



British Naval Officer Henry Mowat helped coordinate three key British offensives in Maine during the American Revolution: the dismantling of Fort Pownal at the mouth of the Penobscot River; the burning of Falmouth; and the destruction of the Massachusetts Navy at Bagaduce (Castine). His reputation among Maine people was forged in these dramatic events, but was it malice alone that guided his actions? *Documents of the American Revolution, 1770-1783*, Maine Historical Society Collections.

HENRY MOWAT: MISCREANT OF THE MAINE COAST

BY LOUIS ARTHUR NORTON

This article follows the career of Captain Henry Mowat as he took charge of operations for the British Navy off the Maine Coast during the Revolutionary War. Mowat was involved in three decisive actions during this time: the dismantling of Fort Pownall at the mouth of the Penobscot River; the burning of Falmouth, or present-day Portland; and the defeat of the Massachusetts naval expedition to the British-occupied Bagaduce Peninsula on the eastern side of Penobscot Bay. The author asks the question: did this British officer deserve his reputation among Mainers as an “execrable monster?” Louis Arthur Norton is a professor emeritus at the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington. Dr Norton has published extensively on maritime history topics, including a biography titled JOSHUA BARNEY: HERO OF THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR AND 1812 by the Naval Institute Press in 2000. He received the 2002 and 2006 Gerald E. Morris Prize for maritime historiography from the Mystic Seaport Museum.

Most chronicles of the Revolutionary War focus on the centers of military conflict up and down the eastern seaboard, from the Carolinas up through Boston and its environs, and on a scattering of clashes along the colonial western frontier. Somewhat forgotten is the fact that the vast coast of the eastern province of Massachusetts, now the State of Maine, was the site of many small skirmishes and important military events. The most renowned were the rebel capture of the armed British warship *Margaretta* at Machias and Benedict Arnold's attack on Quebec, which included an onerous march through the Maine wilderness. Three other events involved a British naval lieutenant whom some called, interchangeably, the “Villain of Falmouth,” “Mad Henry Mowat,” or the “Execrable Monster.” Henry Mowat became, in the eyes of his Maine contemporaries, the miscreant of the Revolutionary War.

Mowat spent most of his professional naval career on duty in the Gulf of Maine, orchestrating first the dismantling of Fort Pownall and the burning of Falmouth, both in 1775, and then the British naval defense that upset the American Penobscot Expedition to Bagaduce (Cas-

tine). In 1779 Mowat's British commanders had given him orders to repress and hopefully eliminate revolutionary activity along the coast of Massachusetts and especially on the Maine frontier. The burning of Falmouth in 1775 was especially significant as a turning point in the War of Independence. While this was an isolated event far from population centers to the south, the audacity of the bombardment and wanton destruction of Falmouth led to increased American support for the revolutionary cause. The later defeat of the Penobscot Expedition confirmed the vulnerability of some of the American militia forces and called into question the competence of a least one commander of the Continental Navy. Mowat gained infamy in carrying out these duties, but there is evidence that there may have been more to him than his image implies. Was Mowat a vengeful miscreant, or a duty-bound naval officer operating within a narrow range of choice? Either way, his role in the history of Revolutionary Maine is significant.

Lieutenant Mowat

Henry Mowat was born in Scotland in 1734 into a venerable naval family. His father, Patrick Mowat, held the title of Captain of His Britannic Majesty's Ship *Dolphin*. Mowat had three brothers who also served in the Royal Navy, two of whom were killed in action later in life. For his part, Mowat received his lieutenant's commission on January 22, 1759. He later married and left one son, John Alexander, to carry on the Mowat family tradition by entering the navy in 1804. Taller than most men of the time, with an athletic build and fair complexion, the square-jawed, aquiline-nosed Mowat gained his first assignment as a junior ship's officer on HMS *Baltimore*. In 1764 he received his first command of the eight-gun *Canceaux*, upon which he served for twelve years. The *Canceaux* was a converted merchant ship assigned survey work along the northeastern coast, its primary station being the Piscataqua River adjacent to Portsmouth.¹

Taken Captive at Falmouth

The first shots of the American Revolutionary War were fired on April 19, 1775, at Lexington and Concord, but even before the official commencement of war, some communities targeted Tories in reaction to British imperial policy. In 1774 Samuel Thompson of Brunswick, apparently inspired by the Boston Tea Party of December 16, 1773, led an armed mob of followers up and down the Kennebec River enforcing an embargo against Great Britain. Thompson and his mob searched the

