COMMODORE JOHN BARRY.[1]

In the War of the Revolution some men made reputations over night. Like the fabled goddess who sprang full-fledged from the foam of the sea, they leaped into prominence by a single act. Others did yeoman service throughout that memorable campaign, but lacked the trumpeter to sound their praises, and were quite content to play their brave parts, rewarded by the consciousness of work well done, and little recking of the verdict of posterity. True worth is always modest and self-effacing. Therefore is it that the chronicler finds his task a pleasing one to piece together the fragments of one of these noble and unassuming lives into a mosaic worthy to hold an honored place in a picture of the period.

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

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[1] Paper read before Donegal Chapter, Daughters of the American Revolution, by Richard M. Reilly, Esq., on April 11, 1906.

The first record of him as a sea captain occurs on October 2, 1766, when he became at twenty-one master of a vessel that traded with the Barbadoes Islands. His life on the ocean wave was probably uneventful for the next eight years or more, but when he arrived in Philadelphia, on October 13, 1775, in command of the Black Prince, much history had been made since his departure the year before. "The embattled farmers of Lexington" had "fired the shot heard 'round the world." Ticonderoga had fallen, Bunker Hill had been fought, and Washington had assumed the command of the Continental Army under the shade of the stately elm in Cambridge.

Barry's arrival in Philadelphia was opportune, the Continental Congress having authorized the purchase and fitting out of two armed cruisers with authority to capture vessels bringing supplies to the British Army. Captain Barry was appointed to the command of one of them, the Lexington, named after the place of the first land battle. His commission was the first issued by the Marine Committee of Congress, and attests the high reputation that he enjoyed for courage, skill and experience. Much is contained in the simple record that he was the first officer appointed to the first vessel purchased, named after the place of the first battle. He was soon to add again to his record of initiative by reporting to the Marine Committee of Congress the first capture of a British vessel. This was on April 7, 1776, when off the Capes of Virginia, the Lexington, after a fierce engagement, caused the Edward to strike its colors. Philadelphia acclaimed the Irish sea-dog when he brought his prize up the bay four days later. John Adams wrote of it:

"We begin to make some figure here in the navy way." And Richard Henry Lee, in a letter describing the event, narrated that the enemy did not submit until he was near sinking. Barry's report of the victory is embraced in a few lines giving the bare details, and concluding, "I have the happiness to acquaint you that all our people behaved with much courage."

In the lower Delaware, Barry hovered with his good ship, lending his aid to protect the merchantmen arriving with supplies on Congress account from the assaults of the British men of war. When this work was scarce, he kept himself and crew from stagnating by sallying out to the capture of ocean prizes. In August, 1776, the Lady Susan and the Betsy, manned by the loyalist Goodriches, of Virginia, fell into his hands, and the proceedings of their condemnation as prizes may be read in the records of Congress of November 7, 1776. We next find our hero in command of the Effingham, one of the new vessels authorized by Congress. On the day that Captain Barry received his assignment, October 10, 1776, the rank of the officers of the new Continental Navy was fixed, Barry ranking seventh. Captain John Paul Jones was eighteenth on the list, to his extreme chagrin. But Barry and Jones were real sea-fighters, and they were soon to show by their careers of successful daring how impotent is a Congress committee to keep down men of native force and genius.

And now we come to a picturesque event in Barry's career. It is the winter month of December, 1776, when Washington, having been forced out of New York, is making his weary retreat across New Jersey, seeking to

put the Delaware between himself and the British foe. Saddened by the treachery of Lee, who should have co-operated with him, indignant at the Jerseymen, who, instead of flying to his standard, were going over to the Crown, his soldiers, ragged and forlorn—at no time during the war was the situation so desperate for the American cause. The world still wonders at the masterly way in which Washington retrieved the situation, crossing the Delaware on Christmas night amid the floating ice with his little force of 2.500 men, stealing around the enemy's outposts, and in quick succession winning the battles of Trenton and Princeton. Thus was safety plucked from the nettle danger in the most critical stage of the conflict. The English historian, Trevelyan, says of it: "It may be doubted whether so small a number of men ever employed so short a space of time with greater or more lasting results upon the history of the world." In this momentous struggle, Captain Barry bore a noble part. Though a sailor and a commissioned Captain, he organized a company of volunteers and aided in the transport of the troops across the icy waters, and was in the thick of the strife at Trenton and Princeton. Thus ably did he sustain the Father of His Country in his and its greatest trial.

