

PENOBSCOT, 1779
THE EYE OF A HURRICANE

Two hundred years ago the United States suffered a devastating naval defeat, the worst of the American Revolution, at the mouth of the Penobscot River on the Maine coast. An American flotilla of forty-four vessels, sent to dislodge a small British expeditionary force supported by three sloops-of-war, met a shattering defeat in Penobscot Bay and on the Penobscot River. This debacle, in which the Commonwealth of Massachusetts wasted a fleet and a fortune, proved of utmost consequence in determining the further course of a forgotten Yankee struggle to bring the British-held province of Nova Scotia into the American union. The present writer wishes to focus upon the importance of the Penobscot campaign in relationship to that forgotten contest, waged in the wilderness of New Brunswick and northern New England. Unless Penobscot is examined within the context of this struggle, the military and psychological consequences of the defeat cannot be fully understood.

Additionally, this writer wishes to put forward the argument that the British triumph was, in a very real sense, a failure, for the victors were thwarted in obtaining a major objective. His Majesty's Government had long realized the need for acquiring a strategic post in Eastern Massachusetts, also known as Maine, which would serve as a base of operations against Yankee privateers roaming Fundy Bay and the Gulf of Maine. Frustrated royal ministers and their representatives in Halifax hoped that the British counterstroke at Penobscot would result in crown control of icy waters off Maine and Nova Scotia. In this aim, however, they remained disappointed. While the

British success off the Maine coast in mid-1779 did signal a decrease in American privateering in Yankee waters, the decline represented only a brief respite for the victims of this privateering, a reprieve which, this writer hopes to show, they would have received irrespective of the Royal Navy's accomplishment at Penobscot Bay.

The battle for Penobscot began on June 17, 1779, when a British military party of six vessels and 750 Highland regulars, commanded by Brigadier-General Francis Maclean, arrived from Halifax. In addition to securing an outpost in New England to operate against privateers, Whitehall officials wanted that area of Maine east of the Kennebec River to serve as a bulwark of protection for Quebec and Nova Scotia, two colonies which had previously repelled American-sponsored intrusions but whose restive inhabitants the crown continued to mistrust. While English naval officers foresaw an important supply station in the region for their men-of-war, Tory refugees hoped to establish there a Loyalist colony called New Ireland.¹ The attention of British officials and Loyalists alike focused upon the Bagaduce² peninsula, projecting from the northern shores of Penobscot Bay and commanding all sea approaches to that estuary.

While Maclean's men dug in at Bagaduce and began constructing a stronghold named Fort George in honor of the king, news of their arrival spread throughout New England.³ Without consulting Continental authorities, the Massachusetts government took immediate steps to fit out an expeditionary force to expel the redcoats before they became securely entrenched.⁴ Leadership of the expedition went to Brigadier-General Solomon Lovell, commander of the Suffolk, Massachusetts militia, with Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Revere taking charge of the artillery train.⁵ Commodore Dudley Saltonstall, a well-known Continental navy officer from New London, Connecticut, received orders to command the fleet.⁶

Raising a large naval force to dislodge the Britons proved a formidable task for the men of Massachusetts. Many mariners were privateersmen who manned their vessels in pursuit of spoils rather than wages; these undisciplined seamen showed considerable reluctance to join an invasion fleet comprised almost entirely of Massachusetts state vessels, and to take part in a campaign on such short notice. To encourage them to partake in the expedition, the Massachusetts government proclaimed that it would not share directly or indirectly in any prizes taken by the Yankee armada.⁷ When some Bay State sailors still hesitated to participate, however, officials quickly ordered the impressment of both seamen and armed vessels.⁸

On July 19, less than four weeks after Massachusetts authorities had first learned of Maclean's presence, a task force of more than forty transports and armed vessels sailed from Boston Harbor. Three days later it anchored at Townsend (now Boothbay Harbor, Maine), sixty miles below the Penobscot River.⁹ British commanders, receiving intelligence of Yankee movements almost daily,¹⁰ redoubled their efforts at Bagaduce. General Maclean ordered his troops, now assisted by seamen and Loyalists, to hasten their construction of Fort George.¹¹ Captain Henry Mowat, the English naval officer who had burned Falmouth (Portland, Maine) in the autumn of 1775 and who had more recently escorted the redcoats to Penobscot, stationed his three sloops-of-war — *Albany*, *Nautilus* and *North* — across the narrow mouth of Bagaduce Harbor to bar the entrance of the Yankee fleet.¹² He further ordered three transports to run afoul of any American vessels attempting to penetrate the harbor.¹³

During these continuing British preparations, the Americans arrived off Penobscot. Late on the afternoon of July 25 nine American vessels in three divisions engaged

the king's sloops while General Lovell unsuccessfully attempted to establish a beachhead. After a brief exchange of cannonade which damaged only the rigging of the British vessels, the Yankees ceased firing and dropped anchor down the bay.¹⁴

On the following day, while the opposing fleets again exchanged fire, two hundred New Englanders landed on Nautilus Island, situated in the middle of Penobscot Bay, ousted twenty Royal marines and seized some British artillery pieces.¹⁵ Although action stagnated on July 27, the next day American marines and militiamen, protected by a shroud of fog and cannonade, landed on the peninsula. But they soon found themselves unable to storm the fort. Confined to a narrow neck of land, the Yankees watched helplessly as British and American warships battled furiously nearby. During this engagement the Continental frigate *Warren*, Commodore Saltonstall's flagship, received considerable damage. Her mainmast, forestay and gammoning took the brunt of the enemy's fire.¹⁶

During the next two weeks the American fleet remained bewilderingly inactive: it dared only maneuver about the mouth of the Penobscot River and sporadically engage the British. Although Saltonstall possessed overwhelming naval superiority, he refused to contest Mowat's position at the entrance to the harbor. Admittedly, he mistrusted many of his own captains who showed little inclination to partake in a full-scale assault.¹⁷ If the cautious commodore had engaged the British naval force — as General Lovell had constantly entreated — the Yankees could have seized Fort George. But so long as the British warships remained in the harbor, they could pin down the American ground forces by a concentrated fire.¹⁸

The more Saltonstall dallied, the more an anxious General Lovell realized that the tide of battle moved

