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"Now We Find It Necessary to Take Care of Ourselves": Citizen Involvement and Influence in the Creation of the United States Navy: 1796-1798

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Previous historians of the Quasi-War period (1797-1801) have typically explained the conflict by focusing on the influence of government figures like John Adams, Alexander Hamilton and Timothy Pickering in expanding the nation's defenses against France. For example, the story of the Navy's establishment usually describes partisan debates in Congress and official correspondences, isolated from the specific desires of the common people, ordaining a coherent national policy. This traditional view ignores or minimizes the other side of the dialectic: citizens' appeals and advice to their leaders. Invariably, the views and beliefs of "the people" are illustrated by mob or collective actions and election results, or they are presented through the eyes of isolated elite figures like Abigail Adams, Fisher Ames, or Robert Liston.[1] The results are usually bland stereotypes of Federalist merchants and simplistic characterizations of their actions in the national scene. This essay synthesizes previously ignored primary source material and localized historical perspectives into a fuller understanding of the positive influence that American citizens had in the establishment of a national navy.[2]

Citizens' actions were not exclusively responsible for the efficient and auspicious 1798 creation of the United States Navy; leaders in the capital had ultimate authority over legislation and the implementation of suggestions. However, to a notable degree, the navy's success can be attributed to the contributions of the citizenry. Furthermore, the public's reactions to the war crisis paint a broader picture of the politics of the early republic period.[3]

French Spoliations and Their Effects

One cool morning in March 1797, the Baltimore merchant ship Cincinnatus encountered a French man-of-war off the coast of Martinique. The French crew

boarded and captured the American ship, tortured its captain with thumbscrews, and ordered him to declare all of his cargo as British goods, so they could legally seize it as contraband. He adamantly refused, but the French stole most of the Americans' provisions anyway before releasing the ship.[4]

Hundreds of similar encounters occurred during a state of undeclared war that began shortly after the United States ratified Jay's Treaty with England in April 1796. The treaty explicitly defied the doctrine that "free ships make free goods" which had previously applied to commerce between France and America; the vessels of neutral nations were no longer assumed to contain neutral cargo and were subject to inspection by any belligerent navy. The U.S. government pledged a complicit alliance with England in the continental wars, offering her merchants free trade in American ports, and leaving French merchant fleets in commercial competition with their enemy and defenseless against the Royal Navy.

In retaliation, French agents in the West Indies issued decrees in August 1796 which permitted France's civilian vessels to seize all American merchant ships with British destinations or goods.[5] In March 1797, the French Directory officially sanctioned this commercial warfare of its merchant marine against all American vessels in the Caribbean.[6] Specifically, French privateers approached and boarded any American merchant ship they found and demanded to review the ship's log and lists of the crew, cargo, and ownership. Invariably, the French captain claimed some discrepancy or illegitimacy in the paperwork, commandeered the vessel as a prize, ordered the American crew aboard his ship, and sailed it back to a friendly port. There the French "condemned" the vessel and refitted it as their ship. Local courts seized its payload and turned the crew out onto the streets. The most common justification was the finding of British merchandise onboard, which was probably true on occasion. However, the high number of captures belies the truthfulness of most justifications the French gave for their seizures.

These cargo seizures severely threatened America's young shipping industry, which had been on the verge of maturity. The continental war which began in 1792 drastically expanded English and French demands for American food, lumber, and other provisions. When enemy embargoes cut off supply routes from Europe, the Caribbean colonies of both nations also depended on American goods. During the twenty-three years of English-French warfare, U.S. annual exports quadrupled to $82 million.[7] New England cities like Boston, New Haven, and Salem boomed from provincial

fishing and trading communities into bustling international shipping ports. The seaboard towns' survival depended completely on the success of trade voyages abroad.

Consequently, American ports felt the impact of the French confiscations like a swift punch in the stomach. Ship captains had no warning of the French decrees and were physically and legally defenseless against their attackers. Between October 1796 and June 1797, French privateers captured 316 American ships and their cargo.[8] These losses accounted for over 6 percent of all trading vessels under the American flag. In 1797, total imports fell by 7 percent and exports dropped 24 percent from the previous year.[9] The reductions were due in part to captures and partly to a decrease in the number of voyages attempted. The price of insurance for goods shipped from America to the West Indies, which rose by 200 percent to 600 percent within a few months, made the costs of shipping prohibitive for some traders.[10] During 1797, insurance rates skyrocketed from an average of 6 percent of a cargo's value to 30 percent.[11] South Carolina Representative Robert Goodloe Harper estimated the total losses by July 1797 "from twelve to fifteen million dollars."[12]

The town of Newburyport, Massachusetts, claimed a total loss of $682,000 from seventy-seven separate vessel seizures by the French before 1800.[13] William Gray, a Salem merchant, lost two of his seven ships (the *Eliza* and the *Sally*) within a few months.[14] Baltimore merchant Robert Oliver wrote to his business agent in March 1798 that he did not "intend to adventure any more until we see how we stand with the French." The powerful Crowninshield merchant family in Salem announced in May that it would "send no more property to sea even if we get John [Crowninshield] home safe."[15] Clearly, America's merchant vessels suffered terribly from French attacks and urgently needed greater naval protection than the national government could provide.

Founding the U.S. Navy

Most or all of the French depredations could have been avoided if the United States had a standing navy to patrol its harbors and protect the merchant marine. However, the United States Navy existed in little more than name in 1797 and was completely unprepared to act against the French depredations. The navy's only three ships lay unfinished in dry dock; naval affairs were relegated to the bottom of the War Department's priorities; and merchant vessels could not legally arm to defend themselves.

