



John Jacobs: A Revolutionary War Patriot

Revised

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Nestled in quaint Bristol County, Massachusetts, Nathaniel and Mercy (née Whitman) Jacobs welcomed the arrival of their newborn son, John, on May 29, 1725. The sixth-born child of a colonial American family, John was born into the Jacobs family legacy.

In 1730, Nathaniel Jacobs moved his family to Woodstock, Connecticut; however, the land in this flourishing area was expensive due to the rich soil and peaceful atmosphere. Nathaniel wished to purchase a large plot of land that would serve his descendants for years to come, just as his grandfather had done in 100 years prior. In 1623, Nathaniel's grandfather, Nicholas Jacobs, had founded the town of Hingham, Massachusetts in the first wave of English immigrants to traverse the Atlantic.¹

For the sake of his sons' future inheritance, in 1740, Nathaniel purchased a tract of land outside of Woodstock, in the church community of Thompson. For £900, Nathaniel acquired from John Wiley a wild, unsettled, and untamed portion of the "Saltonstall Tract." Upon the family's settling, the land became known as the "Jacobs District." The District was the region's final colonial dwelling before a large expanse of wilderness that stretched for dozens of miles; therefore, the family established a halfway house for travelers, which became the "Jacobs' Inn." This Inn and Tavern became widely known by all who journeyed between Hartford and Boston.²

John Jacobs' childhood was spent in the Jacobs District; taming the land, hunting the ever-present deer and bear, and working the family farm. Not only was John raised on a wild, expansive tract of land, where he learned to hunt, track and fight; but also, he watched his father build a successful business from a simple Inn. Meanwhile, the shadow of the British Empire, and growing political unrest in the colonies, was ever-present.³

On January 24, 1751, at the age of twenty-six, John Jacobs married Sarah Plank of Killingly, Connecticut. That same year, John became the administrator of the family Inn and Tavern, inheriting it from his father. At age sixty-eight, Nathaniel Jacobs was too old to maintain the land and the business.⁴ John, who was raised in a dichotomy of structured business and wild, untamed land, saw his life change drastically: he was now the head of a family, a land-owner, and the proprietor of a thriving business. Between 1752 and 1766, John and Sarah had eight

¹ Mackenzie, George Norbury, and Nelson Osgood Rhoades. *Colonial Families of the United States of America: In Which Is given the History, Genealogy, and Armorial Bearings of Colonial Families Who Settled in the American Colonies from the Time of the Settlement of Jamestown, 13th May, 1607, to the Battle of Lexington, 19th April, 1775.* Vol. 6. Baltimore: Genealogical Pub., 1966. Print.

² Larned, Ellen D. *History of Windham County, Connecticut.* Thompson, CT: Author, 1874. Print.

³ "POWs During The American Revolution - Archiving Early America." Archiving Early America. Archiving Early America, n.d. Web. 10 May 2016.

<<http://www.earlyamerica.com/early-america-review/volume-6/pows-during-the-american-revolution/>>.

⁴ Larned, Ellen Douglas. "Thompson's First Families." Thompson Church Magazine (1900): n. pag. Print.



children. Jesse, John Jr., Jerusha, Asa, Mercy, Abel, Sarah, and Amasa were raised in the Jacobs District, surrounded by the same wilderness that embroidered John's childhood years.⁵

In 1775, the Revolutionary War began. As the war quickly escalated from unorganized skirmishes to full-blown battles, Joshua Huntington, a notable businessman and Connecticut's agent for the Continental Congress, organized the creation and construction of a large frigate, a ship later named the *Confederacy*.⁶

Meanwhile in Thompson, the town and parish was mentally and emotionally preparing for war. Before war had even been declared, the Connecticut colony passed anti-Tory laws, which forced most loyalists to either flee their towns or suffer incarceration. Later known as the Provision State, Connecticut was active in supplying food, clothing, and weapons to the Continental Army, contributing more to the soldiers than any other state.⁷

The Jacob's Tavern was most likely a place of scheming and planning for patriots and the Continental militia. Keeping his customers' secrets, or even plotting with them, would have been a duty of great importance for John Jacobs. The Tavern's prime location, distant enough from Boston to be secure, yet close enough to the city for access, added to its value in the rebellion. From September of 1775, until the Battle of Bunker Hill, Boston was controlled by the British. Located on the road that connected the capital of the Provision State and Boston, the Tavern was instrumental for housing travelers of all sorts. In addition, it was a great house of custom: entertaining dozens of famous Continental leaders and officers.⁸ The Tavern's atmosphere was one of patriotism and loyalty to the Continental army.