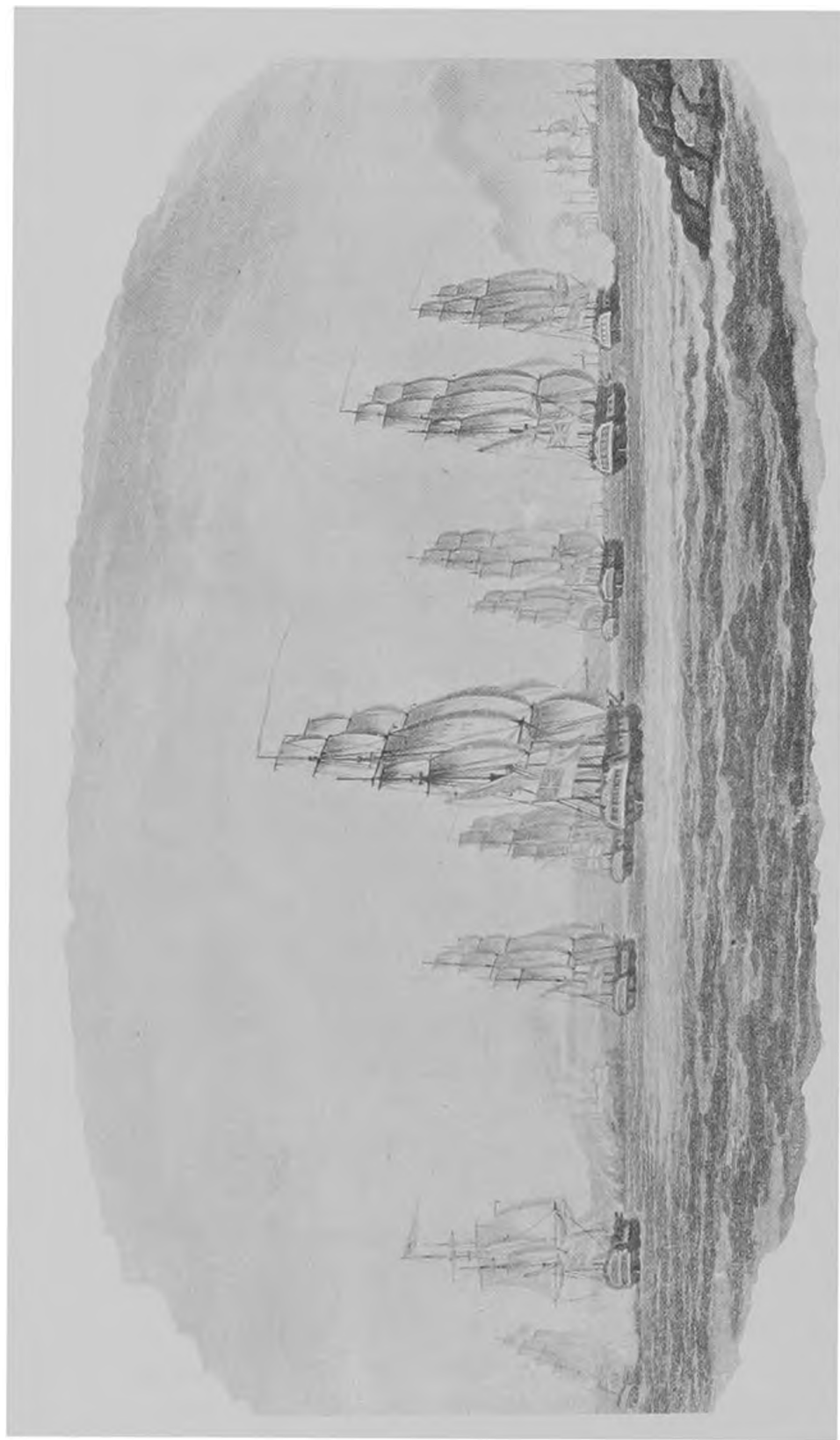
against him. The inhabitants of Penobscot, many of them Loyalists, responded coolly to his proclamation of July 29, which urged that they come over to the American side and promised amnesty for those who did so.¹⁹ Both officers and enlisted men expressed growing concern over the course of the campaign.²⁰ Each day brought reports that British naval reinforcements from New York would soon appear on the horizon.²¹

By August 11 Lovell had determined on the necessity for immediate action if the New Englanders still hoped to take the fort. He pleaded with Saltonstall:

I mean not to determine on your mode of attack; but it appears to me so very practicable, that any farther delay must be infamous; and I have it this moment by a deserter from one of their ships, that the moment you enter the harbour they will destroy them . . .²²

Yet Saltonstall had dawdled too long. Before he could commit his fleet to an all-out assault, Sir George Collier appeared with naval reinforcements from Sandy Hook. On August 14 his British squadron bore down on the Americans who, in their fright, had already evacuated their positions on Bagaduce and Nautilus Island. Collier's warships easily overwhelmed two Yankee vessels attempting to escape down the bay; the remaining American craft fled up the Penobscot River pursued by the British fleet. Collier captured some of the Yankee transports. Those he did not want to the bottom anyway, scuttled and burned by their own crews, who then fled inland to safety.²³ "Since their Defeat," Sir George Collier noted with satisfaction immediately after his victory, "the Americans have quarrelled amongst themselves, and fought, by which between 50 and 60 Men are slain."²⁴

Rebels squabbling over responsibility for the rout concentrated their ire on their former leaders, most of whom lacked familiarity with the battlefield. Brigadier-General Solomon Lovell, for instance, was an



'S' George Collier, victory in: Portland Bay 1779.

inexperienced leader of militiamen who enjoyed important political connections in Massachusetts and an unimpressive battle record skirmishing with redcoats in Rhode Island. His commander of the artillery, Paul Revere, is best remembered for his midnight ride in Lexington in April 1775 to alert his countrymen of British troop movements. Charges made against the American hero after the Penobscot fiasco represent him as being more concerned with his personal safety and possessions than with the safety of his compatriots. Most serious of these accusations was the deposition of General Peleg Wadsworth to the Committee of Inquiry established by the state of Massachusetts to investigate Penobscot. Wadsworth testified that Revere disobeyed a direct order by commandeering a barge to transport himself and his personal luggage rather than using the vessel to rescue seamen from a disabled American schooner. "I asked him," fumed Wadsworth, "whether he came there [to Penobscot] to take Care of his private Baggage or to serve the state."²⁵

