

Edward Preble

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Section One: Prologue

Edward Preble, captain of three United States Frigates during the late 1780s through the early 1800s. In this research paper an underappreciated captain whose actions shaped the way modern navy's operate is going to be given the light of day. The reason I wanted to research Commodore Edward Preble is because of his time on the USS Constitution. Many people are familiar with its time during the war of 1812, but its actions before then are lesser known. Prebles actions as captain of the USS Constitution and Commodore of the Mediterranean were some of the most notable during the early nineteenth century.



Section Two: Introduction

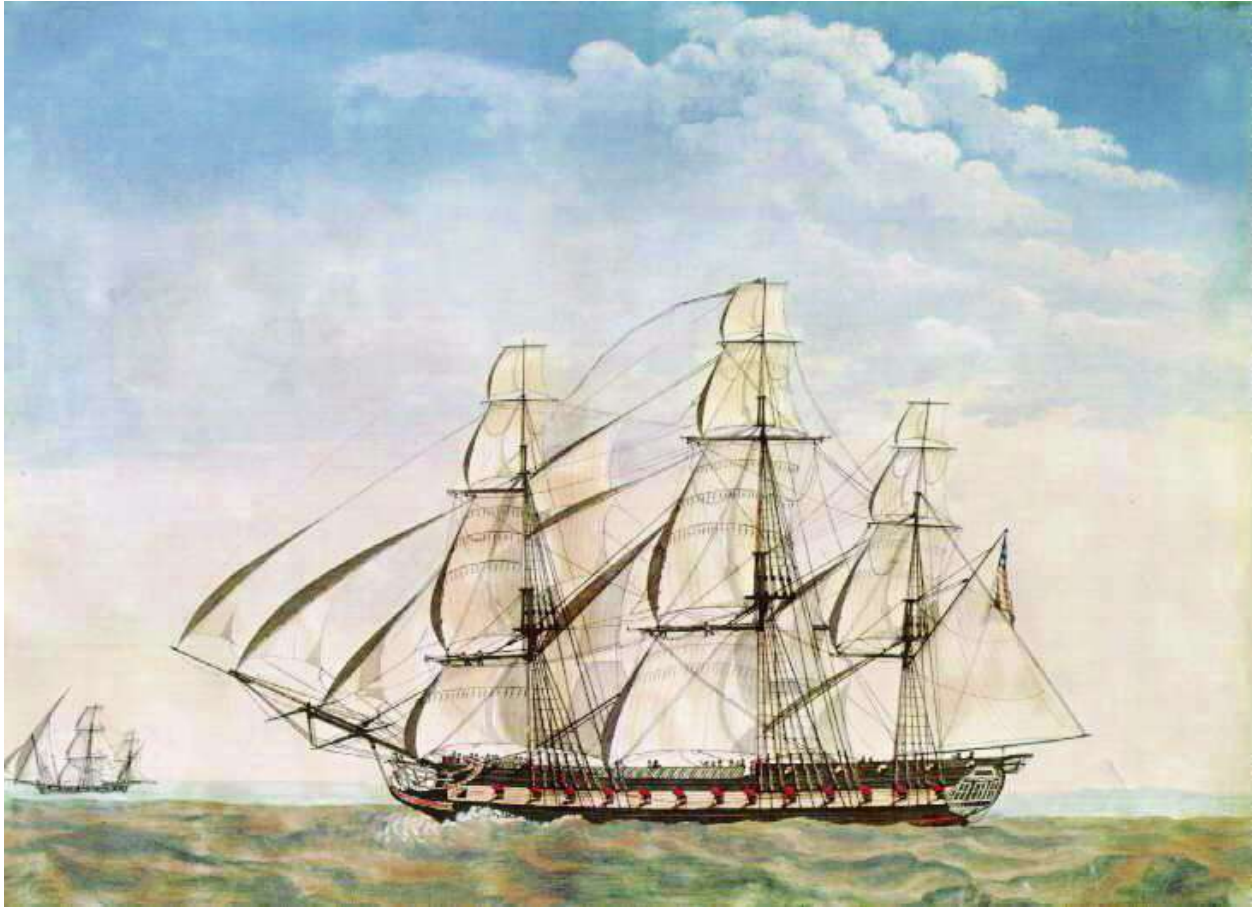
Preble was born on the 15 of April, 1761 to Jedidiah Preble and Mehitable Bangs. Jedidiah was a maritime sailor for thirty years¹ before leaving to enroll in a provincial regiment in Falmouth, Maine. He then became a lieutenant-colonel in the French and Indian War, and later a Brigadier General before retiring to be a local judge. Preble having a notable father influenced him to take a liking to military life and was sent to Dummer Academy in byfield Massachusetts.²

