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ROBIN HOOD, LETTER OF MARQUE SHIP COLLECTION

Creator:	Stephen Higginson, Daniel Sargent, Ebenezer Parsons, and Captain Sargent Smith
Dates:	1781
Quantity:	0.5 linear feet (1 document box)
Acquisition:	Donated by: Thomas E. Babson, ca. 1955
Identification:	A02 ; Archive Collection #02
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Copyright:	Requests for permission to publish material from this collection should be addressed to the Librarian/Archivist.
Language:	English
Finding Aid:	Peter Martin, Nov. 1995, supervisor, Ellen Nelson, archivist. Reprocessed by Howard Thomas, July 2004, supervisor, Stephanie Buck, archivist.

Biographical Note

This collection of documents pertains to the Robin Hood, a Letter of Marque Ship, covering the period February to December, 1781. This time frame includes the building of the ship and her maiden voyage from Boston to Christian Sand, Denmark. It should be noted that there is some discrepancy in the spelling of the name of the city (i.e. Christian Sand vs. Christiansand) and the

27 Pleasant Street, Gloucester, Massachusetts 01930 USA

+1 978-283-0455

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country in which it was located (i.e. Denmark vs. Norway). Writer Joe Garland in his book Guns Off Gloucester resolves the issue by including a map (pg. 226) and stating “Christiansand, across the Skagerak, is on the south coast of Norway, which was virtually a province of Denmark.” (pg. 227).

The Robin Hood was built early in 1781 by Joseph Clark of Boston, MA for the owners, Stephen Higginson, Daniel Sargent and Ebenezer Parsons, all of Boston, MA but with close Cape Ann connections. The owners selected Sargent Smith, a Gloucesterman, to serve as captain of their ship. On May 24th, Captain Smith received his commission and proceeded to outfit and provision the ship for a crew of sixty men. The provisions included sixty barrels of pork and eight hundred pounds of beef as well as fourteen guns and eight hundred pounds of powder. The manifest lists the names, stations and share of men on board the ship. A list of advanced wages has the word “runaway” written next to two names.

Captain Smith received very detailed instructions from the owners for the voyage including: special directions to obtain the release of John Higginson, the younger brother of one of the owners, who was being held in Fortune Prison (Forton Prison, Portsmouth, England); specific routes to follow; pay of the crew; treatment of prisoners and handling of prizes. Other instructions included landing in Denmark and dealing with John Merchant or, if it was not possible to land in Denmark, then to land in Holland and deal with John Hodshon.

Captain Smith was instructed further how to stow the goods received from Copenhagen, Denmark, Gottenburg, Sweden, and Christian Sand for the return trip. The goods included tea, hemp, pepper, china, cinnamon, cloves, silk, ribbons, etc. A side note, apparently Captain Smith was detained by Danish authorities for engaging a British vessel in Danish waters. Fortunately, John Merchant was able to secure his release.

Acquisition Note

Original processing stated “Unknown,” but recently located papers appear to indicate that the Robin Hood Collection was found in 1951, in the attic of the Babson House, which was built around 1740, at the Green, and at present is identified as 245 Washington Street. It is believed that the Collection was given to the Cape Ann Historical Association by Thomas E. Babson circa 1955.

Scope and Content of the Collection

This collection provides a unique insight into the building, outfitting, provisioning and sailing in 1781 of the letter of marque ship Robin Hood, which took part in the American Revolution. As Thomas E. Babson noted in his series of three articles on the “Robin Hood” papers that appeared in the Gloucester Daily Times September 13-21, 1955, although the terms “privateer” and “letter of marque vessel” are often used interchangeably, there is a distinction. A privateer could roam the seas freely in search of prey, whereas a letter of marque vessel was restricted in her prize-taking endeavors to such enemy vessels as she might encounter in the course of her regular trade between specified ports.

Although the source of the acquisition of the collection is officially listed as “unknown”, recently located papers appear to indicate that the Robin Hood collection was found in 1951 under the eaves of a venerable Gloucester dwelling known as the “Babson House”. This house was built around 1740, at the Green, and, at present, is identified as 245 Washington Street. It is believed the collection was given to the Cape Ann Historical Association by Thomas E. Babson circa 1955.