Financial hardships had forced the government to sell the last vessel of the Continental Navy in 1785, and the Constitution outlawed state navies. The Treasury Department possessed a handful of revenue cutters, but they had few cannons and were only authorized to enforce customs and commercial regulations. Congress had passed a tentative Naval Act in response to the Barbary crisis of 1794, which authorized the construction of six ships, but ordered a halt to all naval activities upon the ratification of a treaty with Algiers. When this peace was finally achieved in 1796, President Washington had to force through a bill to continue work on the three frigates already begun.[16]

Congress passed several stopgap measures in 1797, which plugged a few holes in the nation's leaky defense system. On March 2, Congress appropriated funds for the completion of three ships to constitute the U.S. Navy.[17] The unfinished thirty-six-cannon frigates, the *United States*, the *Constellation*, and the *Constitution*, would be launched and immediately deployed in late-1798 to protect convoys of American merchants in the Caribbean Sea. An act of 23 June distributed money to each state for fortifying ports and harbors. The July 1st naval armament act appropriated funds to build three more frigates, as well as authorized the president to employ the revenue cutters as naval vessels. Relying on America's overextended resources, this provision did little to pacify the need for larger defenses.[18]

The reasons for Congress's reluctance to establish a large, strong navy are intricate and complex. The antagonists, mostly members of the opposition Republican Party, combated the pro-navy forces on several grounds. Albert Gallatin, leader of the Republicans in the House, warned about the economic repercussions: "The true question [is] whether the creation of an efficient navy should be postponed to the payment of the public debt…"[19] Fellow Republican John Dawson of Virginia echoed these concerns, "The conduct of the French government towards our envoys, and the many captures of our vessels by the cruisers of that nation…cause the adoption of measures which I fear place us in a state of war, beget the necessity of new taxes, and will load us with a public debt, one of the greatest of national curses."[20] These objections indicated a kind of sectionalism between mercantile New England, where the president and many of his administration resided, and the agrarian remainder of the nation that suffered less from French depredations. The practical complaints also concealed the prevailing friendship of many Republican officials with the French, and their aversion to constructing a military force that might combat them. Conflicts among congressmen and public officials over the national economy, sectional rivalries, and

disagreements about implementing revolutionary ideology all intersected in federal efforts to establish the United States Navy.

These debates and their consequences were not limited to federal buildings and the parlors of the elite. The controversy existed (indeed, it may have originated) within the body politic, even in places where one would least expect.[21] Mercantile communities did not sit back and cheer the American war effort; rather, they acted directly to spark and sustain it.

Citizen Contributions

Citizens in the seacoast cities responded directly to the spoliations and the war crisis in five distinct ways: writing petitions to their leaders, augmenting their towns' defenses, selling ships to the government, arming their vessels for self-defense, and pledging money to help build more naval vessels.

Formal correspondence flowed from concerned citizens to their government officials. One historian suggests that President Adams "must have spent most of his time in May, June, and July 1798 writing answers to the addresses" he received from aggrieved Americans across the country.[22] Of the thirty-two such letters published in the *Works of John Adams*, six refer directly to naval protection. To a collection of Boston merchants, Adams cheered, "To arms, then, my young friends, — to arms, especially by sea."[23] However, in addition to being a popular mandate of patriotism and Federalist support, these communications conveyed to politicians the true extent of French attacks.

Correspondence between the public and governmental leaders appears to have had little effect on the specific naval policy Congress eventually adopted. Alexander Hamilton's naval defense plan, which he publicized and distributed to several federal officials, was essentially that which Congress enacted over the course of 1798. The reasons for his influence are beyond the scope of this paper, as they involve his political influences (particularly over Secretary of War James McHenry) and connections in the popular press of New York and Philadelphia. However, it is interesting to note that Hamilton's correspondence during the 1797-1798 war crisis reflected no direct input from affected merchants. The closest instance is in a 1 June 1798 letter to McHenry, in which he urged the Secretary of War to build the militia and fortified defenses of the New York City region. "Our citizens are extremely anxious that some further measures for their defense should take place."[24] In another letter he refers to the recent capture of the

Thomas by a French privateer just beyond New York City's harbor, which he characterizes as the talk of the town. "Our merchants are very indignant; our government very prostrate in the view of every man of energy."[25] However, the scarcity of Hamiltonian communication outside the government on naval policy, and the similarities between his plans and the enacted legislation, suggest minimal influence by the populace on naval policy through correspondence.

The main function of communication by citizens with government officials was to inform them of the depredations' effects. In May 1796, several dozen Philadelphia merchants petitioned Congress, claiming losses from the French of over $2 million.[26] The Senate ordered the State Department to investigate these claims, and the result was a lengthy report by Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, delivered to Congress on 28 February 1797.[27] Philadelphians apparently benefited from their proximity to federal officials by encouraging Congress to follow their interests.

Americans who were further removed from public officials had other avenues of correspondence. Sixteen American captains stranded in Cuba, whose vessels had been seized by French or Spanish privateers, sent a letter to Secretary Pickering on 21 June 1797. They listed twenty-seven American vessels trapped in Santiago de Cuba between January and June. The captains specifically requested diplomatic aid which, they recounted, had prevented the condemnation of two vessels and their cargo previously and which could help other ships. "We beg leave to suggest to the Government of the United States the necessity of appointing some person to reside here, as Agent."[28] The only American ambassador in Cuba was stationed at faraway Havana.

