

THE LIVERPOOL PACKET

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OF the matters recorded concerning the town of Liverpool, none compares either in point of vital interest in its time or in challenge to the imagination with that of privateering. Almost from the time of its settlement by the English this activity made its influence felt, slightly in earlier years, acutely from 1776 to 1815, in a diminishing degree since, ripples from the centre of agitation of the War of 1812 not yet having lost themselves on the shores of time.

The word "privateering" suggests various things to various people; to some, a questionable mode of acquiring wealth; to others, a legalized method of harassing an enemy; to this one, piracy; to that, patriotism. The perspective afforded by time, contemporary history and newspaper files, especially those of the enemy, letters, diaries, log-books, all provide the means to determine whether the Maritimes were justified or not in resorting to this mode of warfare.

Privateers were owned, armed and equipped by private citizens and used as defenders of the coast, intelligence craft, commerce destroyers.

The Liverpool privateersmen were of excellent stock, all leading citizens of their community, well and favorably known to British naval officers of the time. When the wars were over, many filled positions of honour as members of parliament, judges, ship-owners, merchants. The crews, mostly fishermen, were picked from volunteers, the success of a cruise depending on each man's ability in seamanship and his skill in the use of naval weapons. None were on wages. All fought on a share system.

Neither officers nor men were lacking in qualities in accordance with the best traditions of the sea. They were daring and intrepid, self-sacrificing and patriotic mariners. There is ample proof of their bravery, and there are many instances of their chivalry. Some of the most brilliant exploits upon the ocean were the deeds of men in command of "private armed ships".

Liverpool, "famous home of famous privateers", had the most famous of all, the glamorous *Liverpool Packet*, "the greatest privateer of all time". Where her keel first struck water, was never known. Captured by a British war vessel on the African coast

when serving as a tender to a Spanish slaver, she appears first in Nova Scotian records November, 1811, when put up at auction in Halifax at the Salter Street hostelry over whose door was carved a double eagle. She was a small schooner, almost a wedge in shape, with bold bows and two tall spars that leaned back sharply towards a narrow stern. Her length was fifty-three feet, four inches; her displacement, sixty-seven tons. She looked fast as the gulls that circled all day above the harbour of Britain's western sea-fortress. Her purchaser was Enos Collins. Other shareholders were Benjamin Knaut, John and James Barss, all four former privateersmen, but at that time merchants and ship-owners established at Liverpool.

Named *The Liverpool Packet* and nicknamed *The Black Joke*, the little schooner was placed in the coastal service between Liverpool and Halifax. She was lying in Halifax Harbour, June 27, 1812, when the British frigate, *Belvidera*, came into port bringing news of the declaration of war made nine days before by the United States against Great Britain, and having on board seventeen casualties of an all-day fight with an American squadron of five ships under Commodore Rodgers. Hastily placing on board five rusty cannon, and collecting all the Liverpool seamen available, Capt. John Freeman of the *Packet* crowded on all sail and sped away to bring first tidings of the war to Enos Collins and Liverpool. Britain had not yet accepted the challenge of the United States, and letters-of-marque, though earnestly desired by the *Packet's* owners, were not yet issued. In the meantime the *Packet* was equipped with five guns—two twelve-pounders, one six-pounder, two four-pounders—and her crew was increased to forty-five. Employed by the Nova Scotia Government as a cartel flying the white flag of truce, she went to Boston at the end of July on her first war voyage. From the middle of the month the Nova Scotia coast had swarmed with American privateers making captures almost daily. Their depredations, at length, on August 24, 1812, led Governor Sherbrooke, who had previously given a letter-of-marque to an English owned Halifax ship against the French, to grant one to the *Packet* endorsed on the back "against France, etc". However, "etc." was interpreted to mean any enemy of Britain, including the United States. Provided with this commission Capt. John Freeman, veteran privateersman of French and Spanish wars, placed on board provisions and military supplies for sixty days. The *Packet's* lieutenant was Joseph Barss, Junior, who won his spurs in privateering and gave evidence of the resourcefulness that was to distinguish him at sea when,

at the age of twenty-three, he took the *Lord Spencer* to the Spanish Main, saved her provisions and crew when she was lost, and continued his cruise in a tender.