When he was fourteen the Revolutionary War broke out, not long after his hometown of Falmouth, Maine (Modern day Portland, Maine) was burned down in the burning of Falmouth by British Captain Henry Mowat. This event made him an ill-tempered child who grew to be even more aggressive as an adult, yet this did not stop him from inspiring loyalty by those around him.³ The burning of his home prompted him to enroll in the Massachusetts State Navy in 1779 at the age of 18.

Section Three: On the Ocean

Edward Preble was appointed to the 12 gun brig *Hope*, where he quickly became an Officer. Later his father requested him to be on a different ship the 26 gun frigate *Protector*. The *Protector* patrolled from Falmouth Maine to Nantucket Massachusetts. The *Protector* was then captured by the *HMS Jersey*, and the crew was taken prisoner. After only one month Preble was released in exchange for a British Officer. Prison ships were very dangerous to be on due to the constant outbreaks of typhus, poor sanitation, and lack of proper nutrition.⁴ For the rest of the war Preble was on the *Winthrop* where captured many British Privateers, an armed ship owned by private individuals instead of an organized navy.

For the next fifteen years Preble was a merchant sailor until the United States Congress commissioned six frigates in 1794. In 1798 the first of the frigates that Preble was appointed to was the *USS Pickering* as a lieutenant. The *Pickering* under command of lieutenant Preble patrolled the Dutch East Indies during the Quasi-War. During this time the *Pickering* was the first ship to fly the American Flag in the Dutch East Indies. In 1799 Preble was promoted to Captain and transferred to the *USS Essex*. Only a year later the *Pickering* was sunk in a Gale in the indian ocean where all sailors were lost at sea.⁵



(The Frigate USS Essex)

During Prebles time as captain of the Essex the ship was the first to cross the equator and the Cape of Good Hope twice.⁶ During its deployment the Essex escorted many convoys to the West Indies, before Captain Preble was transferred back to America. During his time in the United States Preble married Mary Deering in 1801. Mary was prominent member of the Deering family, who owned much of modern day Portland ME.

To preface what happens next a man by the name of Valentine Morris needs to be discussed. During the time in between ships the Barbary war had broken out in Tripoli (Modern day Libya). The Libyan government requested payment from the United States for safe passage

through the Mediterranean, but the U.S. denied it. America then sent a small fleet to escort merchant ships and in return Tripoli declared war on the United States. Valentine Morris was the Commodore of the Mediterranean during the first part of the Barbary War. Valentine Morris did a poor job at protecting American interests. Morris was later captured by the pirates and when the United States paid the ransom Thomas Jefferson stated that “ The tenure of Richard Valentine Morris, on the other hand, was an utter fiasco, as Morris was neither an effective commander nor a very smart one.”⁷ Upon return to the United States Morris was immediately stripped of all command and was sent home.