Some Americans had better luck in finding consulates after the French captured their ships. A State Department document listed 88 individual French captures, reported by American consuls between November 1796 and September 1797. Minister B.H. Phillips recorded eleven vessels seized in San Domingo in the summer, and Jacob Meyer counted thirty-four in Cap Francois during a ten-month period; the other fourty-three were enumerated from consuls in France, Spain, and Portugal.[29] Another twenty-four cargo captures were claimed in a second State Department document, which summarized claims and complaints reported by the ship captains themselves. All but two of these were seized in the Caribbean between October 1796 and September 1797.[30] In December 1797, Pickering sent these documents to Massachusetts Representative Samuel Sewall, who chaired the prominent Committee on Commerce and Manufacture. There they may have had some influence in convincing Congress to

protect the merchant marine. Overall, the function of public correspondence with federal officials was to produce evidence for the pro-navy forces to bolster their cause in Congress and to confirm the utility of measures they planned to take.

Citizens also responded to the crisis in communities all along the Atlantic coast which prepared to defend themselves against French invasion. Coastal fortifications had mostly been left to crumble after the Revolutionary War and required repairs. The reparations occurred on the local level, as coastal communities allocated state and federal funds to certain projects and employed townspeople in the reconstruction process.[31] Connecticut Governor Oliver Wolcott Jr. opened his 1797 State of the State address by warning the legislature about the potential for a French invasion, and asserting the need to reform the militia and repair coastal forts. His successor, Governor John Trumbull, echoed these concerns in his annual address the following year.[32] Congress passed an act on 3 May 1798, which appropriated $430,000 for "fortifying the ports and harbours"; some communities augmented their share with municipal funds.[33] New York City assigned $150,000 to start construction on several new forts in the harbor in 1797, before the bill was even passed. The jump-start caused controversy in the autumn between Hamilton, Adams, Pickering, and others when the city demanded repayment; the president assumed that the forts would not necessarily belong to the United States.[34] This early example shows the confusion that resulted from citizens taking initiative ahead of the federal government.

The third common effort of the mercantile citizenry was self-defense. The greatest irony of the Navy's early sparseness was the multitude of extant vessels whose owners begged the government to arm them to protect the nation's ports and cargo. When considering the resources available to the nation for the defense of commerce, historians often forget the potential for arming the merchant vessels themselves, which were otherwise completely defenseless against a privateer's cannons. Existing laws prohibited the docking or departure of any armed civilian vessel from American ports, which had the dual effect of protecting the harbors for enemy powers and denying protection to domestic ships on the high seas. As early as October 1797, President Adams considered waiving this restriction on American merchant vessels, but Secretary of the Treasury Oliver Wolcott, whose customs collectors enforced the law, was cool to the idea. On 19 March 1798, Adams withdrew by executive order the requirements for local customs officials to restrain armed American merchant vessels from leaving port.[35] Congress finally responded on 25 June, the same day it passed the subscription ship bill, by approving legislation that allowed private vessels to sail armed out of American

ports. Furthermore, the act empowered merchant crews to "oppose and defend against any search, restraint or seizure…by the commander or crew of any vessel under French colors." It placed only one condition: owners must post bonds to the government, which would be repaid only if the ship did not use its arms against neutral vessels.[36] (The restriction ensured that these vessels were not privateers, free to hunt and capture French cargo ships. The U.S. government authorized 365 privateers in the Quasi-War, about one-half of which were registered in Southern states, and one-third from New England. However, none of these saw any action in the West Indies.)[37]

Salem-area residents owned thirty-four of the dozens of armed merchant vessels that sailed in 1798. Twenty of these belonged to the six main merchant firms of the city, and the other fourteen were scattered among various other individuals or firms.[38] In 1799, forty-four vessels registered in Salem had mounted cannons for defense. More than half of these (twenty-four) belonged to the three leading merchant families in the city.[39]

The armament of their own vessels probably did more than any other measure to improve the morale of American merchants. Captain Elias Hasket Derby of the newly fitted *Mount Vernon* sailed with a British convoy through the Strait of Gibraltar and became split from the fleet just as a 100-man French privateer appeared on the African side. The corsair approached boldly, preparing to board. "He came so near our broadside as to allow our six- pound grape to do execution handsomely," Derby wrote his father proudly. "It was a satisfaction to flog the rascal in full view of the English fleet."[40] The popularity of merchant vessel armament indicates the strong desire of Americans to protect their fleets themselves.

Meanwhile, Americans proposed an additional manner to improve the navy: buying merchant ships and converting them to United States Navy vessels.[41] Congress passed an act on 27 April 1798 which appropriated nearly a million dollars for the purchase of no more than twelve ships, each with no more than twenty-two cannons, to augment the minuscule navy.[42] Within six days, the government bought the *Adriana* and the *Ganges* from a New York and a Philadelphia merchant, respectively, and two days later the *Hamburgh Packet* (renamed the *Delaware*), was procured from a Philadelphian.[43] The swiftness of these sales after the bill's passage suggests some premeditation by lawmakers, or the Adams administration, to pass a law that would protect an already desired action. Four days before the bill passed, the War Office sent a letter to Philadelphia merchant Henry Philips, expressly to request purchasing one of his ships for the government. "I beg the favor of you to inform me of the lowest Price you would

require."[44] The *Ganges* and the *Delaware* were swiftly converted into warships, and, by the end of June 1798, they and the two frigates *United States* and *Constellation* patrolled the coastal waters on active duty. The *Adriana* and newly purchased *Herald* followed within a few days. These privately supplied vessels tripled the Navy's presence in the Atlantic. Within a few months, the government acquired all of the twelve vessels permitted under the April 27th naval armament act.[45]