On August 31, 1812, her decks aswarm with officers and men, the Red Jack streaming out from her mast-head, the *Liverpool Packet* passed the Fort whence the band played her across the bar and out the port, the first Nova Scotian privateer to get to sea. Who that watched her sailing down the harbour dreamed that she was beginning a career unequalled in the history of privateering, or that the name of the big, keen-eyed man in lieutenant's uniform on her deck would become a household one along the Atlantic sea-board, and more than a century later set the blood atingle to old romance? The sea-eagle and the little sea-hawk were hunting mates; their prey, American shipping; their hunting-ground, the Atlantic.

Awaiting on St. George's Bank the home coming of American vessels from Europe early on the morning of September 7, the *Packet* made her first capture, the *Middlesex*, six times her size, bound to New York with English coal and salt. A prize crew was placed on board; but before she set sail for Liverpool, the wine-laden *Factor* approached, was hove to by a shot across her bows, boarded and seized. By the time the thirst of the three crews had been assuaged with Oporto wine, the *Packet's* unseasoned men may not have been amenable to their elderly captain, and the command was handed over to Joseph Barss, who, on September 13, brought home the first-fruits of her privateering and forwarded their papers to Halifax. Two days later he was off to sea again, and on September 23, while the sea-hawk lazily rode the Atlantic swell, an old time bombarder, the *Maria* of St. Antonio, carrying a mixed cargo from the Western Isles, was sighted and became her third victim.

On his third voyage Joseph Barss determined to strike a blow at the domestic commerce of the United States by capturing coasters serving the ports between Boston and the South. On October 14 he stationed himself off Cape Cod, the long sandbank hugged by traders between New York and the East. In a five-day foray between this point and Cape Ann the *Packet* captured and sent into Liverpool five American schooners whose cargoes intended for Boston, New York and Baltimore were sold at auction in Halifax. As the British navy up to this time had practically not interfered with the coasters, the *Packet's* raid produced a storm of protest in the press of New England, which raged while Joseph Barss sailed to Halifax for supplies and a renewal of his commission.

His cruising ground on the fourth voyage was off the Port of Salem, where, evading the privateers, revenue cutters and naval vessels sent out in search of him, he captured inward and outward bound ships. Captures made on November 10, 11, 12, 13 and 18 all reached port with their cargoes of provisions.

"Coasters, Look out!" warned an American paper, and proceeded to inform its readers that the *Packet* had captured a schooner and two fishing vessels, that three cargo laden vessels were seized in one afternoon, and that their captains, sent into Chatham, had their private property restored to them and were well treated. The sea-hawk struck again and again on this eminently successful cruise. A captain whose vessel had been taken and released stated that while in sight he saw her board nine more, of which she kept six. The industry of "New England's bane" kept shipping and commercial interests in a rage. "If the Government does not see fit to protect our coast from one paltry privateer, would it be amiss for merchants concerned to attempt protection?" sarcastically asked one victim. Indignation reached the point where it was decided to man a vessel with seventy men to sail to clip the wings of the raider. Two captains organized a parade through Salem streets led by a flag-bearer, a fifer, a drummer and a strapping privateersman, calling for volunteers for the expedition whose object was glory and prize money. In four hours men and equipment were on board, and she cleared for Saint John, N. B., in pursuit of the *Packet*. Meantime that elusive little ship was speeding to Halifax, where Joseph Barss received for his fifth cruise a commission dated November 24, 1812, authorizing him to seize vessels belonging to the United States and to bring them and their cargoes "into a British port, there to remain until His Majesty's pleasure and final determination shall be known therein".

A lumber-laden schooner was taken off Cape Cod before a December gale lasting a week sent Joseph Barss to the open sea, where, hove to, he rode it out. From the log-book of one of his prizes: "At midnight tremendous Gails and Sea on, the seas breaking over the vessel from Stern to Stearn".

