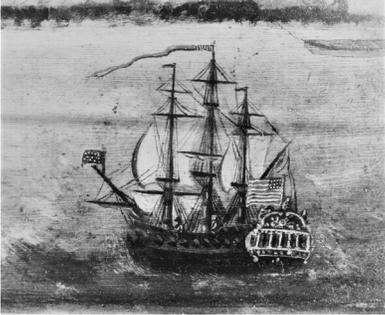


Searching for the Navy's first Purser

By CAPT Donald B. Hoffmann, SC, USN, (Ret.), Member



Frigate ALLIANCE from a 1781 painting, courtesy of NHHC.

I've had too much time on my hands because of the Coronavirus pandemic, so I did a bit of research to write this article. I didn't travel because of safety issues and state restrictions, only researching online and corresponding through email. There are some great online resources available from the National Archives, Naval History and Heritage Command (NHHC), Peabody Essex Museum, Library of Congress, HathiTrust Digital Library, university libraries, cemeteries, and more that I scoured. There were a few historians and librarians from the Museum of the American Revolution, Philadelphia's Laurel Hill Cemetery, and Peabody Essex Museum who looked for answers to my questions, too, for which I'm grateful.

Frank Allston's 1995 "Ready for Sea: The Bicentennial History of the U.S. Navy Supply Corps" and Jeffrey L. Rodengen's 2015 "Ready for Sea: The History of the U.S. Navy Supply Corps". I read and enjoyed these books when they first appeared in print, so I decided to read them again. The story of the Supply Corps is an inspiring and interesting topic to me, and I hope to others as well. Each work highlights

events in the history of the Supply Corps, as well as biographical sketches and events through time. Both books emphasize Congress establishing the new United States Navy in 1794, and Tench Francis, Jr. appointed as Purveyor of Public Supplies in 1795. The Supply Corps traces its lineage from Purveyor Tench Francis, who President George Washington nominated for that office.

Notable, the books did not include the name of the very first Navy Supply Officer ancestor. The earliest Supply Corps predecessor discussed in detail was Purser Samuel Hambleton who served from 1806 to 1851. Purser Hambleton was an impressive historical figure who fought alongside Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry during the War of 1812. He is often cited as the U.S. Navy's first Purser because of his bravery and injuries suffered in the 1813 Battle of Lake Erie, and likely because no one ever heard of another Purser before. Samuel Hambleton's warrant as a Navy Purser from 1806 changed to a commission on January 2, 1813, and then reverted back to a warrant after that. The 1815 Register of Naval Officers shows Purser Hambleton with a warrant as of January 1, 1812. The status of Pursers changed during the 19th Century, as well as for other officers. There is a government record of a Joseph Richardson appointed as a Purser in the United States Navy on August 3, 1796, who held warrant officer status. He then became a midshipman in 1799, and was dismissed in 1803. There are probably earlier Pursers than Joseph Richardson, but I couldn't find their names or stories in my research. There were dozens of later Purser appointments recorded in 1798 and 1799, and some served during the War of 1812.

Once again, the question remains as to who was the first or earliest of our Supply Officer ancestors. So, let's go back to the Revolutionary War's Continental Navy in the period 1775 to 1783 and get some background on Pursers and search for that first ancestor.

Continental Navy warship supply officer specialists were called Pursers, indicating their title and rank, even if their rank wasn't relative to line officers. A Purser's position among ship's officers rested with the Captain and the Purser's experience and abilities. Some of the Purser's responsibilities were specifically set in writing by the Rules for the Regulation of the Navy of the United Colonies, dated November 28, 1775. The Continental Navy modeled their shipboard organization after the British Royal Navy, where Pursers were warrant officers at the time. A ship's captain or a higher authority selected Pursers, and their warrants came from the Committee for Fitting Out Armed Vessels as set by the Continental Congress on December 22, 1775. Pursers were definitely Navy Officers with a warrant to serve, who ran their departments and reported directly to their Captains. The Continental Congress also authorized warrants for Surgeons, Chaplains, Boat-swains, Carpenters, and more.

I've seen written that Pursers were sometimes called a Supercargo because this was a merchant ship term in that era for a representative of a vessel's owner who handled cargo duties on the ship, as well as purchasing and sales at destination ports. Some Continental ships did not have a Purser among their officers at first due to ship size, rush to get the ship in

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service, the level of local shore support, or other reasons. There's a July 8, 1776 letter from William Whipple to John Langdon, both members of the Continental Congress from New Hampshire, that a Purser is a necessary officer for getting the Navy's frigates to sea, and William Whipple was a former merchant ship Captain. Pursers were on duty from the beginnings of the Revolution until 1860, just prior to the Civil War, when their title changed to Paymaster. Then in 1870 Congress approved and established the Pay Corps, still with Paymasters. Finally, Congress established the Supply Corps in 1919 with Supply Officers. The Supply warrant officers were Clerks or Paymaster's Clerks from the Civil War through 1915, and Pay Clerks from 1915 into the 1950s. For further reference, Navy ships weren't referred to as "USS" until President Theodore Roosevelt issued an executive order in 1907.



*Purser Marrow Mease Memorial.
Courtesy Laur Hill Cemetery,
Philadelphia, PA.*

Finally, after searching the National Archives online, I came across the name of a Revolutionary War Purser. This was a first for me. The year was 1779, 4 years into the Revolutionary War, and 16 years before the appointment of Purveyor Tench Francis. His name was Purser Nathan Blodget. I ran across the name of Purser Blodget in a letter he wrote to Benjamin Franklin on 3 March 1779. He referred to Mr. Franklin as "his Excellency, Doctor Benja. Franklin, Minister plenipotentiary &c&c." Mr. Blodget of the Continental 36 gun frigate ALLIANCE, was asking permission to travel to Paris with little explanation other than he wasn't busy, and he had his captain's permission to travel, if approved.