The collection contains some 30 documents consisting of Master’s Instructions, receipts, ship’s manifest and dimensions, correspondence, accounts and invoices, expenses, agreements and memorandum. The documents cover a time period of February and December, 1781.

We have arranged the documents in subject series, and where possible, in a chronological arrangement within each series.

Series Description

- I. Shipping Papers
 - A. March, 1781 Dimensions of masts, yards and bowsprit.
 - B. May 29, 1781 Master’s Instructions (2 documents, 6 pages)
 - C. June, 1781 Manifest List of names, station, wage, advances
 - D. 1781 (month unknown) Manifest List of names, station, share
 - E. 1781 (month unknown) List of advanced wages (2 seamen marked runaway)

- II. Receipts
 - A. April 30, 1781 Payment to James Chase for rum
 - B. May 1, 1781 Payment to John Boies for cartridge paper
 - C. May 11, 1781 Payment to Alexander Baker & Co. for work on ship
 - D. May 14, 1781 Payment to Wm. Cordwell for musket balls and powder
 - E. May 22, 1781 Payment to Richard Skillin for rigging blocks and mallets

- F. May 29, 1781 Payment to John Burbeck for powder
 - G. May, 1781 Payment to John Hooton for 12 large sweeps
 - H. May, 1781 Payment to John Cheeseman for mast hoops
 - I. Oct. 6, 1781 Payment to John Winthrop for freight and chests of tea
 - J. Dec. 12, 1781 Payment to David Greenough prize money Brig Conrad
 - K. 1781 (month unknown) Payment to John Cheeseman for handcuffs and keys
- III. Correspondence
- A. Nov. 6, 1781 Letter to Stephen Higginson from C. S. Black's Widow & Co. mentions Capt. Smith's encounter with an English cutter involving an exchange of shots.
 - B. Dec. 6, 1781 Letter to Stephen Higginson references an overpayment of King's Duty and Commission.
- IV. Accounts and Invoices
- A. Nov. 30, 1781 Invoice of Quantity of Goods shipped on Robin Hood for Boston from Christiansand by John Merchant for owners.
 - B. Dec. 3, 1781 Invoice of Sundry Goods shipped on Robin Hood for Boston from Christiansand by John Merchant for owners.
 - C. Dec. 3, 1781 Account by John Merchant to amount of Sundry Goods shipped on Robin Hood and various cash expenditures including a payment, at Copenhagen, to the Court of Admiralty according to a sentence against Capt. Smith.
 - D. Dec. 3, 1781 Account by John Merchant of sale of 20 casks of rice received out of Robin Hood for owners.
 - E. Dec. 4, 1781 Invoice for 1 chest of merchandise to be shipped on Robin Hood to Boston for Elias H. Derby, signed by Capt. Smith.
 - F. 1781 (month unknown) Invoice of Goods shipped from Copenhagen on Robin Hood by Madam Black & Co. and by John Merchant.
- V. Expenses
- A. Feb 15 – April 6, 1781 Eben Parsons, outfitting for voyage, from nails to fresh meat (2 documents 5 pages.)
 - B. May 10 – 26, 1781 William Parsons, outfitting for voyage, from rum to muskets.
 - C. May, 1781 Ebenezer Parsons, work done for ship, from hooks to thimbles.
 - D. 1781 (month unknown) Sargent Smith, expenses in Christiansand, from pilotage to advances to sailors.
- VI. Agreements and Memorandum
- A. March 1, 1781 William Capen, agreement to complete joinery work on new ship being built by Joseph Clark for Eben Parsons.
 - B. May 25, 1781 Thomas Burbeck, wage agreement signed by Thomas Burbeck.
 - C. May 25, 1781 Eben Parson executed wage agreement with Thomas Burbeck.
 - D. June 2, 1781 Letter of Agency, officers and seamen appoint William Parsons as their true and lawful attorney to act in their place regarding all captured prizes,

prize goods, wares or merchandise.

- E. 1781 (month unknown) Memorandum for the ship Robin Hood, check list of items outfitting for voyage.