Paul Revere managed to clear himself against the charges made against him. Less fortunate was Dudley Saltonstall, the indecisive American naval commander, whom the Committee of Inquiry found lacking in "proper spirit and energy," and rightfully placed most of the responsibility for the calamity on him. Saltonstall's own testimony served to underscore the Connecticut man's timidity and impotence in battle. Asked at his trial why he had not bombarded a British warship at Penobscot, Saltonstall replied limply: "If I had fired, then the enemy would have fired back." Saltonstall himself was fired, the cashiered commodore being held by the Committee of Inquiry as "ever after" incompetent to hold a government office or state post.²⁶

Pitted against these unheroic chiefs were seasoned British fighters. Brigadier-General Francis Maclean was a zealous and resourceful commander whose tenacity in war had previously been demonstrated in campaigns in Europe, British North America and the Caribbean: his stubbornness in opposing the French in the Netherlands early in his long career had wrung praise from his chief adversary, who granted him immediate parole upon his capture.²⁷ Commodore Sir George Collier and Henry Mowat, brilliant seamen for the crown, had long served the Royal Navy and possessed a familiarity with New England waters which surpassed that of most Yankee mariners.²⁸

If lapse in leadership contributed in large measure to the plight of the provincials at Bagaduce, the quality and size of the opposing forces further indicated weaknesses in the American position. While the New Englanders enjoyed, on paper, overwhelming naval superiority, their fleet was manned by sullen privateersmen who had joined the task force under threat of impressment. Moreover, naval strength alone did not decide the outcome at Penobscot. A large American ground force acting with greater vigor at the beginning of the campaign might have taken Fort George. But General Lovell could muster at the height of the battle only 950 soldiers, many of whom were inexperienced militiamen unable to coordinate military attacks with the rowdy seamen of the Yankee fleet. His British counterpart could rely upon 750 Scottish regulars, tough soldiers of an army respected by the Americans for its discipline.²⁹ Additionally, the British defenders of Fort George could draw auxiliaries from three hundred seamen in Henry Mowat's squadron. So desperate was Lovell for American reinforcements that he demanded during battle that Machias, a small Yankee outpost near the Nova Scotia border, send its militia to Bagaduce. But Colonel John Allan, commanding the Machias militiamen,

simply refused to comply with the order because British men-of-war lurking in nearby waters threatened his base.³⁰

Lack of an adequate line of communications worked against the Continentals throughout the expedition. Since 250 miles of roadless wilderness separated Boston from Bagaduce, New England authorities failed to grasp immediately the seriousness of Lovell's situation. Only on August 8, 1779, after several transports had brought urgent requests for troop reinforcements at Penobscot, did Yankee officials determine to reinforce Lovell with the Massachusetts regiment of Colonel Henry Jackson.³¹ Poor roads, however, delayed these auxiliaries in their march from western Massachusetts to the capital.³² Consequently, they did not sail from Boston until August 14, the same day that Sir George Collier scattered the American fleet at Bagaduce.³³

Inaccurate reports prevented the Massachusetts government from realizing immediately the extent of the rebel defeat. Hoping that Lovell might be able to regroup his battered forces and make a stand, officials continued to dispatch provision vessels to Maine. But the threat of British warships and Loyalist privateers cruising in the Gulf of Maine remained a serious obstacle. Detailed instructions from the Massachusetts War Office for avoiding enemy craft further slowed down attempts by the provision vessels to locate Lovell's retreating troops.³⁴

Insurmountable logistics problems combined with a lack of leadership and a hastily-assembled expeditionary force had resulted in the Yankee debacle at Penobscot, the greatest American naval defeat of the Revolution. In one stroke Great Britain had secured a sanctuary for displaced Loyalists and a base to supply her men-of-war. Additionally, the rebel rout at Bagaduce proved to be of great consequence in another arena of Revolutionary

warfare: it represented a watershed in the struggle between downeast republicans and agents of the crown for control of the tottering colony of Nova Scotia.

That struggle had begun in the spring of 1775 when patriots in Machias, the Maine outpost of radicalism, seized the British armed schooner *Margaretta* in the first naval contest of the Revolutionary War. The Machias militants argued vigorously for an armed force to invade the neighboring province of Nova Scotia, whose New England settlers, they claimed, were eager to cast their lot with the Americans. "I ask for a small army to subdue Nova Scotia," the chairman of the Committee of Safety for Machias exhorted, "or at least that some person or persons be given leave to raise men to go against that province at their own risk."³⁵

The Machias notion that a Nova Scotia verging upon armed rebellion lay within the grasp of an American expeditionary force received strong support from both friends and foes of the Yankee cause. His Majesty's harried governor at Halifax, Francis Legge, complained bitterly at the beginning of the war that his New England subjects, who dominated the population, were plotting to turn his colony into another Massachusetts. Concluded the unhappy Legge: "we lay open to the Country on every side, the Batteries are dismantled, the Carriages of the Guns all decayed & they [are] lying on the Ground."³⁶ Firebrands in western Nova Scotia (now New Brunswick) gave nourishment to the governor's ravenous apprehensions when they, like their neighbors in Machias, formed Committees of Safety and appealed for American military assistance.³⁷ This downeast enthusiasm for the republican banner seemed formidable even late in the war. The entry of France into the conflict brought rumors of Count d'Estaing's squadron assisting the rebels in "New Scotland," whose settlers, *Lloyd's Evening Post* declared,

remained “disposed to unite themselves with the United States of America.”³⁸ Reverend Jacob Bailey, the Loyalist missionary who fled from Maine to Nova Scotia on the eve of the battle for Penobscot, found strong pockets of republicanism in the colony in 1780. Defeat of American forces and their allies upon various battlefields failed to shake these diehard dissidents, and indeed had often worked the reverse by entrenching their radicalism even more strongly. On one occasion, after a French naval defeat, the scandalized Bailey reported that

multitudes in these regions of Whiggism are ready to expire with vexation and chagrin . . . I heard a lady last evening declare before Capt. Campbell, that she wished and prayed for the arrival of the french to conquer this province — oh, the impudence, the ingratitude, and malice, the nonsense of republican radicals.³⁹