After the failure of Morris to protect Americans in the Mediterranean Jefferson bypassed many senior officers to promote Preble to Commodore. Along with the promotion Preble was given a new frigate to command, the *USS Constitution*. In 1803 Preble and six other ships sailed to the Mediterranean to fight in the Barbary War. When Preble was promoted to Commodore all of his officers were between the ages of 15 and 30, and he claimed he had been given “just a pack of school boys.”⁸ One of the stories during the voyage to Tripoli was an encounter with a British ship. During one night when sailing near the Strait of Gibraltar Preble sighted a British ship, to which he would hail. When the British ship did not stop, he hailed again and said “I am now going to hail you for the last time. If a proper answer is not returned, I will fire a shot into you.” The British captain then responded by saying "If you give me a shot, I'll give you a broadside." Edward Preble then asked the ship to identify herself and she claimed to be the *HMS Donegal*, an 84 gun ship of the line. Ships of the line were blockade ships that had strong hulls and large numbers of guns. Preble told his crew to “Blow your matches” to ready the guns for a broadside attack. Before things could escalate further another British ship intervened and

apologized because the ship was not actually the *HMS Donegal*, but instead the *HMS Maidstone* a 32 gun frigate. This event gave the crew of the *Constitution* the name “Preble’s Boys” since they were just as hard headed and fearless as he was.⁹

When they finally arrived they began to blockade Tripoli harbor to prevent any supplies or men being moved by sea. Preble had already successfully defeated the Morroicans by using blockades.¹⁰ During this time the *USS Philadelphia* ran aground in the harbor and was captured by the pirates. Although the crew abandoned the ship, it was still seaworthy with minimal repair. When the pirates boarded the ship Preble knew they were going to use the ship to fight against them. To prevent this from happening Preble sent a boat of men to light the *Philadelphia* on fire.¹¹ Lieutenant Stephen Decatur commanded the boat that set the ship ablaze. Five days later four frigates would arrive from the United States to take over for Commodore Preble.

On Preble’s return home he visited Rome and was treated like a hero. Preble was also invited into the Vatican and met the Pope, to which the Pope said that he “has done more for the cause of Christianity than the most powerful nations in ages.” When Preble arrived in the United States in 1804 he was given a hero's welcome as well as given a sword and a gold medal.¹² Although many people encouraged him to move to Washington and be a strategic part of the Navy, Preble’s poor health and the birth of his son Edward Deering Preble. Not long after this Preble died in 1807 at the age of 46 due to illness. Preble was buried in Eastern Cemetery in Portland. To honor the work done by Preble six ships were named after him.¹³

Endnotes

1. New England Historic Genealogical Society Staff. *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register*. Vol. 13. Portland, Maine: Samuel G. Drake Publisher, 1859.
2. 1972, revised 1996 - Edward Preble, a Naval Biography 1761-1807, by Christopher McKee. Published by United States Naval Institute, Annapolis,
3. *ibid*
4. Log of HMS Jersey, 19 June 1745. Cited in Willis, Sam (2008), *Fighting at Sea in the Eighteenth Century: The Art of Sailing Warfare*, p. 158
5. "Pickering." Naval History and Heritage Command. August 20, 2015. Accessed June 17, 2019. <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/p/pickering.html>.
6. "Essex I (Man-of-War)." Essex I (Man-of-War). July 8, 2015. Accessed June 17, 2019. <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/e/essex-i.html>.
7. "From Thomas Jefferson to Edward Preble, 18 November 1802," *Founders Online*, National Archives, accessed June 17, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-39-02-0022>. [Original source: *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 39, *13 November 1802–3 March 1803*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 33.]
8. Edward Preble, a Naval Biography 1761-1807, by Christopher McKee. Published by United States Naval Institute, Annapolis, MD
9. Preble's Boys - Commodore Edward Preble and the Birth of American Sea Power. by Fletcher Pratt
10. "To James Madison from Edward Preble, 3 June 1804." Edward Preble to James Madison. June 3, 1804. Syracuse Harbor, Syracuse, New York.
11. Edward Preble, a Naval Biography 1761-1807, by Christopher McKee. Published by United States Naval Institute, Annapolis, MD
12. "To Thomas Jefferson from Edward Preble, 30 July 1805." Edward Preble to President Thomas Jefferson. July 30, 1805. Portland, Maine.
13. "Edward Preble (1761-1807) - Find A Grave Memorial." Find A Grave. June 8, 2003. Accessed June 18, 2019. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/7550250/edward-preble>.

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