Despite his important role in Thompson, John Jacobs heeded George Washington's call for soldiers. John left behind everything he loved to fight with the patriots, whose cause paralleled that upon which he was raised. He journeyed to New London and became a seaman for the Continental Navy.

The Continental Frigate *Confederacy* was built in 1778, along the Thames river, by the southeastern Connecticut town of Norwich.⁹ The construction lasted from 1776 until 1778; with her completion on November 8th widely celebrated. The *Confederacy* was then towed to New

⁵ Mackenzie, George Norbury, and Nelson Osgood Rhoades. *Colonial Families...*, 13th May, 1607, to the Battle of Lexington, 19th April, 1775. Vol. 6. Baltimore: Genealogical Pub., 1966. Print.

⁶ Morris, Robert, E. James Ferguson, and John Catanzariti. *The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781-1784*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 1973. Print.

⁷ "ConnecticutHistory.org." ConnecticutHistory.org Revolutionary War Comments. Connecticut Humanities, n.d. Web. 10 May 2016. <<http://connecticuthistory.org/topics-page/revolutionary-war/>>.

⁸ Larned, Ellen Douglas. "Thompson's First Families." Thompson Church Magazine (1900): n. pag. Print.

⁹ Johnston, Henry Phelps. *The Record of Connecticut Men in the Military and Naval Service during the War of the Revolution, 1775-1783*. Baltimore, MD: Clearfield, 1997. Print.



London, where she was fitted; thereby allowing Captain Seth Harding and his crew, including John Jacobs, to begin their journey aboard this American naval ship.¹⁰

Seth Harding was selected by Congress to command the *Confederacy* two months prior, based on his notable record in New England society. For almost three years, Harding captained the frigate in her duty as a convoy service, while also leading raids on enemy merchant vessels.¹¹

As a seaman for the Continental Army, as opposed to the more common privateering, Jacobs showed his loyalty to the rebel cause. Working on a Continental frigate paid far less than sailing for privately owned vessels; a fact known by all colonists. John Jacobs made the conscious choice to serve the cause he believed in, as opposed to serving for profit.¹²

Americans were well aware of the legendary strength of the Royal navy, and therefore were realistic in their aspirations. The Continental Navy was tasked with defending the American coast and its harbors, making necessary supply runs, and disturbing British trade. The crews were made up of “adventuresome youths, chiefly farm lads, who made a few voyages to satisfy their wanderlust before returning to soil.”¹³ Despite their vivacious personalities and courageous attitudes, the seamen experienced a life far from that of a glamorous adventure. Every voyage was difficult, hazardous, and involved poor nutrition and unsanitary conditions.¹⁴

The *Confederacy*’s first voyage was to Philadelphia, where the crew lay in wait of orders that would send the frigate and its passengers on a perilous journey.¹⁵ By late October of 1779, the frigate had left Philadelphia and was en route to deliver the French Minister and American-Spanish Minister to France. Two months into the voyage, a violent storm developed. The ship was dismasted and nearly destroyed.¹⁶ After arriving in the West Indies for repairs on December 18th, the *Confederacy* once again took sail, this time without the diplomatic passengers, who had departed Martinique aboard the French ship, *L’Aurore*.¹⁷ For the next few

¹⁰ Steinburg, Mindy, ed. *The Frigate Confederacy Papers* (Collection 222). The Frigate Confederacy Papers, 1776-1786. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Jan. 2001. Web. 03 May 2016. <<http://www2.hsp.org/collections/manuscripts/c/confederacy0222.htm>>.

¹¹ Morris, Robert, E. James Ferguson, and John Catanzariti. *The Papers of Robert Morris, 1781-1784*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 1973. Print.

