

THE FIRST NAVAL BATTLE OF THE REVOLUTION AT MACHIAS, MAINE JUNE 1775. BY HON. GEORGE F. TALBOT, OF PORTLAND*

The British invasion came in conflict with the aroused national feeling at Machias just as it did at Lexington, and Concord, and Bunker Hill. The people of Machias of 1775 were Yankees of the Yankees. They belonged to Massachusetts, and believed in Massachusetts politics and Massachusetts religion, just as they have till to-day. They entered enthusiastically and unanimously into the quarrel of their native State, and if Massachusetts was going to war with George III, they were going to war with him without one thought of the chances, and without waiting to know whether another colony or another man was likely to back them. When the American Revolution broke out, about eighty families made their home in the old town of Machias. With them the first consideration had been, not that proximity so convenient for schools, for social visiting and easy communication which roads and sidewalks afford, but a good site and plenty of land, which should give a homestead for themselves and their posterity. So with their 250-acre first division lots they occupied both banks of the river, from the sea inland, and of its branches — East, West and Middle rivers. The sixteen seven-acre lots of the first mill owners made the nucleus of the village.

Two coasters had lately gone in from Boston. Captain Ichabod Jones, who owned the vessels, wanted to extricate his family and house hold effects, as well as his vessels from Boston, and he could only do this by agreeing to take back the lumber for which the military authorities were to pay, there being then no other market for it. Before opening his hatches and offering his goods for sale, he exacted from the people a stipulation that they would not molest him. It is probable that the permission would have been carried out in good faith had not the captain of the *Margaretta* unnecessarily provoked a quarrel with the inhabitants. The Machias people had received notice in some way through the proclamation of the Provincial Congress that hostilities had commenced by an invasion pushed into the very heart of Massachusetts, and by the slaughter of its citizens in resisting the evident attempt of the British Government to deprive them of the liberty and right of self-government they had enjoyed ever since their colonial charters.

They responded to this notice with zeal and unanimity, and raised a liberty pole to stand as a symbol of their patriotism. Captain Moor, of the *Margaretta*, when he learned how the liberty pole was erected and what it signified, ordered it to be taken down, under the threat of firing upon the town. A town meeting was held, and voted with great spirit that the liberty pole should stand, but even then Jones induced Captain Moor to withhold hostilities until a fuller and larger town meeting, which he promised should be held on the 4th of June, and which should take final action in the matter. In the meantime the leading patriots, knowing that the town would never yield the point, looked round to see what means they had for defense and resistance.

There was then living at East River a sort of patriarch of the settlement, Benjamin Foster, the father of a numerous family and a man of great consideration through his long life, in both state and church affairs. The sixteen settlers of 1763 had brought his brother, Wooden Foster, with them to be their blacksmith — an artisan indispensable in

an isolated lumbering community. He himself came in 1765, and, being a man of substance and enterprise, took up a lot at East River and built the first sawmill there. At the time of the event I am now reciting he was about fifty years of age, and, having been present as a soldier at the capture of Louisburg in 1745, and having served under General Abercrombie in the French and Indian war ten years later, he was probably the man of the largest military experience in the whole settlement. As such he was made lieutenant of the first militia company, in 1750 Judge Jones being its captain. Foster was the most prominent man in planning and organizing the expedition that led to the capture of the *Margaretta*.

The sons of Morris O'Brien — one of them, Colonel Jeremiah, the leader — won the renown of the actual capture. The leading citizens met together by conceit in the woods on the west bank of Machias river about a mile below the village. Their counsels were divided. Foster was in favor of making prisoners of the officers and men of the cutter, and taking possession of the now partly laden sloops of Captain Jones and of the *Margaretta*, their convoy. More timid men must have urged that the town had voted to let the sloops be loaded and depart, and it was only on that condition that they had procured their supplies, and it was only by performing their promise that they could expect to be kept from starvation here after. But the coolness of Foster and the impetuosity of the O'Briens overwhelmed all calculations of prudence. Foster, weary of debate, crossed a brook near which they were standing, and called out to all who favored the capture of the *Margaretta* and the two sloops to follow him, and ultimately every man stood by his side. This was Sunday, the 9th of June.

