered at discretion." Joshua and Anne were married on March 16, 1780. They had several children (accounts differ on how many).

Though Barney was captured and taken prisoner by the British several times, he was usually exchanged for a British officer held by the Americans. However, in early 1781, he was captured and incarcerated in Old Mill Prison in Plymouth, England. He faced the possibility of being executed for piracy.

In a scene fit for a Hollywood swashbuckler movie, on May 18, 1781, Barney, with the help of a fellow American prisoner, scaled the walls and escaped from the prison. After many weeks of hiding in the port city of Plymouth, Barney secretly sailed to France where he later boarded a vessel that arrived in Philadelphia in March 1782. After many months of imprisonment and hiding, Barney arrived home exhausted but essentially unharmed.

Later that month, Barney was back in action as captain of the USS *Hyder-Ally*. On April 8, 1782, his ship encountered the much larger and more heavily armed British warship, *General Monk*. Barney's leadership ability coupled with the gunnery skills of his crew forced the *General Monk* to surrender quickly.

*Barney knew of no other life than that of a naval warrior: "I was happiest when faced with the point of the bayonet or the cannon's mouth!"*



"The *Hyder-Ally* opened her ports and gave a well-directed broadside, which spoke her determination in a language not to be misunderstood. The enemy closed upon her immediately, and showed a disposition to board," Mary wrote. "At this critical juncture Captain Barney had the coolness and presence of mind to conceive, and execute on the instant, a *ruse de guerre*, to which he was unquestionably indebted for the victory that immediately followed."

The *Hyder-Ally* was tasked with delivering top-secret correspondence between Benjamin Franklin, Ambassador to France, and the U.S. Congress. The most important of these messages was Franklin's monumental news of the signing of the Treaty of Paris, the 1783 declaration of peace between Great Britain and the now-independent United States of America.

#### **Interlude Between Wars**

Following the Revolutionary War, Barney foundered like one of his battle-ravaged warships. As Mary explained: "Captain Barney was not, like most of his brother-officers in both branches of the service, returning to a mode of life with which he had been previously familiar, but was now to begin a course of action totally different from all the habits of his youth and manhood." Barney knew of no other life than that of a naval warrior. He started several commerce ventures, all of which resulted in what Mary characterized as "heavy losses." She added that her father-in-law was the proverbial "fish out of water."



Bored by the confines of Baltimore, Barney set out on an overland trip in 1787 that crossed the Allegheny Mountains to Fort Pitt (today's Pittsburgh). He then headed south before finally reaching Kentucky, where he purchased a plot of land. His writings indicate that while he enjoyed roaming in the wilderness, he also felt unfulfilled. Barney's mind would repeatedly turn back to sea warfare, and he was quoted as saying, "I was happiest when faced with the point of the bayonet or the cannon's mouth!"

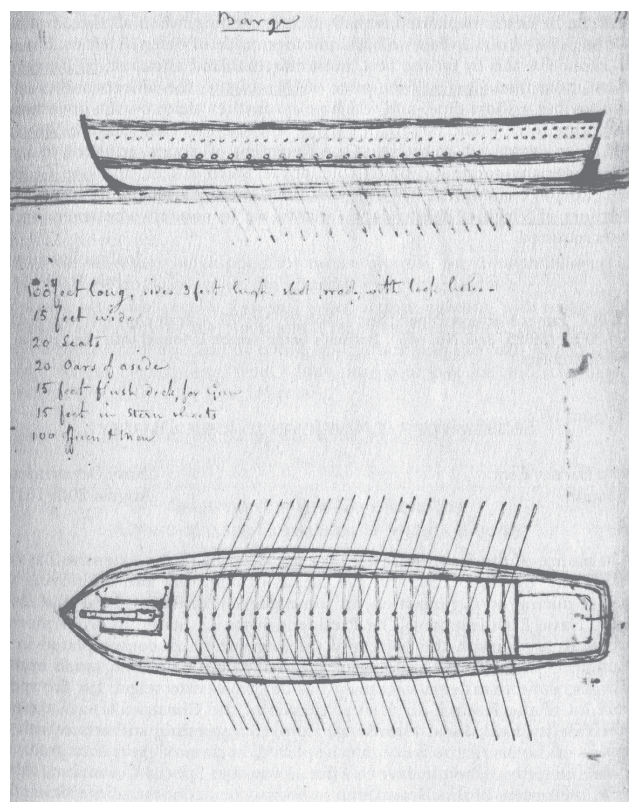
After returning to Baltimore later that year, his interest was piqued by politics during the ratification process of the U.S. Constitution. Barney attended the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, and he strongly advocated for the ratification of the document in Maryland. Barney traveled throughout the state making public appearances and speeches advocating its adoption. At one of these events, an unknown assailant seriously injured him with a sharpened weapon, ending his public appearances. However, the efforts of native Marylanders such as Barney were successful: On April 28, 1788, the state formally adopted the U.S. Constitution.