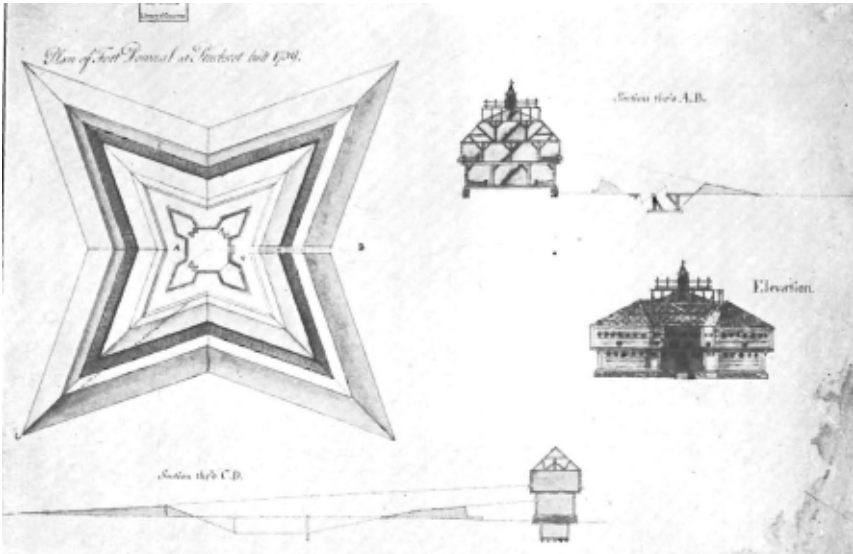
merchant houses for Tories and tea in hopes of throwing both into the river. This essentially stopped trade with the British merchants who supplied many indispensable goods, with dire consequences for the Cumberland County seacoast towns.

In April 1775 royal authorities in Boston sent a naval ship to break the local embargo and “to warn the Infatuated people of the Consequences that will issue from detaining, or interfering with ... any of his Majesties Loyal subjects in their lawful avocations.”² Mowat’s *Canceaux*, en route to Halifax, was diverted to Falmouth to maintain civil order. The appearance of the armed warship in Falmouth harbor enraged some members of the local authority.

The *Canceaux*’s presence created unusual tensions because news of the battles at Lexington and Concord had recently reached Falmouth. Upon learning of the *Canceaux*’s arrival, Thompson decided to resolve the issue of enforcing the boycott, regardless of the wishes of Falmouth’s town leaders. In early May, he and about fifty men entered Falmouth “each with a small bough of Spruce in his hat, and having a spruce pole with a green top on it as a standard.”³ The party detained Captain Mowat, his ship’s surgeon, and the Reverend John Wiswall while Mowat and his party were ashore negotiating with town officials. Apprehension arose on both sides. Thompson was reluctant to give up his captives because he felt that “Divine Providence had thrown them into [my] hand.” Chaos broke out in Falmouth when the *Canceaux*’s second-in-command ordered two blank rounds (some references suggest real rounds) fired in the direction of the town as a warning to release Mowat.⁴

Frightened residents fled as town authorities implored Thompson and his men to free Mowat. Complicating the delicate deliberations, approximately six hundred armed and undisciplined militiamen from nearby Gorham, Cape Elizabeth, Scarborough, and Windham poured into the town to harass Tories. Falmouth’s militia was unable to defend the town, as many members had already left for Cambridge in response to the call to join the Continental Army. The rest of the militia were preoccupied with the preservation of their own persons and property. Falmouth was under an ominous British naval threat, overrun by a rag-tag militia of neighboring fellow citizens, and held captive by Thompson’s inopportune hostage-taking.

Sanity prevailed: Thompson released Mowat on parole, perhaps because he was not sure what else to do with the British captain.⁵ According to the eighteenth-century ethical code governing military parole, Mowat agreed to the terms of his parole and was honor-bound to keep



Fort Pownal, erected at the mouth of the Penobscot River in 1759, became a focus of British concern as tensions mounted along the Maine Coast. In March 1775 Mowat and his crew removed the arms and munitions from the fort, and in reprisal, American insurgents burned the blockhouse and filled in the moat. Fort Pownal plans, Library of Congress; map from Sandra Gordon Olson, “The Archaeology of Fort Pownall: A Military Outpost on the Maine Coast” (M.A. thesis, University of Maine, 1984).



them. He was released to return to his ship, but was told to return ashore in the morning to complete negotiations. Two prominent local moderate Whigs, Enoch Freeman and Jedediah Preble, were held as a guarantee of Mowat's return.⁶ Around the time of the parole discussions, some sailors took a small boat ashore to do laundry and, while there, they overheard plans kill Mowat when he returned the next day.⁷ The sailors reported the conversation to Mowat who decided that, since the people of Falmouth were not living up to their agreement, he would break his word. It was obviously too dangerous to honor the conditions of parole.

Local loyalists were embarrassed to learn why Mowat stayed aboard the *Canceaux* and were concerned that as British citizens they were entitled to the protection of the crown. They expressed this to Mowat in the following statement: "we have been relieved by your Spited Conduct from those Anxieties natural to Persons who are abnoxious [sic] to the Enemies of our happy Constitution and by your courteous and kind behavior to all the Friends of Government flatter Ourselves with the pleasing Prospect of a Continuance of your Protection. [We regret that you are leaving us] prey to the Sons of rapine and lawless Violence."⁸ The Americans also feared reprisal if other ships of the Royal Navy heard of the slight to one of their officers. The British lieutenant appeared to understand their concerns, and thus the citizens of Falmouth felt that they had no reason to fear retribution.