Foster was a devout man, but no doubt he believed himself to be engaged in the Lord's business on that day. A plan of attack was immediately agreed upon. The English officers would be at meeting that morning. A rude building, twenty-five by forty feet, had been built on the site of the present town hall and used for religious worship. It had benches arranged on each side of a central aisle. It was decided to attempt to surround the church and seize the officers during the service. Part of the company remained under Foster to do this at the proper conjuncture, and the rest dispersed, attending church as worshipers, though perhaps giving less heed than usual to the services. They had brought their guns and secreted them outside the building. John O'Brien says he hid his gun under a board and took his seat on a bench behind Captain Moor, ready to seize him at the first alarm.

The day was warm and fine, and the windows of the little tabernacle were wide open. A singular accident disclosed the danger of overlooking the negro element. In our late great war we suffered everywhere delay, disaster and defeat by not taking the negro into our counsels. Just so it happened to the Machias patriots. I have no doubt Parson Lyon was fully possessed of the plot his flock were engaged in. The able, highly educated and eccentric Parson Lyon was called as the first settled minister of Machias from Nova Scotia, and like many other people of that province who afterward fled to the States, was a zealous Whig. There were warlike sentiments in the old familiar psalms he might have selected that morning without exciting the suspicion of the English officers in their gay uniforms and decorous demeanor. But London Atus, the ancestor of

all the Atuses, the colored servant of Mr. Lyon, had not been taken into the confidence of the military leaders.

In some perch of a negro pew, with a better outdoor view than had the inside audience, he got sight of armed men (Foster's band) crossing a foot bridge that connected two islands on the falls, and, giving an outcry, leaped out of the window. The English officers followed his example, and by the time Foster's force had reached the meeting house they had reached their vessel, and Jones, who was to have been made a prisoner had fled and secreted himself in the woods. Captain Moor weighed anchor at once and proceeded down the river. Foster and O'Brien then determined to seize Jones' sloops and pursue the cutter. One of these — the Polly — could not have been in a condition to be available. Perhaps she was already too heavily laden, but the O'Briens took possession of the Unity, Jones' other sloop, and during the rest of Sunday mustered a crew of volunteers numbering in all about forty men, and Foster went to East River to get a schooner there and a volunteer crew to join in the enterprise.

Early in the next morning they proceeded down the river from both villages. The East river vessel got aground and had no share in the battle. Of the party on board the Unity only half had muskets and for these there were only three rounds of ammunition. The rest armed themselves with pitchforks and narrow axes. So sudden and impulsive had been the expedition that up to this time it had been an unorganized mob. But as, with a favoring wind, they sailed down the river they had leisure to complete their plans. Jeremiah O'Brien," the oldest of the brothers, was made captain and Edmund Stevens, lieutenant ; and, knowing they had no powder to waste in long shots they determined to bear down upon the enemy, board her, and decide the contest at once upon her deck. Where was the East river schooner and their brave commander? They did not know ; they did not wait for her. Forty undisciplined men are in chase of a vessel armed with sixteen swivels and four four-pounders, with a complement of men, without any thought of the peril of their adventure.

The bravery at Lexington and Concord, where several hundred militiamen fired upon retreating regulars from behind trees, fences and stone walls, or of Bunker Hill, where mainly behind earthworks sheltered from shot, well-armed men resisted three successive assaults of a line of battle, was certainly not greater than that. I do not know of any feat in all the war, or of any war, that for daring and desperate courage can be compared with it.

As the sloop opened out into the broad river below Machiasport village the enemy came in sight and soon within hailing distance. Moor hailed the sloop and told her to keep off or he would fire. O'Brien shouted back a demand for surrender, and Stevens an emphatic defiance. Moor withheld his fire, and the breeze strengthening, set all his sails and tried to escape. It is easy to see that Captain Moor owed the loss of his vessel and his life to his own hesitation, I cannot think to his cowardice. When he stood out to sea again the sloop was close upon him, and a collision had become unavoidable. So he opened fire and killed one man on board the sloop. The sloop answered with a volley of