Nova Scotia’s “impudence” towards King George seemed most pervasive during the first years of the war, when the colony lacked a strong garrison to repel invasion. Nova Scotia insurgents, assembling at Machias, joined with the militants there to plot their mischief. These comrades-in-arms determined to invade the province by land and wean it away from Britain, in spite of a decided lack of support evinced by General George Washington, the Continental Congress and the Massachusetts General Court, all of whom faced burdensome problems elsewhere. Indeed, the radicals made several incursions into Nova Scotia in 1776 and 1777, penetrating as far as the River Saint John in western Nova Scotia and the Isthmus of Chignecto. However, a disastrous “siege” of British-held Fort Cumberland on the isthmus in November 1776 concluded with embarrassed revolutionaries fleeing westward towards the Saint John River and Machias.⁴⁰

While the bungled attack on Fort Cumberland proved to be a failure from which the revolutionary movement in Nova Scotia never fully recovered, neither the radicals nor

the British immediately recognized it as such. In January 1777 the Royal Council of Halifax received “very authentic Intelligence” that the men of Machias again planned an invasion, this time “under the Protection of the Pirate Frigate *Alfred* & other arm’d vessels.” The Council resolved to send warships of the Royal Navy to Machias to counter the threat.⁴¹ Accordingly, Sir George Collier’s squadron assailed Machias in mid-August, destroying magazines there as well as large quantities of flour, rice, tanned leather hides and shoes.⁴² Following the bombardment, Collier sailed along the rugged coast of Maine and New Hampshire, entering enemy harbors, capturing rebel vessels and burning Yankee forts.⁴³ Two years before his masterstroke at Penobscot the Briton had already impressed upon downeasters his zeal in defending the interests of the crown.

If calamitous defeats in 1776 and 1777 had precluded the possibility of revolution in New England’s northern neighbor, the determined republicans of Maine and Massachusetts refused to acknowledge that Nova Scotia had slipped beyond their military grasp. While the best chance for a Yankee success against the colony had come early in the war, the general military situation in North America, at least until Burgoyne’s defeat, favored the British. After the stunning rebel victory at Saratoga in late 1777, with the resultant Franco-American Alliance, the initiative rested with the Continentals. British war leaders, recognizing that New England could not be split from its fellow colonies to the south, again feared for the safety of Nova Scotia. Keen American strategists realized the futility of further downeast schemes, but New England dissenters and even Congress had retained sufficient bluster to issue challenges to the Halifax government. In early 1777, shortly after the Fort Cumberland fiasco, the Continental Congress empowered Massachusetts to raise “a body of men not exceeding three thousand” to embark against

Nova Scotia “in the course of the winter or early in the spring.”⁴⁴ This continuing Revolutionary bravado rekindled British anxieties. In London, *Lloyd’s Evening Post*, for example, reported at the beginning of 1778 that General Benedict Arnold and 14,000 provincials had marched for the peninsular outpost.⁴⁵ The Boston press boasted in the spring of 1779 that Halifax remained “under great Apprehensions of an invasion from the Americans.”⁴⁶ Psychologically, it appears that many republicans showed a surprising stubbornness in refusing to write off Nova Scotia. Indeed, the American bombast directed against His Majesty’s representatives in Halifax proved a major factor in the British formulation of an invasion at Penobscot.

The British victory of Maclean and Collier at Bagaduce brought to a close not only the remaining possibility of a military attack on Nova Scotia but also all hopes, however illusory, of a push in that direction. The commander of the Machias militia, Colonel John Allan, himself a republican refugee from Nova Scotia, recognized immediately the significance of the battle. “The Unhappy and Unparalleled Defeat at Penobscot,” he observed, “has put this Department in a most Critical & Dangerous Situation, such as Requires the most vigilant attention for its Preservation.”⁴⁷ Allan and his cohorts had foreseen Machias as an advance base for northern invasion. With Britain established at Fort George, however, the patriots found themselves effectively isolated from the Boston supply line and constricted by an English vise with jaws to their south and east. Whenever Allan attempted to rekindle downeast republicanism, even in Maine shore towns, the Royal Navy now dispatched armed vessels to the threatened seaports.⁴⁸ Bagaduce was the last major battle of the Revolution fought in New England: while the enfeebled Maine dissidents continued resistance for the

remainder of the war, their mission now was not a Nova Scotia conquest but retention of a residue of Eastern Massachusetts.

The Penobscot catastrophe served to underscore a shift in Yankee impressions of Nova Scotia, previously held by downeasters as a friend open to enticement. While his Majesty's Government at Halifax may have breathed more freely after Penobscot; the Yankees of Maine and Massachusetts did not. They had experienced stinging defeat upon the battlefield, had seen the illusion of an "independent" Nova Scotia shattered, and now many of them and their families suffered indignities at the hands of the redcoats. Penobscot refugees left all their worldly belongings to trek through desolate woods to the Kennebec River in central Maine, begging for food as they went.⁴⁹ Those republicans who remained in British-controlled Bagaduce felt even greater distresses. They found themselves conscripted to construct military posts for the redcoats, freely insulted by Loyalists, and almost totally lacking in supplies.⁵⁰ Colonel Allan summed up the new Yankee attitude when he wrote of his "feeling of mortification for the Disgrace Brought on the Arms of Our Country" by Penobscot.⁵¹

Beginning in the spring of 1780, the New Englanders, reflecting a new mood of bitterness and frustration, lashed out at their northern neighbor. Sullen patriots began to wonder if wartime visitors from Nova Scotia were not in reality British spies. The Massachusetts General Court passed a resolution forbidding the issuance of safe-conduct passes to Nova Scotia settlers who had previously carried on an illegal trade with the New England colony.⁵² Yankee mariners who had once welcomed Nova Scotia vessels entering Boston Harbor now seized them.⁵³ The New England press kept alive a spirit of retribution by printing tales of British mistreatment of American prisoners and sympathizers in

Nova Scotia.⁵⁴ The republicans, seeking revenge, cast angry eyes upon the agents of the crown in the northern province and sought an effective weapon from their depleted arsenal.