After several days the *Canceaux* caught a retreating tide and sailed into the Gulf of Maine, escorting a vessel carrying many of Falmouth's Tories to the temporary safety of Boston. On June 26, 1775, the *Journal of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress* recorded an opinion from "the committee appointed to consider the Conduct of Colonel Thompson, at Falmouth with respect to Captain Mowat." According to the committee, Thompson's conduct was "friendly to his country and the cause of liberty."⁹ On the other hand, it was perhaps Thompson's annoying local embargo and his seizure of a royal naval officer that prompted the British command to consider a retaliation designed to intimidate a wavering Maine coastal population and force them to submit to the authority of King George III.

Tensions mounted along the New England coast. On June 12, a band of the Sons of Liberty from Machias captured the armed Royal Navy vessel *Margaretta*. In the attack, the vessel's commander, Midshipman James Moore, was killed. A few days later on June 16, conflict broke out in Boston, culminating in what would become known as the Battle of Bunker Hill, the first major British and American ground action of the

nascent war. At the same time, the Royal Navy was dismayed by a growing number of British supply ships captured by American privateers. Some of the cargoes seized by the Americans contained ammunition and military supplies intended for British arsenals in North America. This confiscated war materiel was a boon for the ill-equipped Continental Army, and the privateer actions angered those in command of the British naval forces in Boston and Halifax.¹⁰

On the Maine coast, these hostilities drew attention to Fort Pownal at the mouth of the Penobscot River. The stockade fort was erected in May 1759 on the decree of Massachusetts Governor Thomas Pownal to protect the river from French and Indian threat. Soon afterward, the British captured Quebec, ending France's grip in North America. Fort Pownal no longer had a military purpose, but for the next decade and a half it served as a center for trade and settlement in the Penobscot region. On the eve of the American Revolution, political tensions between the Tories and rebels in the area was high. In March 1775 loyalist Colonel Thomas Goldthwait, then in command of Fort Pownal, allowed Mowat and his men on the *Canceaux* to remove the fort's cannons and powder in order to keep them out of insurgent hands.¹¹ In retaliation, a regiment of American rebels burned down the blockhouse and filled in the fort's ditch-like moat to prevent British reoccupation of the fort. The dismantling of Fort Pownal was the first of three events that contributed to Mainers' frustrations with Henry Mowat and his role in the Revolution.

The continued interception of British supply ships angered Vice-Admiral Samuel Graves, the commander of the British North Atlantic fleet, who had only twenty-nine armed ships to patrol the coastline from Nova Scotia to Florida – some 1,800 miles. Many of his vessels were small, in disrepair, and short of men. During July, August, and September, Vice-Admiral Graves deployed his thinly stretched armada to capture or sink the schooner-privateers ranging this long, open coastline. Frustrated by this formidable task, he decided to punish the rebellious coastal towns and ordered his men to burn and, if necessary, loot seaports from Machias to the North Shore ports outside Boston. Not only did these outports shelter rebel privateers, but they also supplied them with provisions, sails, and other vital gear. Captain Mowat had spent more than a decade surveying the coast of New England on board the *Canceaux*. He knew these waters and settlements better than most other North American naval commanders. On October 6 Graves ordered Mowat “to Chastise Marblehead, Salem, Newbury Port, Cape Anne Harbour, Portsmouth, Ipswich, Saco, and Falmouth in Casco Bay [and] You

are to go to all the above Places as you can and make the most vigorous Efforts to burn the Towns, and destroy the Shipping in the Harbours.” As the rationale for dispatching armed vessels on this mission, Graves noted that the four New England governments were in open rebellion against the crown and that their privateers had captured several vessels, incarcerating their crews and wounding or killing many of the “King’s Subjects.”¹² He instructed Mowat: “if possible first go to Cape Anne where Rebels thought it proper to fire upon the *Falcon* and where they took her Officers and Crew, and sent Prisoners in the Country.”¹³