¹² Higginbotham, Don. *The War of American Independence; Military Attitudes, Policies, and Practice, 1763-1789*. New York: Macmillan, 1971. Print.

¹³ Larned, Ellen D. *History of Windham County, Connecticut*. Thompson, CT: Author, 1874. Print.

¹⁴ Larned, Ellen D. *History of Windham County, Connecticut*. Thompson, CT: Author, 1874. Print.

¹⁵ Johnston, Henry Phelps. *The Record of Connecticut Men in the Military and Naval Service during the War of the Revolution, 1775-1783*. Baltimore, MD: Clearfield, 1997. Print.

¹⁶ Steinburg, Mindy, ed. *The Frigate Confederacy Papers* (Collection 222). The Frigate Confederacy Papers, 1776-1786. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Jan. 2001. Web. 03 May 2016. <<http://www2.hsp.org/collections/manuscripts/c/confederacy0222.htm>>.

¹⁷ Johnston, Henry Phelps. *The Record of Connecticut Men in the Military and Naval Service during the War of the Revolution, 1775-1783*. Baltimore, MD: Clearfield, 1997. Print.



months, John Jacobs, his fellow seamen, and the captain of the *Confederacy* made supply runs for the Continental Army without any problems. That all changed in the spring of 1781.

On a supply run to the West Indies, the *Confederacy* was captured by two British ships off the Capes of Virginia. The English renamed the vessel *Confederate*, and sent her, the supplies, and the nearly 100 prisoners to "Charlestowne."¹⁸ After nearly two years at sea, away from family, receiving a trivial wage, John Jacobs became a prisoner of war.

Upon arriving in Charlestown, Continental Navy personnel were held aboard prison ships in the harbor. Aboard prison ships, continentals froze, starved, and were ravaged by disease. The men were plagued by not only the elements, but also captivity itself. Patriots were stranded, locked away, with little hope of ever being freed. They were suffocatingly packed into tight spaces and men were driven to despair.¹⁹ Many men chose to join British forces in exchange for salvation. John Jacobs, instead, showed perseverance by remaining loyal to George Washington and his deeply-rooted beliefs. For two years, John Jacobs remained in captivity, for it was not until the end of the war, in 1783, that POWs were released.²⁰

When the war ended, prisoners of war were released. John Jacobs finally traveled home to his wife of thirty-two years. For the rest of his life, John lived humbly in the town of Thompson, Connecticut. He served the church and community, and was elected one of six highway surveyors and collectors in 1785.²¹

The Jacobs Tavern continued to flourish, housing and feeding famous American Revolutionary War veterans and notable political leaders. On November 7, 1789, President George Washington breakfasted at the Tavern while traveling from Boston during the first Presidential Tour. For John Jacobs, a simple seaman who suffered two years of inhumane imprisonment for Washington's cause, meeting the face of the Revolution was monumental.

John Jacobs was never recognized as a captain, officer, nor a recipient of honor; however, when faced with life or liberty, he chose liberty. He chose to stand by his beliefs and suffer horrors as a prisoner of war. Jacobs was fortunate enough to live out the life he fought to preserve until his death in 1820: farming, tending his tavern, and caring for his family.

¹⁸ Steinburg, Mindy, ed. *The Frigate Confederacy Papers* (Collection 222). The Frigate Confederacy Papers, 1776-1786. The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Jan. 2001. Web. 03 May 2016. <<http://www2.hsp.org/collections/manuscripts/c/confederacy0222.htm>>.

¹⁹ Dzurec, David. "Prisoners of War and American Self-Image during the American Revolution." *War in History* 20.430 (2013): 430-51. Print.

²⁰ "POWs During The American Revolution - Archiving Early America." Archiving Early America. Archiving Early America, n.d. Web. 10 May 2016. <<http://www.earlyamerica.com/early-america-review/volume-6/pows-during-the-american-revolution/>>.

²¹ "Organization of Thompson, Connecticut." Connecticut Genealogy. N.p., 08 Aug. 2011. Web. 08 May 2016. <http://www.connecticutgenealogy.com/windham/organization_of_thompson.htm>.