We next find Barry after the Trenton campaign engaged in protecting Philadelphia by defensive naval operations. When in September, 1777, the British army entered Philadelphia and Congress fled to Lancaster, Barry, in his vessel, the Effingham, went down the Delaware to take charge of the business of preventing British vessels from coming up the river. Fierce river fighting followed for the

next two months, until the position growing untenable, the American fleet, under cover of night, passed up the river in front of the city, losing several of their vessels in the venture. To Barry, who was now in the upper Delaware, is given the credit of projecting the plan for destroying the enemy's vessels in the river by floating down machines resembling ship's buoys filled with powder. It failed of its purpose, but the consternation of the British and the fierce cannonading to which the powder kegs were exposed gave rise to the humorous ditty, "The Battle of the Kegs." There was a good laugh at the British expense, as will be seen by a sample verse from the satirical story:

"From morn to night these men of might
Display'd amazing courage;
And when the sun was fairly down,
Retired to eat their porridge."

Barry's restless spirit ill brooked the inaction to which he was condemned in the Upper Delaware, and he is found in the early part of 1778 inducing the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, then in Lancaster, to aid the Continental navy in harassing or destroying the British supply vessels coming up the Lower Delaware. On a night in February, he came down with twenty-seven men, in four row boats, passed Philadelphia unobserved, and captured the British ten-gun ship, the Alert, with two supply ships, the Mermaid and the Kitty. The dauntless Barry, with only a few more than a score of followers, leaped over the rail of the Alert, cutlass in hand, and succeeded in capturing the entire crew of 116 men. The fame of this exploit, together with the masterly style in which, against great

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John Barry

odds he avoided the re-capture of the Alert by a British sloop of war, added new laurels to the intrepid sea captain. It is said that as a result of it, Sir William Howe, then Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in America, offered Barry 20,000 guineas and the command of a British frigate, if he would go over to the English service. Barry's reply was brief and patriotic: "Not the value and command of the whole British fleet can seduce me from the cause of my country." Washington, at Valley Forge, was a close observer of Barry's work at this time, as he received much forage and supplies from him for his army. Under date of March 12, 1778, he thus writes our hero: "I......congratulate you on the success which has crowned your gallantry and address in the late attack upon the enemy's ships. Although circumstances have prevented you from reaping the full benefit of your conquests, yet there is ample consolation in the degree of glory which you have acquired."

Barry's next adventure, while not successful, showed him a genuine specimen of the fighting race. He had been appointed to the command of the Raleigh, of 32 guns, in September, 1778, and within a few hours after sailing was in a fierce fight with two English ships, one being of 64 guns. The conflict kept up until midnight, and Barry was compelled to set fire to his ship, himself and the greater part of his crew escaping to an island of the Penobscot. It was a brave fight against heavy odds, and the Marine Committee of Congress publicly complimented him for his "great gallantry."

We next see him directed by Congress to take command of an expedi-

tion against East Florida, where disaffection had been spreading. But the sailing of Sir Henry Clinton's fleet southward from New York, with reinforcements, caused a change in the plans, and the proposed expedition was abandoned. For the greater part of the year 1779 he commanded the letter of marque brig, the Delaware, capturing a man-of-war and several merchantmen. The treaty of alliance with France in February, 1778, gave its name to Barry's next command, the Alliance, which was the largest and best of the vessels of the Continental navy. We are tempted to smile just a little at this eulogy of her by Philip Freneau, the poet of the Revolution:

"See how she mounts the foaming wave,
Where other ships would find a grave;
Majestic, awful and serene,
She walks the ocean like its queen.

Barry's command of the Alliance continued until the close of the war, and he was devotedly attached to her. She enjoyed the unusual distinction of being the only frigate to escape capture or destruction, was in many important engagements, always coming off victorious, and was the fastest sailer in the navy. She bore across the seas Col. John Laurens, when he went to France for funds to move the French army from Rhode Island to Yorktown. On this voyage Barry gave our British cousins a lesson in international law, when, in the capture of a privateer of the enemy, he at once released a Venetian ship taken by the privateer. He held the capture to be contrary to the law of nations, which respects the property of neutrals. For this he was thanked by a resolution of Congress. Franklin wrote of it in a

letter from Paris on November 5th, 1781, to the President of Congress: "The Ambassador of Venice told me that he was charged by the Senate to express to me their grateful sense of the friendly behavior of Captain Barry, commander of the Alliance, in rescuing one of the ships of their State from an English privateer and setting her at liberty."