After further investigation, I discovered that Captain Pierre Landais and Purser Blodget sailed aboard ALLIANCE from Boston to France from January to February 1779, carrying the Marquis de Lafayette, already a Continental Army Major General, to petition the French government for more assistance with the war. Captain Landais and Purser Blodget made this voyage, interrupted only by a crew mutiny and the capture of 2 prize ships. Under orders from Mr. Franklin, ALLIANCE joined Captain John Paul Jones' squadron of ships. Captain Landais probably caused a collision between ALLIANCE and Captain Jones' ship BONHOMME RICHARD off the coast of France. Then, after the famous battle between BONHOMME RICHARD and HMS SERAPIS, where Captain Jones implied in his correspondence that ALLIANCE fired on his ship as well as HMS SERAPIS during the battle, a feud erupted between the two captains. In a later encounter, Captain Landais pushed Captain Jones and demanded a duel. Captain John Paul Jones had the reputation of being a tough character, but the two never duelled.

In a diary of John Adams, dated 15 May 1779, he writes of Purser Blodget getting preferential treatment from Captain Landais which is a danger to good order. In fact, from Benjamin Franklin's papers it seems that Captain Landais partiality to Purser Blodget caused friction with the other ALLIANCE officers. Pursers in those days were not above suspicion about putting their financial interests first. The captain, officers, and crew of sailors and marines were all due a portion of the proceeds from any prize ships taken during commerce raiding, and ALLIANCE had taken 2 ships on its voyage to France carrying Lafayette.

The second early Navy Purser I came across in my research was Samuel Cooper who served aboard ALLIANCE a few years later in at least 1781 and 1782 under Captain John Barry. He was aboard ALLIANCE in another return trip for General Lafayette to France in 1781, and wrote to Benjamin Franklin on 6 March 1782. He introduced himself in the letter as an officer of the frigate ALLIANCE, saying he had arrived in France 12 months before, but didn't get a chance to contact Mr. Franklin because of his ship's short stay. Purser Cooper was asking for help in getting his brother, William Cooper, either a Lieutenant or Captain of Marines, freed in a prisoner exchange. The British took him prisoner off the coast of America and sent him to Mill Prison in Plymouth, England.

The last of three Continental Navy Pursers I found in my research was Matthew Mease. I found a letter from Captain John Paul Jones to Benjamin Franklin dated October 3, 1779, describing the action between BONHOMME RICHARD and HMS SERAPIS. During this battle off the English coast Captain Jones uttered the famous words, "I have not yet begun to fight!" In the end, HMS SERAPIS surrendered, but BONHOMME RICHARD sank from its damage. There is one very

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important line written by Captain Jones in his letter. Captain Jones stated that he only had two cannons on the Quarter Deck remaining in service during the fight, and Purser Mease commanded those guns, but was wounded in the head, needing replacing; but not without great difficulty. Here's the earliest account of a Purser fighting with distinction against the enemy until struck down.

I was curious if Purser Mease survived, and researching further, I found that the ship's Surgeon patched up Purser Mease and he was up and about the next day. Purser Mease made another appearance in the contemporary records when Captain Jones commanded the Sloop of War ARIEL from 1780 to 1781. Captain Jones disguised ARIEL as a Royal Navy warship and had Purser Mease hail a Brit-ish privateer captain to get him to come aboard. Although the trick didn't work, the privateer TRIUMPH surrendered after being fired upon.

I thought I hit gold by finding the grave of Purser Matthew Mease in Philadelphia's Laurel Hill Cemetery, but it's a family grave site that includes a "cenotaph" for Purser Mease on the far right side of the large stone monument. A cenotaph is an empty tomb, so Purser Mease rests elsewhere. But, carved into the memorial stone above his name and words about his wounding in the battle aboard BONHOMME RICHARD, is "Archive Cutlass Pistol." It appears the Mease family placed his cutlass and pistol inside the grave. There are no birth and death dates on the stone. I plan to visit his memorial one day and pay my respects when it's safe to travel again.

I know I haven't uncovered the identity of the Navy's very first Purser, but we now know a bit about three of the earliest of our own: Continental Navy Pursers Blodget, Cooper, and Mease. We also know the name of U.S. Navy Purser Joseph Richardson from 1796. Just like the men and women of the Supply Corps serving aboard ships today, responsibilities of these early Pursers involved money, provisions, purchasing, paperwork, battle stations, deployment preparations, crew satisfaction, and keeping the Captain happy; if that's ever been totally possible. I don't have any depictions of these Pursers, nor do I know when they were born, when they entered Navy service, or where they are buried. More detailed research and travel would be needed by a dedicated Supply Corps Officer or historian, to dig up more information on these Pursers, as well as others who are for now, lost to history. I hoped to get access online or help from historians to the crew lists and musters for the first few Continental Navy ships commissioned, but that wasn't possible. I would like to add that there are plans for a new \$450 million National Museum of the U.S. Navy to open to the public in 2025 at the Washington Navy Yard. Here's an opportunity to tell the earliest history of the Supply Corps with its Continental Navy Pursers, so they get the recognition they deserve.

Our Continental Navy was small in size, but consequential in winning sea battles and taking prizes. Along with the Army, our Navy and Pursers helped win the war against Britain. Supply Corps Officers can take great pride in knowing the names of a few of their ancestors who were key participants in this country's early fight for liberty. We also recognize our remarkable Supply Corps history predates 1795, going back to the beginnings of the American Revolution where Pursers served, led, and fought alongside the other Navy and Marine Officers, and crew of sailors and marines.