With the resumption of coasting traffic, the *Packet* re-appeared and reaped a late but abundant harvest. New England newspapers described the *Packet* holding up a whole fleet from Vineyard Sound on December 16. The wrathful *Boston Messenger* declared that it was shameful that an insignificant fishing schooner (?) twenty days out from Liverpool should have seized shipping valued at \$70,000, following the capture of cargoes worth at least \$50,000.

On December 19 the *Columbian Sentinel*, Boston, apostrophized its readers: "All awake! *The Liverpool Packet* has again raided our coast".

Two days later the look-out on the Fort at Liverpool sighted the *Packet* standing in to the outer harbour, her two latest captures in her wake. The Viking was bringing his ship home for the Yuletide. Moving swiftly to her anchorage, she passed twenty-one of her captures riding at anchor under the bleak December sky. Never again was the Mersey to give a like welcome to one of her sailors home from the sea. Though little of the prize money was distributed until late in 1814, lack of funds did not detract from the crew's Christmas cheer. Fire-places in taverns were warm and bright, rum was plentiful, and the drab winter lanes and streets echoed and re-echoed the wild strains of their sea-songs.

As few coasters rounded Cape Cod in mid-winter, the privateersmen remained in Liverpool till the end of February. A great gale early in the year played havoc among the many vessels in the harbour. Some broke from their moorings, others had to be steered on to rocks to prevent them from driving out to sea. The *Packet* was driven ashore, but was soon refloated, as were all her prizes.

On the sixth voyage whose letter-of-marque carried the date, February 10, 1813, she was accompanied to her fishing-ground off Cape Cod by two new cruisers, the *Sir John Sherbrooke* and the *Retaliation*. Competition did not interfere with her success. Not only did the first prize fall to her, but in nine days she sent seven vessels into Liverpool.

An historian of this period credits Joseph Barss with an intelligence system as good of its kind in 1813 as that of the British navy in the Great War. He had an uncanny sense of the approach of war-brigs and the coast patrol, and of the time and place to secure the best prizes. He changed the locality of his operations so quickly that it did not seem possible that the vessel which was reported here to-day and there to-morrow could be one and the same. Her speed was amazing. On a Sunday off Portland she captured a schooner, and on Monday, off Point Judith, 250 miles away, a sloop. Added to her mysterious comings and goings was the enigma of her change of rig, her name and that of her commander, all stated at times incorrectly by her crew to deceive their prisoners.

So successful was this cruise that it was necessary to go to Liverpool in March for more men. An Eastport, Maine, paper of March 6 expressed the opinion that the coasting trade would be

entirely stopped unless the Government took considerable pains to protect it. The *Newburyport Herald*, March 12:—"Our private armed ships that were to sweep the British commerce from the seas have all been captured—not one escaped". Six had armament ranging from 12 to 18 guns.

The seventh cruise found the *Packet* patrolling the neighbourhood of Maine. Capturing a large sloop twice her size, Joseph Barss used it as a decoy and, mingling with a fleet of American coasters working north, at dusk he closed with the largest. The remainder of the coasters fled to Portland and the protection of the navy, while the *Packet* convoyed her two valuable prizes to Liverpool and returned to the Maine coast on her eighth cruise.

April's gleanings were four schooners, two sloops, two brigs and a ship. May found her still on the north shore making captures, and on a Saturday and Sunday blockading Gloucester. The seething citizens sent out a brig to seize her. The *Packet* fled, the brig pursued. Stout American sweeps in the hands of the erstwhile fishermen gave her an advantage, and she escaped the brig and two other craft that came out to aid her.

One of the boldest proceedings of Joseph Barss and his men was to anchor for the night in Tarpaulin Cove, and to land the next day on Nashome Island to have a frolic or picnic. It was a strategic spot to lie in wait for small craft making daylight runs from port to port, and larger vessels might be caught here threading their way into Vineyard Sound or creeping past the islands before making a dash for the open sea, but a dangerous place for holiday-making. Danger, however, added zest to the crew's enjoyment of their frolic, for it was their familiar.