Certainly, the most significant influence of the citizenry on the federal government's naval policy, and the tightest connection between the two spheres, was the subscription ship construction program. In eight coastal cities, members of the private sector pledged money from their own pockets to fund the construction of a large ship and formed committees to organize the effort. The labor, materials, and coordination of the project also came from within the community. When complete, the community loaned the ship to the federal government for an annual commission of 6 percent of the ship's value and full reimbursement of construction costs. Congress passed an act to codify the subscription program on 28 June 1798.[46]

Subscription was a common means of involvement by wealthy Americans in achieving local objectives. For example, Richard Derby, the father of future naval subscriber Elias Hasket Derby, was one of thirty names on a subscription list in 1760 to fund a library in Salem. "[W]e the subscribers, sensible of the Publick advantage of having a well chosen Library in this town agree to form ourselves into a society for that purposes, & hereby promise to pay to Stephen Higginson Esq. the sum set against our names respectively…."[47]

Where previous historians have assumed that Congress took the initiative in applying the colonial concept of public subscription to the expansion of the navy, close examination of local histories proves that the reverse is true.[48] Naval historian Howard I. Chapelle asserted that the June legislation empowered the Secretary of the Navy "to induce the citizens of Newburyport to build the twenty-four-gun ship *Merrimack*," but the Navy Department was not created until three weeks later.[49] Rather than arguing that after Adams signed the subscription Act, "[m]erchants…rose to the occasion and by private subscription built vessels in their ports for the navy," it would be more appropriate to say that Congress rose to the occasion presented by the merchants.[50] Citizens anticipated the official requests, as in Maryland where subscription meetings began in June 1798, and, in November of that year, an address by the Maryland state legislature urged all citizens to "rally round the government of their

adoption." Governor John Henry made a speech that same month "encouraging the people to place themselves in a posture of defense."[51] The tendency to attribute the initiative for naval defense to political leaders is noteworthy because it belies the assumptions by some historians of this era that political influence and responsibility rested only with elites.

Merchants in Newburyport got the idea for shipbuilding by subscription in late May, 1798, and communicated their intentions on 1 June to U.S. Representative Bailey Bartlett. "A number of the inhabitants of this town have agreed to build and equip a ship…and to offer her to the government of the United States for their use." Furthermore, they requested that their patriotic act be upheld and encouraged by Congress:

> As we indulge a hope that this intention of the citizens of Newburyport will lead to proportionate exertions in larger and wealthier towns, we beg leave to suggest the convenience that any provision which may be thought proper and applicable to the case might be general…They heartily wish their abilities extended beyond their present offer, but the immense ravages which have been committed on their property by sea, and the great proportion of the remnant yet at risk, forbid their further indulgence of the inclinations. [52]

Bartlett received the petition at Philadelphia and apparently acted swiftly to legalize this action and to express the committee's wishes of expanding their effort down the coast. On 6 June, a bill was read on the House floor which would allow the president to receive "any armed vessel built within the United States, and voluntarily offered to him for the use of the United States, to be employed in public service." The House bill that passed a week later included no compensation to the loaning party and allowed the government to accept only twelve ships in this fashion. [53] The Senate produced a more elaborate bill, on which the debates were more heated — likely due to the greater influence of the Republican Party and the landlocked states in the upper house.

Meanwhile, a sort of subscription frenzy burned southward down the coast. Newspapers reprinted the Newburyport subscription committee's announcement almost immediately. It appeared in Boston the day after the group's meeting on 26 May, in Philadelphia's *Aurora* on 1 June, in New York's *Spectator* 2 June, and in Charleston's *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser* on 16 June. In the month of June, the New York *Commercial Advertiser* reported subscription campaigns in New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Norfolk, Petersburg, Richmond, and statewide efforts in Rhode Island and New York.[54] The language of the Newburyport article probably did

the most to engender interest and action among newspaper readers in these cities. The dispatch began: "The patriotic citizens of this town, determined to show their attachment to their own government, and to vindicate its commercial rights, have opened a subscription for the purpose of building a twenty gun ship…"[55]

The challenge worked. William Cobbett, editor of the popular *Porcupine's Gazette*, a Federalist daily printed in Philadelphia, chided his readers on 9 June to emulate Newburyport's subscription committee. "What our rich merchants are about here I know not. They have a good deal to lose; and they may take my word for it, that if they will not give a *little*, they will *lose all*."[56] Though news of the Massachusetts effort had been in the city for a week, and a pertinent bill debated in Congress, it was not until the day after this editorial that Philadelphians took their own initiative — the prickly Porcupine's goading probably spurred activity. Once subscription committees took action, the momentum built swiftly. By 14 June, the *Gazette* cheerfully noted that the city's merchants had raised $70,000, and the committee had reformed to attend to the ship's design.[57]

When he was installed in office, Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert paid immediate attention to such private shipbuilding efforts. His main contribution was to continue to play cities off of each other on the grounds of patriotism, striving for bigger and better results from each. The day before the subscription-ship bill passed Congress, he wrote nearly identical letters to subscription committees in each of the four major cities: "It is hoped that New York, Boston, Philadelphia, & Baltimore will each furnish one such Vessels [sic], instead of more of smaller size, as it is expected, that the latter can be obtained from the Towns of less commercial importance." Stoddert's careful wording encouraged each of these cities to prove its worth and avoid being dubbed one of those of "less commercial importance."[58]

Private interest and action increased at a meteoric rate. By the time the Senate passed its subscription bill on 14 June, citizens had begun subscription efforts in Newburyport, New York, and Philadelphia; before the House could debate the bill, a committee was established in Baltimore. The popularity of the subscription plan shocked the Republicans who strove to limit this apparently boundless phenomenon. At the present rate, it appeared that every seaboard city would find the funds to build at least one ship and perhaps to expand the navy into a powerful and dangerous force, no less formidable than a standing army. The final bill, passed on 25 June, limited the number of guns and size of the privately built ships. It also accepted as precedent the Newburyport proposal

of 6 percent interest on the ship's total cost, to prevent profiteering.[59] Some smaller communities tried unsuccessfully to join the subscription frenzy. Several prominent citizens in the small coastal town of Beaufort, South Carolina, wrote the Secretary of War of their intention to earn the six-percent commission on ships that would only serve their region. Secretary of the Navy Stoddert answered regretfully that they misunderstood the laws of the subscription program.