Nova Scotia seemed controlled firmly by the British. Lord George Germain undoubtedly expressed the view of most English administrators when he informed the Halifax government that royal control of Bagaduce had resulted in “effectual Protection to Nova Scotia against the New England Rebels.”⁵⁵ Secretary Germain proved a poor prophet. In the spring of 1780 New England privateers once again appeared in full force off the Nova Scotia coast. In addition to increasing their attacks upon vessels on the open seas, they turned more and more to preying upon small vessels supposedly safe in the shelter of rivers, inlets or town harbors. As the war drew to a close, the intruders dared on occasion to cut out vessels supposedly secure in well-fortified Halifax Harbor.⁵⁶ Additionally, the resilient Yankees raided such important coastal communities as Annapolis and Lunenburg, plundering the settlers and taking prisoners for ransom.⁵⁷ The Nova Scotia Assembly summarized the disastrous effect that the brigands inflicted upon the provincial economy when they petitioned the king for a reduction in taxes:

They Humbly beg Leave to represent to your Majesty [they declared in 1782], that they have in a variety of Instances Shar'd the Calamities of the present unhappy war, that their Coasting Trade has been entirely Stopp'd and their Foreign Commerce (almost in its Infancy) destroy'd by the Enemy, their Coasts and internal Settlements and Bays and Rivers plunder'd and ravaged by a Merciless Banditti.⁵⁸

A major goal of Great Britain in embarking upon an invasion of Penobscot had been the curtailment of Yankee privateers, who had proven especially active in Nova Scotia waters. In this aim they failed: while a decrease in

privateering did occur along the colony's coast during and after the Bagaduce campaign, the decline provided only the briefest of breathing spells.

Several factors contributed to the pause in maritime harassment. In the first place, all available armed vessels and mariners in Massachusetts had been impressed into the Penobscot fleet. The Bay State, which hitherto had sent the most Yankee raiders in northern waters, had laid down a forty-day embargo on the employment of seamen on vessels other than those destined for Bagaduce.⁵⁹ Armed vessels, which had only recently preyed upon Nova Scotia shipping, had received strict orders to escort American transports to Penobscot.⁶⁰ Secondly, at Penobscot itself, Massachusetts lost a staggering number of commissioned armed vessels, virtually the entire state navy, including fifteen of its finest privateers.⁶¹ After this setback many New Englanders hesitated to risk further possible losses by fitting out new craft immediately. Thirdly, those mariners who did challenge fate by continuing their privateering activities found the season working against them. The Penobscot campaign reached its disastrous conclusion in mid-August of 1779. When September arrived, it brought with it turbulent weather and violent seas. Privateering stagnated during the autumn and winter months as shrewd Yankee skippers refused to put out to sea.

The present writer wishes to offer the interpretation that the suspension of downeast privateering in the fall of 1779 was, in the main, a seasonal phenomenon which most likely would have come about regardless of Collier's impressive victory in Penobscot Bay. Undoubtedly, the mariners of Massachusetts and Maine found themselves pinched for funds, vessels and resolution following the debacle. But patriotism mixed with profit can surmount the most impressive stumbling block. Privateers were usually private armed craft rather than state or

Continental vessels whose crews put out to sea for prize money, not wages. The seamen of New England and the merchants who still gave them financial backing had long since discovered the easy riches that the exposed colony of Nova Scotia offered to their small privateers, known as coasters, which eluded the bulky British men-of-war by dodging in and out of coves, creeks and rivers.⁶² Moreover, the appearance of a French fleet in New England waters in 1780, a result of the Franco-American Alliance, forced squadrons of the Royal Navy to leave the Halifax station in pursuit of His Most Christian Majesty's warships.⁶³ Yankee seamen soon realized that many Nova Scotia coastal communities again lacked an effective shield against attack.

That the flood of New England privateering did recede for the half-year following Bagaduce is not disputed. "The spirit of privateering," a Loyalist newspaper in New York observed in January 1780, "is much on the decline to the eastward . . . The adventurers in that way upon the whole have nothing to boast of."⁶⁴ While this Tory perception was accurate for the winter months of 1779-80, it should be noted that the decrease in maritime assaults "to the eastward" occurred not only after Penobscot but for most of the long winters of the Revolution, as is evidenced by the greatly-reduced Notices of Libel appearing in the Yankee press. These newspaper advertisements, required by maritime law for the lucky privateersman wishing to take his prize into admiralty court for probable condemnation, provided information regarding the prize, master and lading; the captor; and the place and date of trial. Weekly papers such as the *Boston Gazette* printed not only the libel announcements for the Boston maritime court but also the Notices of Libel for the Southern District of Massachusetts, whose court convened in Plymouth, and the Eastern District, whose court met in Maine. Although the Boston court proved by far the most active of the

Yankee prize courts, the *Boston Gazette* at times even reported libels for neighboring Rhode Island and New Hampshire. In mid-summer, at the height of the privateering season, these notices included more than fifty prizes reported in a single issue of the *Gazette*. With the stormy drift toward winter, however, the advertisements became a trickle.⁶⁵

If privateersmen from Massachusetts and Maine lacked prizes to libel during the winter months, they also had little need for commissions, issued by the Massachusetts government and required before a cruise. Boston officials issued commissions to both privateers and letters of marque, the latter being armed vessels authorized not only to take prizes but also to carry freight. While Bay State authorities granted over two hundred commissions between January 1, 1779 and October 31, 1779, they gave only about sixty licenses between November 1, 1779 and April 1, 1780. The drop in commissions was not only an outcome of Penobscot but a timely autumn occurrence. From January 1, 1778 to October 31, 1778, the New Englanders issued approximately 225 commissions; during the next six months, however, they gave out only seventy permits. In spite of the British success at Bagaduce, the Yankees of Massachusetts consigned about 240 certificates between January 1, 1780 and October 31, 1780; in the next half-year, however, they issued only seventy commissions.⁶⁶ Clearly, New England raiders were moved to stay in port as much by rough seas and savage gales as by naval battles won and lost.

The British themselves recognized the seasonal decline by releasing captured American mariners as winter approached, thereby reducing expenses and inconvenience for the crown. The lieutenant-governor of Nova Scotia, Sir Andrew Snape Hammond, for instance, followed this course in the autumn of 1781. "As the Season

for privateering is now over," he confidently informed his superiors on November 25, "I am sending away the prisoners before the winter sets in."⁶⁷ Whitehall officials saw wisdom in Hammond's policy. From London Secretary of State Welbore Ellis felt moved to write the Halifax official that he thought the contrivance of summer imprisonment in the Halifax gaol with the promise of autumn emancipation a "prudent" measure.⁶⁸

The interruption in downeast maritime incursions which came on the heels of the British victory at Penobscot lasted no longer than the seasonal respites that Sir Andrew Snape Hammond and other British officials had come to depend upon. Impressive as the triumph was, it does not appear to have gained any meaningful reprieve for a Nova Scotia wracked by Yankee freebooters. The presence of men-of-war and Loyalist privateers fitting out of New Ireland also did not provide much comfort for the province, which endured the harshest raids of the war after Penobscot.