Following the Constitutional Convention, Barney visited George Washington in the short span of time before the retired general was asked to be U.S. president. By the late 1780s, Barney had gained a reputation as a national hero for his bravery in sea battles and ascended into the upper echelons of America's social classes. Barney became reacquainted with American merchant Robert Morris, known as the "Financier of the Revolution." This connection led to offers of two positions—captain of a U.S. Revenue Cutter and clerk of the District Court of Maryland. Though Barney accepted the clerk position, he quickly lost interest and quit shortly thereafter.

Seeking income, Barney and a partner purchased a warehouse that stored cargo that he could ship in his own vessel. In the 1790s, Barney sailed back and forth from Baltimore to the Caribbean, stopping at ports in Cape Francois, Haiti; Cartagena, Colombia; and Havana, Cuba. He was happy to command a ship again and likely enjoyed, perhaps for the first time in his life, earning a sizable profit from a business venture.

But the work could be dangerous. During one trip to Haiti, he was nearly killed when revolutionaries fighting French government rulers attacked his ship. Before fleeing, Barney allowed many women and children to board his ship for safety. The voyage's misfortune didn't end there: En route to Baltimore, Barney and his crew became prisoners of privateers sanctioned by the British government. Once again, Barney somehow escaped from his captors, returned to his ship and sailed back to Baltimore. Undeterred, Barney made further journeys to war-torn Haiti with a ship now armed with cannons.

The French government bestowed upon Barney a "Letter of Marque," which gave him formal authority to seize vessels



Ink sketch of "Barney's Flotilla boat" drawn by Commodore Joshua Barney in 1814

from nations at war with France, particularly those of Great Britain. In 1790, Barney was captured by the British and charged with piracy. He was put on trial in Jamaica, a British colony. A lack of evidence coupled with support from the American government led to Barney's acquittal.

After repeated offers from the French government, Barney finally accepted a commission as a captain in their navy. From 1796 to 1802, he commanded several French ships that engaged in battle with the British Royal Navy.

### Ventures Into Politics

In 1805, President Thomas Jefferson offered Barney the position of superintendent of the recently established naval yards located in Washington City. In 1806, Barney was encouraged to run for a congressional seat representing the city and county of Baltimore. Although he won a majority of votes in the city of Baltimore, his opponent won the county of Baltimore. With this split vote, the federal government formed a committee to resolve the dispute. The congressional committee ultimately decided that Barney's political opponent, William McCreery, was the winner.

These years were also full of personal loss and tumult. Anne, long afflicted with crippling rheumatism, fell in 1808 and never recovered. She died in July 1808 at the age of 54. One year later, Barney remarried. He wed Harriet Coale, who

Mary Barney described as “a very charming woman.” Joshua and Harriet had three children. Only one, christened Adele, lived beyond infancy.

In 1810, Barney was again urged to run for the congressional seat representing Baltimore. In a repeat of the 1806 election, he won the majority of votes in the city but not the county of Baltimore. The election went to his political opponent, Alexander McKim. After these two failed attempts, Barney swore that he would never again delve into politics. He kept that oath for the remainder of his life.