shot, and soon afterwards the vessels came together and John O'Brien leaped on board the cutter. Then the vessels swung apart, leaving O'Brien alone on the quarter deck of the enemy. He says seven muskets were fired at him without effect, and when the English marines charged upon him with bayonets he jumped over the rail and swam to the sloop. Captain O'Brien next ran the bowsprit of the sloop through the mainsail of the cutter, and twenty of his men armed with pitchforks rushed upon her deck. While in contact or at very close range musket shots had been exchanged, the assailants using all their ammunition. One man was killed, one mortally and one seriously wounded upon the sloop. Five were killed or mortally wounded on board the *Margaretta* — Captain Moor, who was shot through by two musket balls early in the action, the man at the helm, so that the cutter broached to and was run into, Captain Robert Avery, the impressed skipper of the *Holmes's Bay* coaster, and two sailors or marines. The number wounded is not known. John O'Brien says the American vessel had four killed and eight or nine wounded, and the British ten killed and ten wounded. But he says himself that he does not remember the number, but gives it upon the authority of a letter of Captain Joseph Wheaton, written to O'Brien, in which he claims to have been present as one of the sloop's crew.

Mr. Smith in his history, gives the name of John Wheaton as one of the heroes, and there may have been also a Joseph Wheaton. I have followed Mr. Smith's statement of the number of killed and wounded, as more probably correct and more nearly agreeing with local tradition. The error by which Captain Moor forfeited his vessel and his life was in not using his heavy guns while the sloop was at long range, and had no effective means of returning the fire. When the vessels were in contact his superior armament had become unavailable. The firing of the Americans had been close and murderous, and when Moor fell the midshipman, Stillingfleet, next in command, was panic-stricken, and fled below and gave up the ship. The English officers did not know that the ammunition of their enemy had been exhausted, and the assault was too fierce and hot for the reloading of empty muskets. In a hand- to-hand contest a pitchfork — not the slender and elastic implement our factories now turn out, but such a stout and rude double spear as Wooden Foster would forge upon his anvil, set in a long ash pole — was a formidable weapon in the hands of a man who knew how to use it. The very novelty of the weapon, against which their tactics and drill had taught them no effective guard, may have dismayed the marines. At any rate the boarding of the cutter seems to have been the end of the strife, and, there was nothing else for the victors to do but take care of the wounded, secure their prize, and return to the settlement to electrify their friends with the news of their success.

They had purchased their victory by the death of two men — Cool broth and McNeil. John Berry received a severe wound in his head, for which he afterward received a pension, and Isaac Taft and Joseph Cole were slightly wounded. John O'Brien relates that as soon as his brother Jeremiah was elected captain he gave leave to all who were afraid to join in the attack to leave, and offered them a boat, and that three men availed themselves of his offer. He also says that the whole six of the O'Brien brothers — Jeremiah, Gideon, John, William, Dennis and Joseph — participated in the action, and that Morris O'Brien was only prevented from accompanying them by the remonstrances

of his sons. Besides these, let us carefully recapitulate among the heroes, every name that tradition has preserved. There was Edmund Stevens, of Addison, who shouted back defiance when Moor threatened to fire ; Samuel Watts, ancestor, I think, of the Englishman's River Wattses ; Jonathan Knight, one of the first settlers of Calais, and who has descendants there ; Steele and Merritt from Pleasant River (the name is still preserved in that region); Josiah Weston, forefather of the Jonesboro Westons ; John Berry, Isaac Taft and James Cole, who were wounded ; Nathaniel Crednorth, Josiah Libby, Joseph Wheaton, William Fenderson, Ezekiel Foster, son or grandson of Isaiah, brother of Benjamin, called the Colonel ; Simeon Brown, Samuel Whiting, Elias Hoyt and Joseph Getchell, ancestor of those well-esteemed people who have chiefly made their home at Marshfield (he always claimed to have stepped "At the Margareta's deck foot to foot with John O'Brien), and, last of all, Richard Earle, colored servant of Colonel Jere. O'Brien, making good by his courage the indiscretion of his race that had defeated the bloodless enterprise of the day before.