Following the battle, the redcoats at Bagaduce pursued a strategy as circumspect as that of Lieutenant-Governor Hammond. Alarmed at their growing losses elsewhere in North America, they did not build up their forces at Penobscot, which they held until the end of the Revolution in order to tighten their vise against Machias. Nevertheless, the counterstroke of Maclean and Collier was a brilliant victory, destroying a Revolutionary fleet, an American ground force and a number of reputations. For the Yankees of Massachusetts, the chief result of the campaign was failure to dislodge the Britons from a military base within striking distance of Boston. To the men of Maine, Penobscot was a watershed which concluded, once and for all, downeast illusions about the liberation or conquest of a northern neighbor. For Nova Scotia settlers, however, the decline in privateering in their

waters which followed the Penobscot expedition proved to be the calm which preceded the storm as well as the calm which followed the storm.

– NOTES –

¹ Not only the loyalists but also William Knox, British undersecretary of state for the American department, hoped to establish the new British province of New Ireland. See John Allan to Jeremiah Powell, president of the Massachusetts Council, July 16, 1779, *Maine Historical Society, Documentary History of the State of Maine*, 24 vols. (Portland, Maine: Published by the Society, 1869-1916), 16: 364 (hereafter cited as *Documentary History*). The political and military reasons for the British thrust at Penobscot, including royal concern for the contested waters between Nova Scotia and New England, have been carefully examined in the first two chapters of a recent study. See Peter J. Elliott, "The Penobscot Expedition of 1779: A Study in Naval Frustration" (M.A. thesis, University of Maine at Orono, 1974). For a comprehensive investigation of the peculiar history of New Ireland, the most authoritative work on the subject, see Robert W. Sloan, "New Ireland: Loyalists in Eastern Maine During the American Revolution" (Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State University, 1971). The author concludes that the English failed to utilize support in the Penobscot area and that British-sponsored Tory attacks there merely strengthened republican determination to survive.

² This peninsula was also called Biguyduce, Majabagaduce, Majorbigwaduce and Majabiguaduce. It is the present site of Castine, Maine, the home of the Maine Maritime Academy.

³ Shortly after the British incursion, six men in a whaleboat ventured from Falmouth (Portland, Maine) to Penobscot, learned of the English presence and sent a report flying to Boston. See Report of the Committee of Correspondence at Falmouth to the Council and House of Representatives, June 25, 1779, *Documentary History*, 16: 306-7.

⁴ See, for example, Order [of the Massachusetts Council Chamber] to the Board of War to take up Transports, July 1, 1779, *Massachusetts Records Pertaining to the Penobscot Expedition, July-December 1779*, 3, Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library,

1776-1946, Record Group 45, National Archives Building (hereafter cited as Penobscot, RG 45, NA). Hereafter all records in the National Archives Building are indicated by the symbol NA.

⁵ See Order in Council to General Lovell, July 1, 1779, *ibid.*, 2-3, RG 45, NA; Order to Lieut.-Col. Revere, July 8, 1779, *ibid.*, 13, RG 45, NA.

⁶ Resolves of the Council Chamber, July 1, 1779, *Documentary History*, 16: 353.

⁷ Resolves for Enlisting Men for [the] Penobscot Expedition, July 3, 1779, Penobscot, 7, RG 45, NA.

⁸ See, for example, Orders in Council to the Sheriff of the County of Essex, July 3, 1779, *ibid.*, 6-7, RG 45, NA; Warrant to Impress Seamen, n.d., *ibid.*, 7-8, RG 45, NA.

⁹ See entry of July 22 in John Calef, *The Siege of Penobscot by the Rebels, Containing a Journal of the Proceedings* (London: G. Kearsley in Fleet-Street, 1781), p. 3 (hereafter cited as *Calef's Journal*). John Calef was a Penobscot Loyalist whose eyewitness account of the campaign is an extremely valuable source.

¹⁰ See entries of July 18-22, *ibid.*, pp. 1-3.

¹¹ See entry of July 21, *ibid.*, p. 3.

¹² Entry of July 24, *ibid.*, p. 4.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Entry of July 25, *ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁵ Entry of July 26, *ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

¹⁶ Entry of July 28, *ibid.*, pp. 8-10.

¹⁷ The attitude of American naval officers fluctuated greatly during the campaign. After the battle one of the sea captains, in a burst of hindsight, declared that the rebel fleet could have easily destroyed the English vessels. He added that he was surprised that it failed to do so. Deposition of Allan Hallet [of the Brig *Active*], Sworn in Court, September 25, 1779, Massachusetts State Papers, 1775-89, 2: 34, Records of the Continental and Confederation Congresses and the Constitutional Convention, Record Group 360, National Archives Microfilm Publication M247, Roll 79, Item 65, NA (hereafter cited as Massachusetts State Papers, RG 360, M247, / , NA).

¹⁸ See entry of July 28, *Calef's Journal*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁹ Proclamation of Solomon Lovell, July 29, 1779, *ibid.*, pp. 31-35. When the settlers failed to rally to the Yankee standard, Lovell seized a number of Loyalists and imprisoned them on board the American fleet. See entry of August 7, *ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁰ Lovell to Jeremiah Powell, August 13, 1779, *Documentary History*, 17: 3.

²¹ See Lovell to Dudley Saltonstall, August 11, 1779, *Calef's Journal*, p. 37. George Washington himself felt obliged to warn the Yankees of the possibility of British reinforcements. See Washington to Powell, August 3, 1779, Massachusetts Archives, 57: 311. Hereafter all records in the Massachusetts Archives will be indicated by the symbol MA.

²² Lovell to Saltonstall, August 11, 1779, *Calef's Journal*, p. 36.

²³ See "Sir George Collier's Account [of Penobscot], *London Gazette*, Extraordinary Edition, September 24, 1779.