> As to your liberal and public spirited offer to build Galleys, and loan them to the public &c. on the condition, that they shall be manned and armed at public expense, and employed solely in the district; I am very sorry that the Laws will not authorize the President to accede to all the conditions — I have enclosed the Law on that subject, by which you will perceive that he is authorized to accept of any number of vessels as a free gift to the Public, —Your offer is to loan them during the War— [60]

Beaufort probably did not have enough wealth to afford to give ships to the government. Indeed, its merchants may have sought a profitable way to protect their own property and interests. The town of Beaufort did not build any naval vessels.

The success of the subscription shipbuilding effort was assured by August 1798, when Stoddert wrote to the Charleston committee that the copper sheets they required to sheath the hull would not be available for a while. "Indeed I fear there is not enough in the Country to supply the public demand for the next three months."[61] On 1 September, only three of the twenty-seven ships authorized for construction by Congress were not yet underway; Stoddert wrote the president that he counted on Providence, Salem, and Richmond to fill these final openings.[62]

Anomalies

Despite the significant show of support from coastal towns, it would be a mistake to assume that popularity for local initiative and effort pervaded all affected seaport districts. Further, support for or opposition to subscription campaigns did not always correspond to party affiliations or occupations tied to shipping and international commerce; people of the time made decisions about supporting the war based upon a variety of factors.[63]

For example, not all of the citizens who pledged money to the private shipbuilding efforts were merchants, though certainly many were connected to the sea. Seven of Newburyport's nine founding committee members were merchant ship owners, but the remainder included a shipmaster-banker and an unoccupied brother of the U.S. Senator.

[64] The subscription papers for Salem's *Essex* still survive and give us a representative picture of who contributed money to the ship. Of the $74,020 in revenue that the papers record, three-quarters came from men who claimed "Merchant" as their occupation, in whole or in part. The two wealthiest men in town, William Gray Jr. and Elias Hasket Derby, offered $10,000 each; some donated as little as fifty dollars. However, the merchants only comprised fourty-two of the 100 contributors. The other fifty-eight came from all walks of life: shop keepers, cabinetmakers, blacksmiths, lawyers, a tailor, etc.[65] The absolute amount of the pledges may have been less, but, for many of these citizens, $200 might have been a larger percentage of their wealth than the thousands were for some of the merchants.

The best evidence of proactive variance can be found in Salem, Massachusetts. In the 1790s, Salem was the sixth largest city in the United States behind Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston. The city had the most diverse trade of any American port, sending ships to Asia, the Mediterranean, Africa, Brazil, and most of all the West Indies. Reverend William Bentley of Salem's East Church kept a daily journal between 1783 and 1819. He reported with minimal commentary on local events, including merchant ship arrivals and mishaps, and on actions regarding defense for the city. The following entry appeared on 1 May 1798:

> This day our militia was to be mustered, but there was hardly to be seen the appearance of anything military, except in the Artillery Company. So unpopular was the Militia Law that but one captain was to be found & no superiour officers. The companies were warned by Sergeants & some neglected to do their duty. The few who appeared did not attempt the manual exercises & only appeared at the muster roll call. The discharge of the Artillery closed the scene. It was rather a burlesque upon Militia than a military exhibition.[66]

On 11 July Bentley described with more detail the relative apathy of his city toward patriotism and military preparation.

> The last Tuesday's Gazette arraigns the Town of Salem for not celebrating the *4th of July* & subscribing to the aid of Government. Tho' all the Flags were displayed at the forts & upon the Ships, a more perfect silence never reigned on any occasion. And tho' Newburyport have laid the keel of their ship, Salem has not shewn even a subscription.[67]

On the same 4 July, ship captain Moses Brown addressed the carpenters working on the frame of the *Merrimack* in a speech that was attended by half the town of Newburyport. [68] However, lest we get the impression that Salem was a Jacobin haven, Bentley reminds us a few days later of the city's Federalist leanings, at least in ideology.

> A disposition appears to carry on with vigour, an enmity against every man who shall refuse to wear the black rose or national *cockade*, or who shall in any degree or in any sense dissent from the public measures. Persecution is licenced against all the suspected."[69]

Eventually, this patriotism was manifested by a subscription effort, as the *Salem Gazette* gleefully reported on 17 July:

> PATRIOTIC SUBSCRIPTION. Last evening a subscription began in this town, for raising money for the use of government, to be applied to the building of vessels, or such other purposes as government may chose. We have no doubt of being able in our next to announce a very generous amount subscribed, as neither ability or patriotism is wanting.
>
> &hand;*Those who are disposed to aid the subscription, are informed that the paper is left at the Insurance Office for signatures.*[70]

The *Gazette*'s optimism proved premature, as money did not pour in at the rates expected. The next week's issue included only a fleeting mention of the subscription's intent.[71] Reverend Bentley's dismay continued through the summer, as work on the fortifications and frigate subscription proceeded slowly. On 26 July, he commented in his journal, "The *Subscriptions* of Salem *for Ships* of the Government does not proceed with that energy discovered in many towns…"[72]

Newburyport's successful launch of its naval contribution, the *Merrimack*, prompted a further lament about Salem's subscription. On 17 October, the reverend wrote, "The town of Newburyport has distinguished itself by this exertion. We in this Town are yet subscribing but have not yet reached the sum which instantly gave strength to the Carpenters of the Merrimack."[73] This is the last full entry in 1798 regarding the subscription.