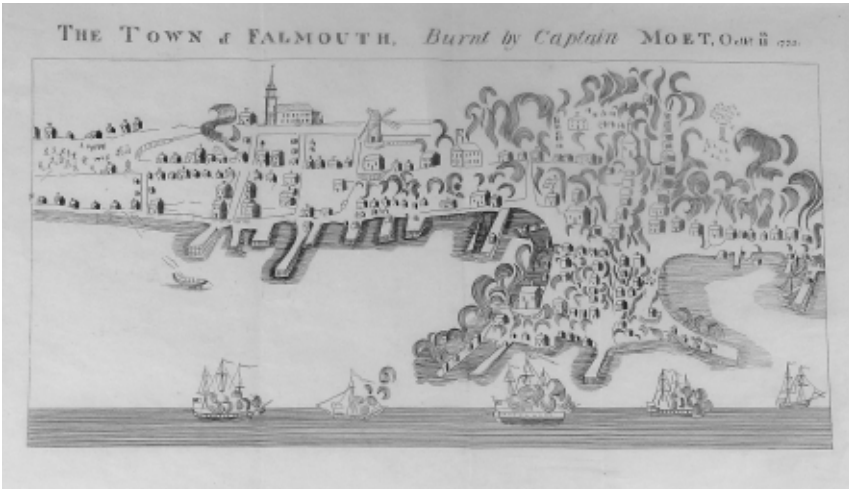
Falmouth bombarded

Mowat obeyed his orders, but chose to attack Falmouth first rather than ports on the North Shore. Many of the North Shore communities were located near one another, and Mowat surmised that a large fire in any of these towns would alert the militias in nearby towns to come to the defense. In addition, the towns extended inland, where seaborne cannon fire would cause minimal damage. He knew that Falmouth’s inhabitants had clustered close together for protection from hostile Indian incursions, making Falmouth an ideal target for a demoralizing bombardment. In addition it was the place where he had been held captive just a few months earlier, an insult to his station as a Royal Navy officer. On the other hand, documentary evidence suggests that Mowat may have thought that he could convince the citizens of Falmouth to pledge their loyalty to the crown, give up armed resistance, and thus save themselves from Graves’s proclamation.

On October 16 a flotilla of four British warships appeared in Falmouth Harbor. Most of the people of Falmouth regarded the squadron’s presence as an unwelcome, but not unusual annoyance. British warships had frequently confiscated livestock from the nearby islands and carried off provisions to feed British troops in Boston. But on the morning of October 17, the cannons on the decks of the squadron were aimed menacingly at the most populated portion of the town. Anxiety decreased, however, when it became known that Captain Mowat was in command of the vessels. Falmouth’s leaders, after all, had helped him gain his release from Thompson and his rebellious band. Townspeople assumed that he could be reasoned with. Having stationed his vessels in the formation he desired, Mowat sent an officer ashore to read the following dictum to the people of Falmouth:

To The people of the Town of Falmouth:

After many premeditated attacks on the legal Prerogatives of the



Henry Mowat gained infamy for his part in the bombardment of Falmouth in October 1775. Acting on orders from the British Admiralty, he accused the inhabitants of “most unpardonable Rebellion” and, after allowing time to “remove without delay the Human Species,” launched a twelve-hour barrage that destroyed 414 of the town’s 500 buildings. Maine Historical Society collections.

best of Sovereigns; After repeated Instances you have experienced in Britain’s long forbearance of the Rod of Correction; and the Merciful and Paternal extension of her Hands to embrace you, again and again have been regarded as vain and nugatory: And in place of a dutiful and grateful return to your King and Parent state, you have been guilty of the most unpardonable Rebellion, Supported by the Ambition of a set of designing men, whose insidious views have cruelly imposed on the credulity of their fellow creatures, and at last have brought the whole into the same Dilemma; which leads me to feel not a little for the Innocent of them, in particular on the present occasion, having it in orders to execute a just Punishment on the Town of Falmouth: In the name of which Authority I previously warn you to remove without delay the Human Species out of the said town; for which purpose I give you the time of two hours, at the period of which, a Red pendant will be hoisted at the Main top gallant Masthead with a gun but should your imprudence lead you to show the least resistance, you will in that case free me of that Humanity, so strongly pointed out in my orders as well as my own Inclination. I also observe that all those who did upon a former occasion fly to the King’s Ship under my Command for Protection, that the same door

is now open and ready to receive them. The Officer who will deliver this letter I respect to return unmolested.

I am & Ca
Henry Mowat¹⁴

Upon receiving Mowat's notice, a committee of Falmouth citizens rowed out to meet with the captain to discuss options. Mowat was not authorized to bargain with locals or even to warn them of an imminent attack. Perhaps, in the tradition of chivalrous conduct, he was willing to risk the vice-admiral's displeasure by attempting to find a way Falmouth could avoid a bombardment. Mowat in fact did make an offer, but it was hardly generous. He informed the committee that he would take it upon himself to deviate from his orders by allowing the inhabitants of Falmouth to leave the settlement before he opened fire. If the residents surrendered all of their arms by the following morning and swore "allegiance to his Majesty King George the third," the town could be spared.¹⁵

When the committee revealed the details of Mowat's ultimatum, another panic ensued in the town. Children and the elderly were evacuated, and many valuable possessions were removed to the safety of the countryside. By daybreak, with many people hastily evacuating the town, what was left of the militia assembled a small collection of arms for Mowat's inspection. It became obvious that the better muskets and pistols had been hidden away for safekeeping. By securing these guns, the residents of Falmouth assured themselves a catastrophe.