²⁴ *Ibid.* I have intentionally limited my narrative to the Penobscot campaign in order to concentrate on emphasizing its importance within the context of the war in New England as well as stressing a negative aspect of the British victory. For the interested reader, there is no lack of published accounts of Penobscot, many of which are valuable studies. Joseph Williamson, "The British Occupation of Penobscot During the Revolution," *Collections of the Maine Historical Society*, 2nd ser., 10 vols. (Portland, Maine: Published by the Society, 1890-99), 1: 309-400, remains a classic account. Another early history which made good use of primary sources is Gardner Weld Allen, *A Naval History of the American Revolution*, 2 vols. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 1: 418-38. In recent times, with renewed interest in the Revolutionary War, there have been a number of published accounts of the Bagaduce campaign, of which I would recommend the following: Harry I. Shaw, Jr., "Penobscot Assault — 1779," *Military Affairs* 18 (Summer 1953): 83-94; Jon M. Nielsen, "Penobscot — From the Jaws of Victory, Our Navy's Worst Defeat," *American Neptune* 37 (October 1977): 288-305; and William Fowler, "Disaster in Penobscot Bay," *Naval War College Review* 31 (Winter 1979): 75-80. Charles Bracelen Flood has also devoted much of *Rise and Fight Again: Perilous Times Along the Road to Independence* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1976) to the battle and its aftermath. For a highly readable account of Penobscot, see chapters 21-35 (hereafter cited as Flood, *Rise, and Fight Again*).

²⁵ Deposition sworn before the Court, with an Addition, by Peleg Wadsworth, September 29, 1779, Penobscot, 161, RG 45, NA. This caustic remark is scribbled in the margin, perhaps as an afterthought by the furious Wadsworth.

²⁶ See Report of the Committee on the Penobscot Expedition, October 7, 1779, *Documentary History*, 17: 358-60. For a well-written account of the various investigations of misconduct made against the

American leaders, see Russell Bellico, "The Great Penobscot Blunder," *American History Illustrated* 13 (December 1978): 44-46.

²⁷ Flood, *Rise, and Fight Again*, pp. 156-57.

²⁸ *Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Collier, Sir George," by John Knox Laughton; Capt. Henry Mowatt, "Captain Henry Mowatt's Account," *The Magazine of History*. Extra Edition 3 (no. 11, 1910): [46]-55.

²⁹ The British soldier at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War was by no means the marching marionette portrayed in popular American histories but a battle-hardened fighter, dredged from the bottom of English society, used to suffering and privation, and not lightly dismissed by his enemies. For an intriguing and accurate picture of him and the British Army in 1776, see Franklin and Mary Wickwire, *Cornwallis: The American Adventure* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), Ch. 4. I am much indebted to Dr. Franklin Wickwire, who supervised my dissertation at the University of Massachusetts, for the suggestions and criticisms, along with considerable encouragement, he gave me while I was writing my thesis, a part of which dealt with Penobscot.

³⁰ See Lovell to Powell, August 13, 1779, MA, 57: 323; Report of J. H. Allan, September 10, 1779, *Documentary History*, 17: 105.

³¹ Council Chamber to Lovell, August 10, 1779, *ibid.*, 16: 443-44. Also see Council to Gen. Horatio Gates, August 8, 1779, *ibid.*, 16: 437.

³² Jackson to Powell, August 11, 1779, *ibid.*, 16: 449.

³³ Council Chamber to Lovell, August 14, 1779, *ibid.*, 16: 465.

³⁴ Typical of these instructions were those given to Capt. John Kilburne of the sloop *Fancy*, who was to search for and deliver supplies to Gen. Lovell:

"You are to keep a vigilant Look out that you fall not into the Hands of the Enemys Ships of War or Privateers and are to Coast along shore the whole way that you may upon occasion make a safe Harbour for which purpose we have furnished you with a Pilot who is well acquainted with every River & Creek in that Country."

The War Office concluded: "we earnestly recommend a strict attention to these your orders." See War Office to Kilburne, August 21, 1779, *Documentary History*, 17: 40-41.

³⁵ Reverend James Lyon to Massachusetts General Court, September 10, 1776, MA, 195: 219.

³⁶ Francis Legge to earl of Dartmouth, August 19, 1775, Public Record Office, Colonial Office Papers, 217/51, 305-7 (hereafter cited as P.R.O., C.O.).

³⁷ See W. C. Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, 34 vols. (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1904-37), 3: 316 (hereafter cited as *Journals of the Continental Congress*). See also Report of Aaron Willard & Moses Child, n.d., Massachusetts State Papers, RG 360, M247, 166/152, NA; and Appeal of the Committee of Safety for the County of Cumberland [Nova Scotia], November 13, 1776, *ibid.*, 1: 171, RG 360, M247, 79/61, NA.

³⁸ Issue of April 10-13, 1778.

³⁹ Bailey to William Simmons, February 4, 1780, Papers of Reverend Jacob Bailey, vol. 13, letter XXXIII. Available at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia, Halifax. The position of the Yankees of Nova Scotia has excited considerable controversy among Canadian and American historians dealing with the Revolutionary War. Beamish Murdoch, for example, wrote at the time of Canadian Confederation that the Nova Scotia Yankees remained loyal to the crown throughout the Revolution. Rev. George Patterson, however, challenged the validity of Murdoch's thesis and found that many Nova Scotians "generally sympathized" with the Americans. Cf. Beamish Murdoch, *A History of Nova Scotia, or Acadie*, 2 vols. (Halifax: J. Barnes, 1866), 2: 570; Rev. George Patterson, *A History of the County of Pictou* (Montreal: Dawson Brothers, 1877), p. 99. In the twentieth century, Wilfred Brenton Kerr argued that the Nova Scotians did not join the Revolution because they lacked a feeling of nationalism, a "common sympathy" with the rebels. See, particularly, his article, "The Merchants of Nova Scotia and the American Revolution," *Canadian Historical Review* 13 (March 1932): 20-26. One of the most influential works on the subject is John Bartlet Brebner, *The Neutral Yankees of Nova Scotia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937). Brebner found the Nova Scotians of 1775-1783 seeking a position of neutrality not unlike that of the Acadians a generation earlier. This thesis has recently been challenged in two scholarly works: Gordon Stewart and George A. Rawlyk, *A People Highly Favoured of God* (Toronto: Macmillan Company, 1972); and George A. Rawlyk, *Nova Scotia's Massachusetts: A Study of Massachusetts-Nova Scotia Relations, 1630-1784* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973). These studies concluded that the Nova Scotians of the Revolutionary period were "a people in a state of confusion" rather than consciously imitating the Acadians by seeking a position of neutrality. George A. Rawlyk has also edited *Revolution Rejected, 1775-1776* (Scarborough, Ont.: Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1968) in which he has contrasted many of the interpretations of the Nova Scotia position.