### Sacrifices at Sea

Due to mounting losses of Royal Navy crewmen incurred during the Napoleonic Wars, the British continually sought replacements by intercepting American cargo vessels and impressing American seamen into service. They made the dubious assertions that they were Royal Navy deserters and that the Americans were allying with the French. Despite America’s repeated entreaties to stop these practices as stipulated in the 1783 Treaty of Paris, the British refused. On June 12, 1812, U.S. Congress declared war on Great Britain.

Barney jumped into the fray a month later, taking command of the privateer vessel *USS Rossie*. By April 1814, Barney had under his command 900 sailors and U.S. Marines as well as a 26-vessel flotilla, which consisted of small gunboats and barges that were designed, built and armed according to Barney’s instructions. Among his officers was his son, USMC Major William B. Barney.

During the first week of June 1814, Barney staged “hit and run” attacks on the British ships at the mouth of the Patuxent River. Barney’s gunboats and barges were greatly outnumbered in terms of firepower. However, his small vessels had an advantage over the large ships: They were able to speedily escape in the many narrow, shallow inlets of Chesapeake Bay.

That advantage ran out on June 8. In a battle that lasted two days, many of the flotilla crewmembers were injured, several were killed, and the gunboats and barges were destroyed. In what was called the Battle of St. Leonard’s Creek, the British then burned nearly all the neighboring buildings, farms and mills in the shoreline areas.

Secretary of War John Armstrong assigned 600 Army soldiers and several pieces of heavy cannon to the area surrounding St. Leonard’s Creek. Simultaneously, Secretary of the Navy Jones ordered a contingent of 120 U.S. Marines to

directly aid Commodore Barney. Barney’s fighters were brave and reliable when the British again attacked St. Leonard’s Creek on June 26. The British withdrew temporarily until August 16, at which point their warships again entered the Patuxent River.

It was the landing of the 2,000-strong British Army on August 18 at Benedict, on the southern shore of Maryland, that would prove most significant. The British Army, led by Major-General Robert Ross, quickly overwhelmed the Americans at Benedict and proceeded to Bladensburg, Md., where they encountered a much larger number of U.S. Army and militia defenders. However, the bulk of the defenders fled when their officers were killed. Barney’s 360 sailors—now serving as infantry—and Captain Samuel Miller’s 106-man U.S. Marine contingent were the only Americans left to fight 2,000 British invaders. Despite putting up a stalwart defense, Barney’s sailors and marines were decimated by the British. At that point, Barney ordered a retreat for the few remaining survivors. Among the injured was Barney, who was seriously wounded when he was hit by a bullet in the thigh.

The War of 1812 ended with the December 24 signing of the Treaty of Ghent, but word did not reach North America until after the Battle of New Orleans in January 1815. Following the war, Barney was honored for his bravery in various cities, particularly in

Baltimore. Unfortunately, he remained in agonizing pain from the wound he received in the Battle of Bladensburg. After repeated unsuccessful attempts to extract the bullet, surgeons recommended that it stay embedded in his leg.

### His Final Years

Barney planned to retire to his Kentucky land permanently. On December 1, 1818, while en route to Kentucky, he suffered violent spasms in his wounded leg. The last of these seizures ended his life. He died and was buried in Pittsburgh in 1818. In 1848, his remains were moved to what was then the newly opened Allegheny Cemetery in Lawrenceville, Pa. In August 2012, at an event sponsored by Maryland DAR chapters, Sons of the American Revolution and United States Daughters of 1812, a new memorial stone marker was dedicated at Barney’s grave.

“His inferiors and dependents, of every class, revered and loved him with a sincerity of attachment that nothing but death could have dissolved,” Mary wrote. “Such was the character of Joshua Barney.”



The bullet that hit Barney in the thigh at Bladensburg proved fatal, but not right away. He died of complications from the wound in 1818. The bullet was extracted and preserved in a brass disc.