Perhaps spurred by the embarrassment of its northern neighbor gaining so much popular press from its launching, Salem merchants regained their subscription fervor and achieved the necessary funds by late October. The committee soon reorganized to manage the construction.

> At a meeting in the Court House in this town on Tuesday evening last, of those gentlemen who have subscribed to build a ship for the service of the United States, it was voted unanimously to build a Frigate of 32 guns, and loan the same to the Government; and Mr. William Gray Jun., John Norris and Jacob Ashton, Esq., Capt. Benj. Hodges, and Capt. Ichabod Nichols were chosen a Committee to carry the vote into immediate effect.[74]

William Bentley's journal entries demonstrate the danger and naïveté of common assumptions that patriotic fervor and outrage at the French captures of local merchant ships necessarily translated into military action and support. He describes a city where ideas governed society, but apathy pervaded it.

No obvious features distinguish Salem from Newburyport that might explain the difference in their subscription shipbuilding efforts. Their economies and wealth distributions were roughly equal; Salem's population was several hundred larger than that of its northern neighbor.[75] Newburyport's initiative did not react to a harder hit from French depredations than other towns. In fact, Salem owners claimed more vessel captures than did merchants in Newburyport.[76] Salem had plenty of political patronage: Secretary of State Pickering was a native of the city. Newburyport had no such connections, and, therefore, had to transmit its subscription proposal through a freshman congressman, Bailey Bartlett.

The evidence from Salem suggests that the Federalist Party's position on the navy's founding was less monolithic than historians typically believe. One might pin a black rose or Union Jack on their overcoat, cheer the Fast Day sermons that condemned the French to hell, and praise the English around a tavern bar. But, at least in Salem, Federalists could also avoid contributing to the war effort for one of many reasons — selfishness, reliance on the federal government to protect the city, attention to other issues like disease, or antipathy toward a merchant elite. The exact nature of these reasons deserves further study and more perspectives than a single diary can provide.

Further Analysis

I conclude that the distortions and inaccuracies inherent in secondary sources on local initiative in the navy's founding derive largely from their over-dependence on outdated works and biased town histories. Dudley Knox's 1938 compilation of naval documents receives the most attention and attribution by far, most of it justified. Unfortunately, Knox included only documents written from the capital or government officials and omits direct correspondence to the Secretary of the Navy and State Department. Historians recklessly apply these documents to local affairs, following Knox's top-down approach to portray legislation and military orders as imposed upon "the people" and interpreting the lack of open protest as widespread support. Evidence of this common adherence to Knox's documents can be found from the fact that many historians omit the June 25th bill that legislated the subscription ship program, as do nearly all works on the Quasi-War.

One might still believe that attention to the opinions and actions of citizens during the Quasi-War is merely trivial and of little historical use. As admitted before, the plans and procedures of Hamilton, Adams, and leading congressmen dominated war policy. However, I believe that there are at least two broader applications for localized study during this period.

First, understanding the local politics during the Quasi-War crisis explains events of the near future. For example, Salem town legend tells that the Crowninshield family never got over the slights they felt when the government refused in 1798 to accept two of their ships for sale.[77] The second-most powerful family in Salem declined to participate in the subscription shipbuilding fund and withdrew from Federalist social circles. "George Crowninshield and Sons refused to contribute to the building of the frigate *Essex* and seem to have been prejudiced against Adams's administration from this time, and they naturally joined the Jeffersonian ranks."[78] In August 1800, Jacob Crowninshield ran for a House seat as the town's first ever Republican party candidate for national office. He lost narrowly in a town where the Jeffersonian gubernatorial candidate had received only fourty- seven votes just a year earlier.[79] In 1815, President James Madison rewarded the Crowninshields' party loyalty by appointing Jacob's brother Benjamin as Secretary of the Navy.[80] Hence, the subscription ship program may have had a broader impact on the nature of early national politics.

Second, historians confess to be stumped by the puzzle of why Adams did not request an official declaration of war against France. In 1798, public opinion was too difficult for the government to gauge, diplomatic measures still seemed possible, and there were no military forces to combat the French — the president and Congress therefore steered a moderate course. But by winter, negotiations with the French had ceased, and Adams finally had an ever- expanding navy with which to fight. So why did he refuse?

Evidence from the citizenry may clarify our perspective. The effects of the Navy's establishment emerged almost immediately. French captures in the Caribbean fell to 105 in 1798, from 280 in the previous year (when merchants fended for themselves). Insurance rates fell from their high levels in the summer of 1797.[81] Robert Goodloe Harper of South Carolina, one of the most ardent High Federalists with the most to lose from a decline in national defense, confessed to his constituents:

> The privateers have wholly disappeared from our coasts. Their number has greatly decreased in the West-Indies. Captures are comparatively few. And the price of insurance on vessels and cargoes has fallen one half. The saving on insurance alone is at the rate of nine

> million of dollars annually; which is more than twice as much as the whole maritime preparations have cost…and the price of produce is again on the rise.[82]

In November 1798, a New York merchant felt confident enough not to insure his vessel at all, "believing that our coasts are clear of French pickaroons."[83] Reverend Bentley in Salem recorded about half as many captures and discussions of captures in 1799 than he made in the previous year. Indeed, by March 1799, local gossip tended toward more positive news. "Our common topics are the captures of French vessels. Every thing is done to incite our joy upon these events."[84] The change in Bentley's tone suggests that fears of merchant marine capture had ebbed by this time.