The local committee members attempted to stall the inevitable, but they were summarily escorted under arms off the ship and rowed ashore. At mid-morning Mowat had his vessels commence firing on Falmouth's concentration of largely wooden buildings. The small armada bombarded the settlement throughout the morning, carrying out Mowat's threat to burn Falmouth to the ground. No lives were lost, but hundreds of buildings were razed or ruined. Two of the thirteen merchant ships trapped in port were seized by Mowat and the rest destroyed. The Reverend Jacob Bailey, a dispirited Tory minister, wrote about the local mood: "now in many instances [the people were] destitute of a hut for themselves and families; and as a tedious winter was approaching they had before them a most gloomy and distressing prospect." Bailey reported that a "multitude of villains were purloining ... goods and carrying them into the country beyond the reach of justice.... The country people were hardly restrained from destroying those

houses that had escaped the general devastation. A most surprising instance of perfidious baseness and human cruelty.”¹⁶

Mowat's bombardment was headline news in America, England, and France. Although opinion was divided in Britain, some newspapers expressed regret and considered the assault an affront to justice. The people of Falmouth were British citizens with all the rights of protection from the crown, and such destruction seemed unwarranted by the events that had preceded it. Many in the French press, always attentive to unseemly events in North America, thought that Graves' strategy was a catastrophic military and political blunder. George Washington found Graves' strategy appalling and wrote of Mowat's conduct: "I know not how sufficiently to detest it."¹⁷ The incident bolstered Falmouth's resolve to fight for American independence; the town committed men and money to the war and petitioned Washington for assistance in rebuilding its fortifications. On October 30, 1775, the Continental Congress added two additional cruisers of twenty and thirty-six-guns to complete a small navy then consisting of two merchant vessels, one of fourteen guns and one of ten guns. In addition, the Congress issued a general prize law authorizing the capture of all British vessels that were, in the judgment of the ship's captain, connected with the impending war. The new policy "was produced by the depredations committed by the vessels under the command of Captain Mowat."¹⁸ The burning of Falmouth also served to arouse separatist fervor elsewhere in the colonies. The image of the inferno, like that of the Boston Massacre, helped sway many formerly unconvinced by the revolutionary cause. Mowat's actions weakened Britain's political position in Maine and contributed to the outcome of the War of Independence. John Adams, who occasionally visited Falmouth as a barrister, was saddened by the events in Maine and became convinced that secession was inevitable.¹⁹ Samuel Adams, his provocateur cousin, became even more zealous in his quest for independence.

Shortly after the assault, Mowat was ordered to continue his survey work along the Gulf of Maine from his base in Halifax. On April 4, 1776, Graves ordered him to aid in converting a Philadelphia merchant ship, the *Rittenhouse*, to a fourteen-gun sloop and to take command of the newly named *Albany*.²⁰ An item in the *Boston Independent Chronicle* noted that "Capt. Burr, of the *Milford* died at Halifax lately, and the Command of his Ship was given to the well known, brutal Henry Mowat, who cruelly plundered and burnt Casco-Bay."²¹ Mowat's notoriety no doubt helped intimidate potential foes.

Bagaduce

During the winter and spring of 1779, British vessels were particularly active in combating the rebel harassment of their North American trade and shipping. On June 9, the Admiralty's headquarters at Halifax ordered the occupation of Majabigwaduce, more commonly known then as Bagaduce and today as Castine, a hammer-shaped peninsula located near the mouth of the Penobscot River. The British landed the 74th and 82nd regiments on June 12, with a total of 640 men under the command of Brigadier General Francis McLean. They set up camp on the neck and began building a fort. In an attempt to gain the trust of local loyalists, General McLean invited the inhabitants of Bagaduce to take an oath of allegiance to the king. He noted that "the greater part of the inhabitants on the river Penobscot, and the several islands therein, are well affected to His Majesty's person, and the ancient constitution under which they formerly flourished."²²

Captain Mowat, still in command of the *Albany*, was put in charge of the naval defense. He expected that the Americans would try to capture Bagaduce, and in consideration of the peninsula's strategic and economic value, regain control of the Penobscot River. After appraising the situation, he determined that he needed two additional vessels and asked General McLean to commandeer the *North* (fourteen-guns) and the *Nautilus* (sixteen-guns), plus some transports, to help protect the fort during its construction.

News of the British landing caused alarm in the colonial capital. The General Court of Massachusetts considered this incursion a threat to the state's fisheries, coastal trade, and particularly the vital supply of old-growth pines essential for ships' masts. In late June the General Court ordered its Board of War to engage as many armed vessels as could be acquired on short notice and prepare to sail against the British at Bagaduce as soon as possible. In addition, the General Court authorized the Board of War to impress vessels and sailors, if need be, to supplement the force, with the promise of fair compensation for all losses. The Massachusetts seamen were guaranteed the same pay and allowances as those under Continental service. Sensing the inadequacy of leadership in the State Navy of Massachusetts, or perhaps as a calculated hedge to transfer blame in the case of failure, the usually independent General Court appealed to the Eastern Department of Continental Navy Board for assistance. The Board responded by placing three Continental ships, the frigate *Warren* (thirty-two-guns), the sloop *Providence* (twelve-guns), and brig *Diligent* (fourteen-guns), at the disposal of the state. Captain



In June 1779 a British force under Brigadier General Francis McLean occupied and fortified the Bagaduce Peninsula on the eastern shores of Penobscot Bay. Captain Mowat and his ships defended the fortifications from the harbor.