⁴⁰ For an account of the siege by the American commander, see Report of Jonathan Eddy, November 12, 1776, Massachusetts State Papers, 1: 167, RG 360, M247, 79/65, NA.

⁴¹ Collier to Lord George Germain, August 16, 1777, P.R.O., C.O. 217/53, 183-84.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ See *London Gazette*, November 15-18, 1777.

⁴⁴ Resolution of Congress, January 8, 1777, Congressional Reports and Resolutions, 7: 20, RG 360, M247, 79/71, NA. Also see *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 7: 18-20.

⁴⁵ Issue of February 9-11, 1778.

⁴⁶ *Boston Evening Post & the General Advertiser*, May 22, 1779. Reprinted in *Halifax Gazette*, June 15, 1779.

⁴⁷ John Allan to the Council of Massachusetts, September 10, 1779, Massachusetts State Papers, 2: 5-8, RG 360, M247, 79/65, NA.

⁴⁸ When, for example, John Allan journeyed to Frenchman's Bay on the northern Maine coast in February 1781 and received pledges from settlers there "to do their Utmost to oppose" the crown, the British sent the armed ship *Allegiance* to destroy rebel homes in that community. See Report of Col. Allan's Journey to Frenchman's Bay, March 17, 1781, Frederic Kidder, comp., *Military Operations in Eastern Maine and Nova Scotia During the Revolution* (Albany, N.Y.: Joel Munsell, 1867), pp. 288-91 (hereafter cited as Kidder, *Military Operations*).

⁴⁹ See, for instance, the Petition of the Inhabitants of Penobscot River, September 6, 1779, *Documentary History*, 17: 88-89.

⁵⁰ When Yankee vessels attempted to venture out of downeast harbors in search of provisions, the British frequently seized them. See Petition of the Inhabitants of Lincoln, October 1, 1779, *ibid.*, 17: 333-38.

⁵¹ Report of J. H. Allan, September 10, 1779, *ibid.*, 17: 108-9.

⁵² Resolves of the Massachusetts General Court, May 5, 1780, MA, 228: 12. Following the Penobscot defeat, John Allan frequently denounced the toleration shown settlers sailing illegally between Maine and Nova Scotia. See Allan to Powell, October 20, 1779, Kidder, *Military Operations*, p. 270; Instructions of Col. Allan, October 27, 1779, *Documentary History*, 17: 412.

⁵³ New Englanders, for example, seized the Nova Scotia schooner *Beaver* while she was on a trading voyage to Boston and threw her master in jail. *Boston Gazette*, April 2, 1781.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, articles in the *New Hampshire Gazette*, September

18, 1779 and October 12, 1779; and the *Boston Gazette*, January 7, 1782.

⁵⁵ Germain to Sir Richard Hughes [lieutenant-governor of Nova Scotia], no. 10, July 7, 1780, P.R.O., C.O. 217/55, 171-72.

⁵⁶ Petition of William Greenwood, April 1780, MA, 225: 219-20; *Lloyd's Evening Post*, August 28-30, 1780.

⁵⁷ See *Boston Gazette*, September 24, 1781; *Halifax Gazette*, September 4, 1781; *Boston Gazette*, July 15, 1782.

⁵⁸ The Humble and Dutifull Address and Memorial to the House of Assembly for the Province of Nova Scotia, June 28, 1782, P.R.O., C.O. 217/56, 45-48.

⁵⁹ Massachusetts Resolve, July 3, 1779, MA, 223: 260.

⁶⁰ See, for example, War Office to Capt. Allan Hallet, July 7, 1779, *Documentary History*, 16: 331-33.

⁶¹ Forty of the forty-four vessels making up the American fleet at Penobscot belonged to the Bay State.

⁶² Sir Richard Hughes, while serving as lieutenant-governor of Nova Scotia, complained to Lord George Germain on September 30, 1778: "The Kings Ships draw too much water, near the shore, to pursue these small [New England] Vessels, and are easily eluded in Creaks or amongst Shoals ..." P.R.O., C.O. 217/54, 120-21.

⁶³ Rumors of a French naval assault against Nova Scotia remained widespread in the closing years of the war. See Thomas Crey to Hughes, March 24, 1780, P.R.O., C.O. 217/55, 130-31; Germain to Hughes, July 5, 1780, *ibid.*, 44-45; extract of a letter from Greenock, August 17, 1781, *Lloyd's Evening Post*, August 22-24, 1781; Brig.-Gen. John Campbell to earl of Shelburne, July 17, 1782, P.R.O., C.O. 217/41, 9.

⁶⁴ Reprinted in the *Boston Gazette*, February 7, 1780.

⁶⁵ The interested reader might wish to contrast the length of the Notices of Libel in the following issues of the *Boston Gazette*: September 22, 1777 against February 2, 1778; September 14, 1778 against March 22, 1779; July 19, 1779 against January 10, 1780; July 3, 1780 against January 1, 1781; July 9, 1781 against January 14, 1782. The length of time between capture and libel varied, but I would estimate that the average period was six to eight weeks.

⁶⁶ These figures were obtained by compiling those commissions listed by month and year in Allan, *Massachusetts Privateers*, *passim*. It should be stressed that the numbers of commissions issued are approximate and that Allen himself was not able to compile all commissions.

⁶⁷ Hammond to German, No. 3, P.R.O., C.O. 217/55, 192-93.

⁶⁸ Ellis to Hammond, no. 1, February 20, 1782, P.R.O., C.O. 217/56, 17-19. Even recent writers have tended to overlook the fact that New England privateers, while smarting from Penobscot, soon returned to maritime harassment. Flood, *Rise, and Fight Again*, for example, leaves the privateersmen (on page 244) scattered and looking for work, the shareholders of privateers with great losses, and the general public singing a bitter ditty noting that at Bagaduce "We burnt up all our shipping . . ." The privateersmen also rose to fight again, somewhat more quickly than others burned by Penobscot, and to the regret of Nova Scotia settlers.

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