This local evidence suggests a simple explanation for the president's reluctance to war with France: the merchants' fortunes had improved. Their woes were the root cause of the conflict, and the dissolution of those problems naturally led to a weaker basis for war. Historians' attention to the intricate politics and diplomacy of the period, instead of to the common people, lead them down a more tortuous road than may be necessary. At the very least, a return to the foundational elements of the Quasi-War — the American people — can only help us to develop a better understanding of the conflict and the politics of the early republic.

Notes

[1] Alexander Deconde wrote the classic source on the conflict's political impacts: *The Quasi War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France 1797-1801*. (New York: Charles Schribner's Sons, 1966). Peripheral references can be found in Marshall Smelser, *The Congress Founds the Navy* (Notre Dame, Ind: Notre Dame University Press, 1959); William Stinchcombe, *The XYZ Affair* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980); Michael A. Palmer, *Stoddert's War: Naval Operations During the Quasi-War with France* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1987). Howard P. Nash, *The Forgotten Wars* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1968). Nash completely forgot to mention any commercial impact on commoners or plebeian contact with the government. In his book, the war exists entirely in the context of the partisan and international conflicts.

[2] Some historians are aware of this discrepancy, even if they do perpetuate it. In his definitive account of the Navy's creation, Marshall Smelser encouraged new historiographical approaches to enrich our understanding of the navy's creation.

"Operations and naval heroes have been and are being well studied. Policy and civilian leadership have been almost ignored." Smelser, *Congress Founds* , 217.

[3] The vast majority of information on naval participation and interest derives from mercantile seacoast cities, which were most directly affected by the French depredations. I will therefore focus on the activities and views in Massachusetts port cities, relating these as often as possible to other locations on the eastern seaboard.

[4] Gardner W. Allen, *Our Naval War with France* , (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 38.

[5] Allen, *Our Naval War* , 35.

[6] Palmer, *Stoddert's War* , 5.

[7] Ben J. Wattenberg, ed. *The Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present* . (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 751.

[8] Deconde, *Quasi-War* , 9. These captures, which were reported by Secretary of State Pickering, included ships taken off the European and African coasts. However, the vast majority of American voyages, and therefore of captures, were in the Caribbean.

[9] Palmer, *Stoddert's War* , 6.

[10] Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860*(Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941), 168. Between September 1796 and February 1797, rates increased from 21/2 percent to 17 percent for voyages to Jamaica, and from 3 percent to 9-10 percent for other West Indian islands.

[11] Palmer, *Stoddert's War* , 6.

[12] From Robert Goodloe Harper, 24 July 1797, *Circular Letters of Congressmen to Their Constituents, 1789-1829*, 3 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978). Not all ships recorded monetary values of their cargo, so an accurate price tag for the French captures cannot be assessed.

[13] John J. Currier, *History of Newburyport, Mass.*(Newburyport, Mass.: John J. Currier, 1906), 239-241. These constitute claims made by the town under the Treaty of Mortefontaine, which ended the hostilities on 30 Sept. 1800. This figure includes some captures from before Jay's Treaty, but dates are not given for all ships so a separate number for the Quasi-War period cannot be calculated.

[14] Dudley W. Knox, ed. *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France* (hereafter referenced as QW) (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1935-1938), 1:23, 26, 35; Edward Gray. *William Gray of Salem, Merchant* . (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 150.

[15] Frederick C. Leiner, "The Subscription Warships of 1798," *American Neptune* 46 (1986): 142.

[16] Smelser, *Congress Founds* , 52-57.

[17] *Ibid.*, 98.

[18] From Anthony New [Republican Representative from Virginia], 17 June 1797, *Circular Letters* .

[19] Smelser, *Congress Founds* , 79.

[20] From John Dawson, 19 July 1798, *Circular Letters* , 125.

[21] This phenomenon will be discussed after the study of citizen contributions to the navy's establishment.

[22] Smelser, *Congress Founds* , 160. Most historians who have examined public participation in the creation of the U.S. Navy have focused on this aspect of citizen involvement.

[23] *Ibid.*, 161.

[24] Alexander Hamilton to James McHenry, 1 June 1798, *The Life and Correspondence of James McHenry,* Bernard C. Steiner, ed. (Cleveland: Burrows Co., 1907), 289.

[25] Alexander Hamilton to Timothy Pickering, 17 May 1798. *Papers of Alexander Hamilton* , ed. Harold C. Syrett et al, 27 vols. (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1961), 21:462

[26] Rayford W. Logan, *Diplomatic Relations of the United States with Haiti, 1776-1891*(Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1941), 61.

[27] QW, 1:1.

[28] *Ibid* ., 1:33-34.

[29] "Extracts from the Consular Letters Respecting Captures by the French," QW, 1:22-28.

[30] "Abstracts of the Cases of Capture...Wherein Documents Have Been Received at the Department of State from the Individuals Aggrieved," QW, 1:28-33.

[31] The process and progress in Salem, Mass., were described firsthand by Reverend William Bentley in Diary of William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, DD.; Pastor of the East Church, Salem Massachusetts* , 4 vols. (Salem, Mass.: Essex Institute, 1907), esp. 2:284-285.

[32] *The Public Records of the State of Connecticut* (Hartford: Press of the Case, 1894), 456, 459.

[33] Circular Letter from Robert Goodloe Harper, 23 July 1798, *Circular Letters* .

[34] Steiner, *James McHenry* , 288.

[35] John D. Pelzer, "Armed Merchantmen and Privateers: Another Perspective on America's Quasi-War with France," *American Neptune* 50 (1990): 272.

[36] *Ibid.*, 273-274.