As the Massachusetts expeditionary forces left Boston for Bagaduce, British forces dug in on the peninsula, constructing a four-foot high rampart later known as Fort George. This 1880s photo shows the remains of the fort and the "dungeon." *Centennial of Castine* (Castine Town Library, 1896).

Dudley Saltonstall, second in seniority on the list of Continental Navy captains, would fly the broad pennant of commodore of the assembled fleet. Saltonstall was the grandson of Gurdon Saltonstall, a former royal governor of Connecticut and a founder of Yale College. His mother was a Winthrop, a Massachusetts first family, and his wife was a member of the influential Rhode Island Babcock family. A product of the American colonial aristocracy, Saltonstall was extremely well connected.

The three Continental Navy vessels were short-handed, but the profitable Massachusetts's privateer fleet had a nearly full compliment of sailors. In order to muster the seamen needed to crew the naval vessels, Massachusetts authorities ordered a forty-day embargo on merchant shipping. With trade options limited and the local economy crippled, many privateer investors offered their ships to the state government. Ever speculative, some Bostonians bought shares in privateer vessels, assuming that the success of the Penobscot Expedition was assured and that they would receive a handsome return on their investment. Ship owners who consented to loan their vessels to the cause of the common good and display a modicum of patriotic zeal also found room for a measure of Yankee discretion. They prudently had their vessels appraised and fully insured by the state. In spite of patriotic appeals and speculative deals among the citizenry, the Board of War was forced to impress the privateers *General Putnam*, *Hector*, *Black Prince*, and *Hunter* for a two-month "cruise" to the Penobscot.²³ New Hampshire Governor Mesech Weare contracted with the twenty-gun privateer *Hampden* to join the task force when it sailed past Portsmouth.

The expeditionary ground forces were led by Massachusetts Brigadier-Generals Solomon Lovell and Peleg Wadsworth and Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Revere, who commanded the train of artillery. The fleet consisted of between sixteen and eighteen armed vessels and twenty-four transports, and the force carried, depending on the definition of armament, between 314 and 344 guns. The Continental Navy Board instructed Saltonstall to "Captivate, Kill or destroy the Enemies whole Force both by Sea & Land, & ... to Consult measures & preserve the greatest harmony with the Commander of the Land Forces, that the navy & army may Cooperate & assist each other."²⁴ Communications between the overall commander and the subordinate commanders would be necessary to accomplish the mission.

The expedition embarked from Boston on July 19 and arrived off Bagaduce on July 25, after picking up a large contingent of militia from Townsend (Boothbay). Before moving his fleet into Penobscot Bay,

Saltonstall sent a scouting party ahead to determine the position of the British vessels protecting the new fort. Keeping such a sizeable undertaking as the Penobscot Expedition secret with so many Tories about was impossible.²⁵ General McLean was informed of the expedition and sent for reinforcements from New York. Meanwhile the general prepared a four-foot high rampart later known as Fort George. Secondary cannon batteries were placed on the southern shore of the Bagaduce peninsula and on nearby Nautilus Island. Mowat moored his three armed sloops, with their total of fifty-six guns, close together at the western entrance of the harbor, and had his small transports huddle behind them for protection. The transports could be easily turned into gun boats or fire ships or cut adrift as navigational hazards.

Upon his arrival at Bagaduce, Saltonstall deployed nine of his vessels against the line of three British ships.²⁶ The result was an ineffective exchange of fire lasting more than an hour. Saltonstall then ordered his ships to anchor out of cannon range, signaling to the enemy that the commodore was reluctant to risk damage to his vessels. At dusk the Americans attempted to establish a beachhead on Bagaduce. Faced with this amphibious operation, the defenders were forced to spread their troops in scattered bunkers, since they did not know the direction of the assault. The attackers maintained the advantage of concentrating forces at defensive weak points. At the same time, their ship-based artillery was less vulnerable to stationary cannons firing from forts. The wild card was nature. Faced with strong winds and tidal currents, the Americans aborted the landing because they feared stranding men on the beach.

On July 26 about 150 marines landed on Nautilus Island and drove off the lightly entrenched British troops. From the captured island Revere's artillery train commanded a part of the British anchorage. In response, Mowat moved his vessels about half a mile eastward into the inner harbor at the mouth of the Bagaduce River, then arrayed them in a line across the mouth of this inner harbor on spring cables, enabling each to deliver a destructive broadside to advancing enemy ships. Most of Saltonstall's armed vessels were square rigged. They therefore required many minutes to tack or wear (change sailing directions), even with ample sea room. The custom for sailing into combat with square-sailed vessels was to have the sails on the lowest yard fastened aloft to their yards in a battle-ready configuration. Unfortunately, the fewer the sails a ship carried aloft, the slower the headway, thus compromising a vessel's maneuverability. If the Americans did manage to get close to Mowat's vessels, the wind and tide would likely make retreat maneuvers impossible. This may account for Saltonstall's often quoted and perhaps

misinterpreted remark to his officers: "I am not going to risk my ship-ping in that damned hole!"²⁷

