

Commodore John Barry

Father of the American Navy

Few Americans are well-acquainted with the gallantry and heroic exploits of Philadelphia's Irish-born naval commander, Commodore John Barry. Obscured by his contemporary, naval commander John Paul Jones, Barry remains to this day an unsung hero of the young American Republic. As most naval historians note, Barry can be classed on a par with Jones for nautical skill and daring, but he exceeds him in the length of service (17 years) to his adopted country and his fidelity to the nurturing of a permanent American Navy. Indeed, Barry deserves the proud epithet, "Father of the American Navy," a title bestowed on him not by current generations of admirers, but by his contemporaries, who were in the best position to judge.



In the space of 58 years, this son of a poor Irish farmer rose from humble cabin boy to senior commander of the entire United States fleet. Intrepid in battle, he was humane to his men as well as adversaries and prisoners. Barry's war contributions are unparalleled: he was the first to capture a British war vessel on the high seas; he captured two British ships after being severely wounded in a ferocious sea battle; he quelled three mutinies; he fought on land at the Battles of Trenton and Princeton; he captured over 20 ships including an armed British schooner in the lower Delaware; he authored a Signal Book which established a set of signals used for effective communication between ships; and he fought the last naval battle of the American Revolution aboard the frigate Alliance in 1783.

Of this type of modest heroes was the subject of this sketch, John Barry, born in Ballysampson, County Wexford, Ireland, in 1745. His family name, de Barry, suggestive of Normandy origin, is found in Wexford as early as the fourteenth century. Brought up with the salt air in his nostrils, it is easy to understand how, as a lad of fifteen years, he found a place with his uncle, master of a vessel trading out of Wexford. His sea journeys brought him often to Philadelphia, and he is found in his early years in the employ of the merchant princes of their time, the Willings, the Merediths and Cadwalladers, sailing on their vessels in varied capacities. The first record of him as a sea captain occurs on October 2, 1766, when he became at twenty-one master of a

vessel that traded with the Barbadoes Islands. His life on the ocean wave was probably uneventful for the next eight years or more, but when he arrived in Philadelphia, on October 13, 1775, in command of the "Black Prince," much history had been made since his departure the year before. "The embattled farmers of Lexington" had "fired the shot heard 'round the world." Ticonderoga had fallen, Bunker Hill had been fought, and Washington had assumed the command of the Continental Army under the shade of the stately elm in Cambridge.

When the war was ended, Barry joined the merchant service, and he does not again become a national figure until on March 19, 1794, we find him offering his services to President Washington to command the squadron against the Algerines, those Corsairs of the African coast having caused much havoc to the commerce of the United States. From this grew the present American Navy. The records of the War Department of June 5, 1794, show that Washington appointed Barry as the ranking commander of the new naval armament ordered to be built by Congress.

Two noted American seamen began their careers with Barry on the "United States:" Stephen Decatur, who was to become famous in the War with Tripoli and with Great Britain, and Charles Stewart, the grandfather of Charles Stewart Parnell. Service under Barry was eagerly sought, as, while a strict disciplinarian, he was eminently just and considerate. It was Barry who, in a letter of January 8, 1798, suggested the creation of a navy department, and also that navy yards should be located for ships and supplies. The organization of the navy into a separate department followed three months later. In the difficulties that arose with France, and in command of the American fleet in the West Indies, he served with distinction. When peace came in 1801, Barry was retained in the service. The remainder of his life-story may be briefly summed up. His health, broken by his many arduous campaigns, began to fail, and at his country seat, at Strawberry Hill, near Philadelphia, he gently drifted into the Valley of the Shadow. He died on September 13, 1803. In its notice of his death, the Pennsylvania Gazette thus feelingly refers to his life and services: "His naval achievements would of themselves have reflected much honor on his memory, but those could not have endeared it to his fellow-citizens had he wanted those gentle and amiable virtues which embellish the gentlemen and ennoble the soldier." He had been twice married, but, like Washington, was childless. It has been beautifully said of Washington that under the Divine plan he was to be childless that a nation might call him Father. May not in a lesser degree the same sentiment hold good for the Father of the American Navy?