The next brilliant performance of our hero was the capture, in April, 1781, of two English brigs, the Mars and Minerva, after subduing a mutiny on his vessel that seriously impaired his fighting force. A month later he fought and captured the armed ship, the Atalanta,and the brig Trepassy, in a memorable engagement. Barry was wounded in the shoulder by a grape shot, and from loss of blood was compelled to go below. The colors of the Alliance had been shot away, the rigging was badly cut and the ship was greatly damaged. The first officer, feeling that all was lost, went to Barry to ask leave to surrender. Barry's answer was a defiant "No" and an order to be brought on deck, where he soon had the happy satisfaction of seeing the enemy lower their colors. Frost's "Naval Biography" says of this engagement: "It was considered a most brilliant exploit and an unequivocal evidence of the unconquerable firmness and intrepidity of the victor." It induced William Collins to ride his Pegasus in this martial fashion:

"In the brave old ship, 'Alliance,'
 We sailed from sea to sea;
Our proud flag in defiance
 Still floating fair and free;
We met the foe and beat him,
 As we often did before;
And ne'er afraid to meet him
 Was our brave old Commodore."

In 1781 the entire navy of the United States consisted of the Alliance and the Deane, and Barry was placed in command of this squadron of two by Robert Morris, Supervisor of Finances, the Admiralty and Naval Boards having been abolished. It will be thus seen that from seventh in rank he had arrived at the top of the list. He was chosen for the important work of transporting Lafayette to France after the battle of Yorktown, a mission to which Washington attached the highest importance, and out of which came influences that hastened the ending of the war. A warm friendship was established between Barry and Lafayette, as may be seen by Barry's letter to the great Frenchmen on November 17, 1782, wherein he writes: "You say you are going to America. I envy the Captain who is to take you. I wish I was in his place, but, although I am deprived of that happiness at present, I hope to have the pleasure to command the ship that conveys you to your native country."

Peace between the United States and England was agreed upon on February 3, 1783, while Barry was at sea on the Alliance. He had sailed from Havana on March 7, accompanied by the Continental ship Luzerne, the two vessels having on board about $200,000 of specie for Congress. Three days later they fell in with three British frigates, two of which Barry engaged and beat off. One of these was the Sybille, which was silenced after the Alliance lost eleven men. This was the last naval battle of the war, and it was fitting that it should be fought by the nation's greatest sea warrior. Of this battle, a good story is extant, which, however, has no authority to support it. It was said that Barry, when hailed on this occasion by the

enemy, answered: "The United States ship Alliance, saucy Jack Barry—half Irishman, half Yankee—who are you?" From what we know of Barry's modesty, the note of bombast in this greeting is somewhat jarring. But perhaps it is not well to examine historical yarns of this type too closely.

When the war was ended, Barry joined the merchant service, and he does not again become a national figure until on March 19, 1794, we find him offering his services to President Washington to command the squadron against the Algerines, those Corsairs of the African coast having caused much havoc to the commerce of the United States. From this grew the present American Navy. The records of the War Department of June 5, 1794, show that Washington appointed Barry as the ranking commander of the new naval armament ordered to be built by Congress. The commission was signed by Washington on his birthday, on February 22, 1797, and is marked "No. One." The appointment was well received in the country. Cooper's History of the Navy says: "Captain Barry was the only one of the six surviving Captains of the Revolutionary War who was not born in America, but he had passed nearly all his life in it, and was thoroughly identified with his adopted countrymen in interest and feeling. He had often distinguished himself during the Revolution, and, perhaps, of all the naval captains that remained, he was the one who possessed a greater reputation for experience, conduct and skill. His appointment met with general approbation, nor did anything ever occur to give the government reason to regret its selection."

Barry's first task at the head of the

young navy was the superintending of the building of the frigate, the United States, the first vessel of the present navy, which was launched in Philadelphia on May 10, 1797, amid great popular rejoicing Miss Eleanor Donnelly's spirited poem, commemorative of the occasion, thus begins:

"A May-day sun—a noon-day tide—
And a warm west wind for the ladies fair!
A hundred craft at anchor ride,
Their bright flags gemming the Delaware.