One tactic that Saltonstall did not try was to convert some transports into fire ships. The prevailing summer winds off Bagaduce are westerly or southwesterly; the tides can often exceed ten feet, and summer fogs are common. Saltonstall's fireboats could have moved quickly under these conditions and would have presented a great hazard in the small harbor. In addition, smoke from the burning fire ships might have provided a screen for the advancing American ships. Shore-based cannons would have had difficulty finding targets in the smoky scrim. British General McLean later said that after seeing the vast American force assembled off the peninsula he was prepared to surrender, following an obligatory token resistance, in order to save British lives. Conceivably a well-planned American assault would have produced this end. On July 29 Mowat ordered most of his transports hauled ashore or scuttled. He converted one, the former privateer *St. Helena*, into a floating gun platform by mounting six guns on the vessel and adding her to his defense line. The rest of the guns from the transports were given to the marines and soldiers manning the shore positions. Mowat ordered fifty of his sailors to build a redoubt on shore outfitted with eight small naval guns in order to assure a line of communications with the fort and General McLean.

The disastrous end of the expedition is well known. Saltonstall had been reluctant to commit his ships in support of the militia's amphibious invasion force. Without his cannons the ground troops were unable to establish a foothold on the peninsula. Records of the expedition indicate much squabbling between naval and army officers and privateers. Finally, after an unproductive siege of nineteen days, the British vessels *Raisnable*, *Blonde*, *Virginia*, *Greyhound*, *Carmilla*, *Galatea*, and the sloop *Otter*, under the command of Admiral Sir George Collier, arrived at the mouth of the Penobscot. Counting the cannons on Mowat's vessels, the British now had 266 guns, many larger than those of the Americans. The British force drove the overwhelmed rebel fleet up the Penobscot River where the Americans were forced to burn or scuttle their vessels. The crews made their way home through the dense down-east forests. The Penobscot Expedition was the worst naval defeat of the Revolutionary War and one of the worse in American history. Saltonstall lost his commission in the Continental Navy as a result of the fiasco, and Colonel Revere faced court martial for disobeying an order from General Wadsworth during the disorderly retreat from the Penobscot, but was later acquitted.



Mowatt's skillful maneuvering and the difficulties of entering the small harbor under adverse winds and tides held the Massachusetts armada at bay until British reinforcements arrived from Halifax. The sketch above locates the Massachusetts Navy outside the harbor and Mowat's fleet in three different positions in the harbor, along with the fort and redoubts on the shore. George A. Wheeler, *Castine Past and Present* (1896).

Mowat's actions when the British reinforcements arrived are noteworthy. His first order was to move the cannons that he had placed ashore back on his ships. He then prepared to have his flotilla join the chase up the river. Because there was a headwind and the tide had slackened, he warped his vessels out of the harbor and into the Penobscot River. This involved rowboats carrying kedge anchors out from the vessels; the anchors were dropped, and the sailors winched up the cables,

thus slowly moving the ships behind them.²⁸ It was obvious that his defense of Bagaduce had succeeded, and Mowat desperately wanted to join the fray. Once in the Penobscot, he put some of his sailors in small armed boats that could be rowed in search of the enemy, demonstrating his aggression in battle.

One incident, however, showed Mowat's humane side. When the British landed at the Bagaduce Peninsula, Captain John (Josiah) Brewer, a member of the local Penobscot militia, realized that there was little to be gained by resisting. Informed that the inhabitants would be allowed to "stay in their homes and live peaceably and mind their business," he negotiated a military pass so that he might serve as an intermediary between the up-river settlements and the British.²⁹ Once the American ships had been burned, sunk, or captured, American wounded appeared in settlements. Using his pass, Brewer contacted McLean and requested safe passage for the sick and wounded. A small upriver schooner was chartered and workers began converting it into a makeshift hospital ship to accommodate the injured men. Mowat, on patrol for able-bodied rebel survivors, became aware of the humanitarian rescue operation. Bored with the relative routine of the patrol, he became interested in the conversion of the schooner. He frequently invited Brewer aboard the *Albany* where they discussed the progress over a glass of wine. When the invalids were loaded onboard, Mowat issued a pass to Brewer to allow him through the British blockade.³⁰ Unfortunately, Mowat learned that a noted rebel, Captain George Ross of the privateer *Monmouth*, had escaped among the sick and wounded using a false name. Furious at the deception, Mowat threatened Brewer when they met after the incident. The American admitted his guilt, and Mowat's anger cooled. In combat, a little subterfuge was considered permissible. In time the two adversaries resumed their cordial relationship.