On that day of complete relaxation, when he savoured to the full the satisfaction that comes from a sense of accomplishment, probably Joseph Barss reached the high-water mark of his career. Behind him were youthful dreams realized, ambitions gratified, outstanding success; and as there is a period of rest at flood-tide before the ebb begins, so was the tenor of his life for the next few weeks unchanged, after which came capture, imprisonment, an alien mode of life.

While the crew picnicked, Falmouth men hastily manned a sloop and set out to capture them and their ship; but luck was still with the *Liverpool Packet*, and she outwitted the enemy to irritate them further by taking a deeply loaded schooner in sight of one of their own vessels, to chase a sloop into Wood's Hole, to essay the cutting out of a brig and schooner fleeing from her to shelter in Holme's Hole. Liverpool saw a steady stream of her

captures coming over the bar. On May 23rd, 1813, Joseph Barss concluded his ninth voyage by bringing into Halifax two brigs and a sloop. At the Court of Vice-Admiralty thirty-three prizes were credited to the *Liverpool Packet*.

It is morning on the coast of Maine, June 11, 1812. The *Packet* at anchor, a sail coming over the horizon. Not a trader, as at first supposed, when she threw her Red Jack and British ensign to the breeze, but nemesis in the form of the *Thomas* of Portsmouth, a new fast-sailing Baltimore-built schooner, heavily armed—15 guns to the *Packet's* 5—flying the Stars and Stripes. The tide has turned. *The Packet's* short range guns are no match for the long ones of the *Tom* and, except one, are thrown overboard and she turns to flee. The five-hour race is on. Her men drag the six pounder to the stern, feed it with the six-pound shot, then try a four-pound ball wrapped in canvas which serves only to split the muzzle.

The *Thomas* is swiftly overhauling the sea-hawk, and to save useless loss of life fighting at close range the *Packet* strikes her colours.

The eagle's wings are clipped, the little sea-hawk is a prize to the claws of the *Thomas*. Five weeks from the day of the frolic the *Packet* came to anchor in Portsmouth harbour. The prisoners, manacled, and guarded by militia were marched through lanes and narrow streets by a route easily traced on an old map to the long jail on Islington street. Here captain and crew were treated with great severity, their raids on commerce—no complaints of cruelty or outrage were ever made against them—not inclining their captors to consider parole and exchange. After weary months of imprisonment Joseph Barss was set free through the repeated intercession of Sir John Sherbrooke, and exchanged on terms that did not permit him to resume privateering.

Three weeks after the capture of the *Packet* by the *Thomas*, the latter became a prize to a British frigate after a chase of thirty-two hours, and was taken into Halifax and sold to Liverpool privateersmen, the largest shareholder being Joseph Barss Sr., representative of Queens in the House of Assembly. The *Thomas* of Portsmouth now became the *Wolverine* of Liverpool. It must have given grim satisfaction to the senior Barss to send destiny's instrument in the capture of his great son to wrest from her former owners prize after prize, eight of which she sent in before the new year.

In 1814, on Joseph Barss's return to Liverpool from Portsmouth prison, it was a strange freak of war that gave him as his

first command the *Wolverine*, sailing not as a privateer, but as a trader to the West Indies. Returning in August, he found that the American Government considered his presence on the high seas in any capacity a violation of his parole. His sea-faring had ended.

Apparently he remained in Liverpool the next four years. On July first, 1817, a farm in Kentville was assigned to him and to it he removed his family. Here he turned his sword into a ploughshare without success. For seven years the losing struggle went on. The sea called insistently. When his grass ran in waves before the wind, he saw instead the white horses of the Atlantic racing from Western Head to Coffin Island, the spray rising in broken columns on Neil's Ledges, the long wash of the waves in Sandy Cove. In the long restless nights he dreamed of his wonder-ship "and the wheel's kick and the white sails shaking". When the sun lay still on his hill-side farm, he longed for "a windy day with the white clouds flying, and the blown spume, and the flung spray".