"Ten thousand freemen crowd the quay,
The housetops other thousands hold;
All Philadelphia throngs to see
The launch of Barry's frigate bold.

"The gallant ship, United States,
First of our navy's valiant fleet—
A nation's fame on her future waits,
A nation's hopes in her present meet."

Two noted American seamen began their careers with Barry on the United States: Stephen Decatur, who was to become famous in the War with Tripoli and with Great Britain, and Charles Stewart, the grandfather of Charles Stewart Parnell. Service under Barry was eagerly sought, as, while a strict disciplinarian, he was eminently just and considerate. It was Barry who, in a letter of January 8, 1798, suggested the creation of a navy department, and also that navy yards should be located for ships and supplies. The organization of the navy into a separate department followed three months later. In the difficulties that arose with France,and in command of the American fleet in the West Indies, he served with distinction. When peace came in 1801, Barry was retained in the service. The

remainder of his life-story may be briefly summed up. His health, broken by his many arduous campaigns, began to fail, and at his country seat, at Strawberry Hill, near Philadelphia, he gently drifted into the valley of the shadow. He died on September 13, 1803. In its notice of his death, the Pennsylvania Gazette thus feelingly refers to his life and services: "His naval achievements would of themselves have reflected much honor on his memory, but those could not have endeared it to his fellow-citizens had he wanted those gentle and amiable virtues which embellish the gentlemen and ennoble the soldier." He had been twice married, but, like Washington, was childless. It has been beautifully said of Washington that under the Divine plan he was to be childless that a nation might call him Father. May not in a lesser degree the same sentiment hold good for the Father of the American Navy?

The record of this remarkable man will not be found in the recognized histories of the Revolutionary period. The friend of Washington and Lafayette, who was twice thanked by Congress, who was in command of the Continental sea forces when Cornwallis surrendered, who suggested the creation of the Navy Department and held its first commission, seems to have been strangely ignored. Vainly is Bancroft and McMaster searched for some light on his career. The newer histories of Higginson, Wilson and Garner and Lodge make no allusion to him. Larned's History for Ready Reference omits him. Winsor's "Narrative and Critical History of America" simply alludes to Barry's loss of the Raleigh without comment. It remained for Martin I. J. Griffin, of Philadelphia, a painstaking and faith-

ful historian, to dig into the records of a century or more ago and bring to light the salient facts in the life of this great sea captain. From his book, "Commodore John Barry," printed by subscription a few years ago, were obtained the data for this paper. The book is a valuable contribution to the history of the country, which has so long permitted one of its truest heroes to remain in comparative obscurity. An instalment of justice was obtained four years ago, when the torpedo boat destroyer "Barry" was launched, and the wrong of a century will be partially righted if Congress passes the bill now pending in the House appropriating $25,000 to erect in Washington a monument inscribed: "John Barry, the Father of the American Navy."

He sleeps the dreamless sleep of the dead in old St. Mary's Cemetery, on Fourth street, above Spruce street, Philadelphia, near to the lordly waters of the Delaware that had borne him so often to and from the sea. Until 1876 no marble shaft reared its height to heaven to recall his life and services, but in that Centennial year the Catholic Total Abstinence Union of America placed his statue on their fountain in Fairmount Park, at the foot of George's Hill. That same year his grave in St. Mary's Cemetery was marked by his friends and fellow churchmen with a tomb, the inscription on which was composed in part by his friend, Dr. Benjamin Rush, one of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence. This brief sketch of the life of a great and good man may fitly end with an extract from the message on the sculptured marble:

Sacred to the memory of

COMMODORE JOHN BARRY,

Father of the American Navy.
Let the Christian, Patriot and Soldier who visits these mansions of the dead view this monument with respect and veneration.
Beneath it rest the remains of JOHN BARRY, who was born in County Wexford, Ireland, in the year 1745.
America was the object of his patriotism and the aim of his usefulness and ambition.
At the beginning of the Revolutionary War he held the commission of Captain in the then limited Navy of the Colonies.
His achievements in battle and his renowned naval tactics merited for him the position of Commodore, and to be justly regarded as the father of the American navy.
He fought often and bled in the cause of freedom, but his deeds of valor did not diminish in him the virtues which adorn his private life.
He was eminently gentle, kind, just and charitable, and no less beloved by his family and friends than by his grateful country."

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