Great must have been the exultation at Machias when the Unity and her prize came up with the returning tide to West Falls, sobered some what by the grief for the slain and the general respect and regret which were felt for the untimely death of the young English captain. As a part of the preparations of Sunday, a messenger had been despatched to Chandler's river to procure powder and ball, and as the men of that settlement were all absent at Machias — many of them, as we have seen in the expedition — two women, Hannah and Rebecca Weston, nineteen and seventeen years old, procured thirty or forty pounds of powder and balls and brought them to Machias through the woods, following a line of blazed trees, and arriving at the settlement at two o'clock in the afternoon after the capture of the Margareta.

A committee of safety was elected, who had the control of the military and civil affairs during the remainder of the war. The armament of the Margareta was transferred to the sloop Unity, which was fitted up with bulwarks and named the Machias Liberty, and Jeremiah O'Brien, her commander, cruised for three weeks off the coast trying to capture the "Diligence," a British coast survey vessel. The Diligence came into the lower harbor the middle of June, with an armed tender. The officers and part of the crew landed at Buck's Harbor, as they said, to learn the fate of the Margareta, and were surprised and captured by Captain Smith, grandfather of Bartlett Smith, the lamented historian of Machias, and the next day O'Brien in the Liberty and Foster in the Falmouth packet boarded and captured, without resistance, both the Diligence and her tender.

On the 26th of June the Provincial Congress passed a vote of thanks to Captain Jeremiah O'Brien and Captain Benjamin Foster and the brave men under their command, for these heroic exploits, and placed at their disposal the two sloops and the Margareta, which they had taken. The enemy's wounded, as well as those of the expedition, seemed to have been as well cared for as was possible. A hospital was improvised out of a shop, and most of the wounded were placed in it and treated as well as they could be in a town, where was neither surgeon nor physician. Captain Moor, who was still alive when the prize was brought up river to the village, was received in the house of Judge Jones, nephew of Captain Ichabod Jones. A messenger

was despatched at once to Nova Scotia for a surgeon, but Captain Moor could not profit by his long delayed arrival. His death occurred the day after the battle. There is this pathetic relation of the unkindly fate of this young officer, who seems to have been a brave man, intent upon his duties, and who, as he must have believed, in a time of peace, did not consider that it would be actually necessary to turn his heavy guns upon a nearly unarmed party of fellow British subjects.

It is asserted that on his voyage to Machias, he brought as passengers from Boston two estimable young ladies, relatives of Captain Jones, to one of whom he was affianced, and that his service at Machias performed, and the two sloops at sea for Boston, he expected to sail to Halifax and there be married. The expedition to Nova Scotia for a surgeon brought back Doctor William Chaloner, another Nova Scotia Whig, who continued to be a citizen of Machias, and was of eminent service and has left there a large and very respectable progeny. In briefly reviewing the event, our surprise and admiration pass alternately from the rash audacity of the project to the impetuous bravery of its accomplishment.

There was a completely isolated lumbering community that did not raise its bread or vegetables, not even potatoes, and brought hay for the teams that were used in logging, over the sea from far away Nova Scotia, that were fed from hand to mouth, by supplies of provisions brought from Boston and exchanged for pine boards. Their only market and source of supplies was held by the whole British army in America. The cutter they seized was the convoy that had protected the sloops from whose cargoes they had just been fed, and that were to carry back the lumber with which they had paid for them, under a written permit obtained from the selectmen of Boston, who were of the patriot party. In flying at and seizing this vessel and her convoy they seemed to be arresting this trade and exposing them selves and their families not only to invasion, burning and pillage, but to immediate starvation. But we forget the grandeur of this sacrifice in our latter admiration of the daring with which they accomplished their scheme.

A trading craft without bulwarks or armed marines, or even sailors, is pressed in to service, driven bows on to an armed cutter with forty trained men on board, thoroughly armed and provided with heavy guns and ammunition, and commanded by a brave officer of the royal navy. Of the party of forty perhaps not a man was ever in battle, and not more than twenty of them had muskets, with only powder enough for them to be discharged thrice ; and with this equipment they crowd all sail, rush at their prey, storm across her decks with no effective weapons but pitchforks and axes, for their ammunition has been spent. The captain of the assailed vessel is slain, the men borne down in the impetuous rush take shelter below, and the panic stricken officer who succeeds to the command surrenders his vessel to the assailants. Surely there is nothing like this in our early or recent history.