After the defeat, the Americans lost heart in contesting the Penobscot, and for the rest of the war eastern Maine remained under British occupation. British shipping, from Bagaduce to Newfoundland, enjoyed a period of relative security. Evidence of this is contained in the following note Mowat wrote sometime after the events of Bagaduce:

The attack on the Penobscot ... was positively the severest blow received by the American naval force during the war. The trade to Canada, which was intended, after the expected reduction of the post of Penobscot, to be intercepted by this very armament, went safe that season: The New England provinces did not for the remaining period of the contest recover the loss of ships, and the expense of fitting out



In mid-August the American commanders resolved to launch an assault on Fort George; almost at the same moment the British relief fleet arrived from Halifax. The resulting defeat was the worst naval disaster in American history prior to Pearl Harbor. Maine Historical Society Collections.

the expedition. Every thought of attempting Canada and Nova Scotia, was henceforth laid aside, and the trade ... from the banks of Newfoundland along the coast of Nova Scotia ... enjoyed unusual security.³¹

Mowat's triumph at Bagaduce gained him little, professionally. Admiral Collier neglected to mention Mowat's exemplary actions to the Admiralty in London. Mowat had hoped for a swift rise in rank, but every promotion made by Admiral Marriot Arbuthnot, Collier's successor as commander of British Naval Forces in North America, went to officers junior to him. Particularly rankling was Arbuthnot's promotion of an officer who had received his lieutenant's commission while serving under Mowat on the *Albany*. On October 26, 1782, Mowat was promoted to the rank of captain at the relatively advanced age of forty-eight. He rose to become senior officer in command of the fleet on the North American station. After serving for about forty-five years, the sixty-four-year-old British naval officer died of a stroke on April 4, 1798 on board his ship, the *Assistance*, five miles off Cape Henry. By that time better relations had evolved between Great Britain and her former colonies. Henry Mowat is still with us in America, interred at in the St. John's churchyard in Hampton, Virginia.

Little is known of Mowat's personal character, but he did deviate from his orders in a humanitarian gesture before bombarding Falmouth. His interest in the hospital schooner and its errand of mercy and his treatment of Colonel Brewer also suggest that he was not as heartless or brutal as his reputation suggests. As the ranking naval officer in the waters off the Maine coast, Mowat was duty-bound to carry out draconian orders under difficult and rapidly shifting conditions, as Britain and America moved steadily toward war. Caught between a frustrated and peremptory Admiralty and a rebellious colonial population, he made difficult choices. These decisions tainted his reputation in Maine, and they may have slowed his advance up the ranks in the British Navy, but the documents provide no evidence that he could have done otherwise in this deteriorating situation. Perhaps Mowat was not as heartless as he is presently described in Maine history; more than a miscreant, he is, perhaps, best considered a man of mystery.

NOTES

1. A detailed record of Mowat's voyages on the *Canceaux* is found in Henry Mowat, *Voyage of the Canceaux 1764-1776: Abridged Logs of the H.M. Armed Ship Canceaux*, transcribed by Andrew L. Wahll (New York: Heritage Books, 2003).
2. William Bell Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, DC: Naval History Division, 1964), vol. 1, pp. 244-5.
3. Clark, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 307.
4. Clark, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 307.
5. James S. Leamon, *Revolution Downeast: The War for Independence in Maine* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 66.
6. Leamon, *Revolution Downeast*, p. 66.
7. *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, vol. 1, p. 328.
8. Clark, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, vol. 1, pp. 261-2.
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10. Chester G. Hearn, *George Washington's Schooners: The First American Navy* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1995), pp. 1-4.
11. Gorham Munson, *Penobscot: Down East Paradise* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: J. B. Lippincott, 1959), pp. 295-97.
12. Clark, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, vol. 2, p. 324.
13. Clark, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, vol. 2, pp. 324-26.
14. Clark, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, vol. 2, pp. 471.
15. Clark, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 2: p. 489.
16. Leamon, *Revolution Downeast*, pp. 71-72.

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19. David G. McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), pp. 63,71.
20. Clark, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, vol. 7, pp. 787, 1031.
21. Clark, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, vol. 7, p. 1187.
22. James Sullivan to John Sullivan, August 30, 1779, in Thomas Coffin Amory, *Life of James Sullivan, with Selections from His Writings* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1859), vol. 2: pp. 376-78; Munson, *Penobscot*, p. 78.
23. C.B. Kevitt, *General Solomon Lovell and the Penobscot Expedition: 1779* (Weymouth, Massachusetts: Weymouth Historical Commission, 1976), pp. 65, 69-70.
24. Kevitt, *General Lovell*, p. 72-3.
25. Charles R. Smith, *Marines in the Revolution* (Washington, DC: History and Museums Division, 1975), p. 335.
26. Calef, *Siege of Penobscot*, p. 339.
27. *Whig and Courier* (Bangor, Maine), August 23, 1846 (letter from David Pelham giving Colonel John Brewer's reminiscences of the Penobscot Expedition).
28. George E. Buker, *The Penobscot Expedition: Commodore Saltonstall and the Massachusetts Conspiracy of 1779* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2002.) p 81.
29. Munson, *Penobscot*, pp. 95-6.
30. Buker, *Penobscot Expedition*, p.101.
31. Jon M. Nielson, "Penobscot: From the Jaws of Victory: Our Navy's Worst Defeat," *American Neptune* 37 (no. 4, 1977), p 304.