[37] Michael A. Palmer, "Anglo-American Naval Cooperation, 1798-1801," *Naval History* 4 (1990): 19.

[38] James Duncan Phillips, *Salem and the Indies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947), 135. Exact numbers cannot de determined, but Phillips estimates that at least 300 merchant vessels sailed under arms.

[39] Dudley W. Knox, "Private Armed Ships Belonging to Salem, 1799, from American State Papers," *Historical Collections of the Essex Institute* 71 (1935): 121-129.

[40] Phillips, *Indies* , 142.

[41] Two of these offers appear in QW, 1:50.

[42] *Ibid.*, I:58.

[43] QW, 1:62-63.

[44] War Office to Henry Philips, 23 April 1798, QW, 1:57.

[45] Smelser, *Congress Founds* , 182-184, 147. The *Hamburgh Packet* (renamed *Delaware*) was the first American ship to capture the French privateer *Croyable* , on 15 July 1798. The French captain claimed he knew of no war between the U.S. and France. Captain Stephen Decatur replied on behalf of the American people, "The French have been making war with us for a long time. Now we find it necessary to take care of ourselves." Deconde, *Quasi-War* , 127.

[46] Leiner, "Subscription Warships," 148.

[47] James Duncan Phillips, *Salem in the Eighteenth Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1937), 258.

[48] Frederick Leiner was the first to discover the discrepancy, but even he did not recognize the scope of the false assumption. See Leiner, "Subscription Warships," 145.

[49] Howard I. Chapelle, *History of the American Sailing Navy* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1949), 157.

[50] William M. Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 36.

[51] L. Marx Renzulli committed the same error as Fowler when he described the fervor in Maryland immediately following the XYZ affair disclosures in April 1798. He first cites the legislature and the governor and then recounts the initial subscription meeting of Maryland merchants, as if this were a response to the government leaders' demands. Yet his footnote reveals the actual chronology. See L. Marx Renzulli, *Maryland: The Federalist Years* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972), 193-4.

[52] *Newburyport Herald and Country Gazette* , 19 June 1798.

[53] Leiner, "Subscription Warships," 145.

[54] *New York Commercial Advertiser* , 1-30 June 1798.

[55] *New York Spectator* , 2 June 1798.

[56] *Philadelphia Porcupine's Gazette* , 9 June 1798.

[57] *Ibid.*, 14 June 1798. Overall, Philadelphia raised about $100,000 to fund its frigate.

[58] Secretary of the Navy to Murray et al. (Baltimore), 27 June 1798, QW, 1:146.

[59] Smelser, *Congress Founds* , 170; Leiner, "Subscription Warships," 148. Record of the congressional debate is sparse, and includes no texts of the speeches.

[60] Secretary of the Navy to John Chaplin Jr. and others, Beaufort, South Carolina, 28 July 1798, QW, 1: 246. The original letter from Chaplin et al. to McHenry has not been found.

[61] Secretary of the Navy to William Crafts, Charleston South Carolina, 23 August 1798, QW, 1:331.

[62] Secretary of the Navy to President Adams [Enclosure], 1 September 1798, QW, 1:368.

[63] This historical reality confounds traditional scholarly tendencies to conflate "merchants," "Federalists," and "pro-Navy" in their discussions of public opinion and action, often to the point that these almost become synonyms.

[64] Leiner, "Subscription Warships," 143.

[65] Philip Chadwick Foster Smith, *The Frigate Essex Papers* (Salem, Mass.: Peabody Museum of Salem, 1974), 31-34.

[66] Bentley, *Diary* , 2: 267.

[67] *Ibid.*, 2:276.

[68] *Newburyport Herald and Country Gazette* , 6 July 1798.

[69] Bentley, *Diary* , 2: 276.

[70] *Salem Gazette* , 17 July 1798.

[71] *Ibid.*, 24 July 1798.

[72] Bentley, *Diary* , 2:277.

[73] *Ibid.*, 2:286.

[74] *Salem Gazette* , 26 October 1798. Salem finally launched the *Essex* in December 1799, over a year later than its neighbor. Ironically, Salem's contribution to the U.S. Navy, though one of the last, was also the most useful of the loaned frigates. The ship

fought extensively in the War of 1812, while the *Merrimack* foundered on Cape Cod five years after its launch.

[75] Smith, *Frigate Essex Papers* , 7.

[76] The American State Papers record one capture in 1796 and four in 1797 for Salem; two in each year 1796 and 1797 for Newburyport. "Essex County Vessels Captured by Foreign Powers, 1793-1813," *Historical Collections of the Essex Institute* 58 (October 1922): 280-287; 59 (January 1923): 25-32.

[77] The Crowninshield firm wrote McHenry, Stoddert, and finally President Adams in the summer of 1798 to sell the *America* and the *Belisarius* to the government at a 6 percent profit. Their offer conflated the similar laws of extant ship purchase (Act of April 27) and subscription commissions (Act of June 25), and was therefore illegal. None of the three official responses pacified the Crowninshields, who took the refusals as personal affronts. Smith, *Frigate Essex Papers* , 19, 24-26; Phillips, *Salem and the Indies* , 134.

[78] Phillips, *Indies* , 252.

[79] Bentley, *Diary* , 2:346-7, 299.

[80] Fowler, *Jack Tars* , 262.

[81] Palmer, *Stoddert's War* , 75.

[82] From Robert Goodloe Harper, 10 February 1799, *Circular Letters* .

[83] Palmer, *Stoddert's War* , 73.

[84] Bentley, *Diary* , 2: 298. A survey of pages 251-325 yields fifty-five mentions in 1798 and twenty-seven in 1799.

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