At length on August 3, 1824, in his forty-ninth year there came "a quiet sleep, a sweet dream, the long trick was over".

He lies in the shadow of the oaks in the beautiful Kentville cemetery, far from his sea-side home, and the resting-place of any of his fellow-rovers.

Two months after his capture the *Liverpool Packet*, so recently the "evil genius of the American coasting trade", was back on the Nova Scotia sea-board as an American privateer under the name, *Young Teazer's Ghost*, in command of Wm. B. Dobson, former captain of the *Young Teazer*, destroyed in Mahone Bay. It was a fruitless cruise, and at its end Capt. John Perkins took over the command and changed her name to *Portsmouth Packet*. Change of name intended to woo did not win Lady Luck, for in the Bay of Fundy on October 5, the British brig-of-war, *Fantomé*, sighted her and for thirteen hours pursued her, ending the chase off Mount Desert. Once more in British-hands she was brought into Halifax, and went through the usual prize court proceedings.

For a second time in her known history she was sold as a prize in the garrison city; for the second time she was bid in by Enos Collins, and again given the name *Liverpool Packet*. 420 pounds, the amount for which she was sold, was a small sum to pay for the schooner that had brought in prizes worth \$150,000 before her capture by the *Thomas*. A younger man now trod her quarter-deck, Caleb Seely, twenty-seven years old, a United Empire Loyalist of New Brunswick.

Commissioned November 25, 1813, she shortly returned from the American coast with three prizes. So successful was the *Packet* under her new commander that the New England papers in their anger called names. *Newburyport Herald*: "A glance at the marine news will show that a contemptible picaroon has been permitted to prowl around our harbour and capture our property to the value of \$60,000".

The *Packet* came home for Christmas, 1813, and in January went on a cruise with the *Retaliation*. Halifax sent a despatch to a Boston paper February 10, that all the privateers of Nova Scotia were hauled up and dismantled during the American embargo which lasted to the middle of May.

When the coasting trade was renewed, the privateers again became active. The *Liverpool Packet* took eight sloops in May and seven in early June. She raided shipping on the sea-board of Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut and New York till October, when Caleb Seely gave up privateering and established himself as a merchant and ship-owner in Liverpool where he died in 1869.

The last commander of the *Liverpool Packet* during the war was Lewis Knaut. A tightening of the blockade by the British navy and an increase in British privateers lessened the number of prizes captured, yet she sent in four before Christmas. The *Fair Trader* was the last prize to be brought before the prize court by the *Packet*.

On December 13, 1814, a Boston paper makes this last mention of her: "A gentleman from Nantucket says the privateers *Liverpool Packet* and *Rolla* are anchored there". Her career as a privateer was over, and so far as known her name does not appear again in any record of that time.

Where she was built and her first name are as little known as her subsequent career. The story of her escapes and successes, her disappearances and victorious return, makes a brilliant page in Nova Scotian history, and lifts our part in the War of 1812 out of the commonplace and into the realm of romance. When one in three prizes to reach port was a good average, she succeeded in getting fifty before the prize courts. She is credited with from 100 to 200 captures, some of which were released, some lost, some recaptured by the Americans. Their value is variously estimated from \$262,000 to \$1,000,000. Even the smaller sum was a large amount for a schooner the size of a harbour tug to earn in little more than two years.

She was the first Nova Scotian privateer to get to sea, the second to be granted a letter-of-marque, and the only one to strike

a decisive blow at the commerce along the New England coast during the first five months of the war, seriously interrupting domestic trade. Express teams had to be employed to do the work of the coasters. Hundreds of canvas-covered waggons, drawn by long teams of horses or oxen, were seen on the highways between the north and the south carrying on exchange of products. The excessive fear caused by her blockade of American ports started the scheme of the Cape Cod Canal the cost of which, it was said, would have been covered by losses inflicted in two of her cruises alone.

She leaves vivid pictures in the mind, subjects for an artist's brush. Responsive as a sentient being, staunch and swift, gallant and gay, she captures the imagination and lives in the memory mingled with feelings of pride and tenderness.