Container List

Box 1

Series I: Shipping Papers

- I. Folder 1
 - a. Dimensions
 - b. Master's Instructions
 - c. Manifest
 - d. Manifest
 - e. Advanced Wages

Series II: Receipts

- II. Folder 2
 - a. James Chase
 - b. John Boies
 - c. Alexander Black & Co.
 - d. Wm. Cordwell
 - e. Richard Skillin
 - f. John Burbeck
 - g. John Hooton
 - h. John Cheeseman
 - i. John Winthrop
 - j. D. Greenough
 - k. John Cheeseman

Series III: Correspondence

- III. Folder 3
 - a. C. S. Black's Widow & Co.
 - b. Stephen Higginson

Series IV: Accounts and Invoices

- IV. Folder 4
 - a. John Merchant
 - b. John Merchant
 - c. John Merchant
 - d. John Merchant
 - e. Elias H. Derby
 - f. Madam Black & Co.

Series V: Expenses

- V. Folder 5
 - a. Eben Parsons
 - b. William Parsons
 - c. Ebenezer Parsons
 - d. Sargent Smith

Series VI: Agreements and Memorandum

- VI. Folder 6
 - a. William Capen
 - b. Thomas Burbeck
 - c. Eben Parsons
 - d. Letter of Agency
 - e. Memorandum Check List

Series VII: Appendix Ship Robin Hood 1781

- VII. Folder 7
-

Transcript

Master's instructions

Captain Sargent Smith
Boston, May 29, 1781

You being master of our ship Robin Hood and ready to sail, our orders are that you embrace the first good wind and proceed from here to Christian Sand in Denmark. On your arrival there you will deliver the goods you carry out from here to Mr. John Merchant who goes out in the ship with you, and you will get the ship ready to take in such goods as he shall send down from Copenhagen for you.

Mr. Merchant will directly on your arriving at Christian Sand go up to Copenhagen to prepare the goods which you are to bring home, and you are to follow his directions respecting the goods you take on board. We have fitted the ship at a great expense and have sent guns and men enough to enable you to take prizes on your passage and we put great dependence upon the prospect of captives in your way out. We therefore would have you look at every vessel you see, if your ship sails very well which we have no doubt of, and attack all such British and Bermudian vessels as you may meet with and think yourself capable of taking without danger of losing your own ship. You will take care to satisfy yourself as to the force of a ship before you go too nigh her, and when you are doubtful of a vessels strength, be sure to see that your ship outsails her or delay going very near her till afternoon, so that if she proves stronger than you expected you may have the advantage of the night escape.

When you get in the track of ships bound from England to Quebeck, New York, Newfoundland and the homeward bound West India men, you need not hurry along but run

under easy sail for the better chance of prizes, till you have taken as many as you can man and keep 25 men on board your own ship, then proceed your voyage as fast as you can. You will remember that the American, Danish, French and Spanish vessels which you may retake are by a new regulation all our own. When you get upon the coast of England and Denmark don't be over anxious after cutters if you should see any. They generally sail very fast and are often of much greater force than they appear to be, and very seldom of much value. But every other kind of vessel you may venture to look at, if your own sails fast. Should you meet with any vessel with rice, tobacco or sugar, you will load your own ship out of her, and if there be a great value left send her home or else take all her valuables stores and dismiss her, for it will not be worth while to part with your men for a vessel of but little value. The same conduct will be advisable if you meet with vessel bound for Newfoundland having nothing but a few stores, take all them out dismantle and dismiss them. We are persuaded that you will meet enough vessels that are valuable to expend your men, and should you meet one that is very much so you will put your best prize master and men on board her. Give them all orders to avoid our eastern shore in coming home with prizes. If the Americans are allowed to carry their prizes into Denmark and your ship sails very fast, you may clean your ship at Christian Sand. Take a good pilot on board and make a short cruise on that coast while Mr. Merchant is getting your cargo ready. But you must send home any valuable prizes you may take before going in, but she should be released after you get her in.

You will be careful to find the best trim of your ship and have her marked after you arrive both forward and abaft. Be sure not to load too deep when coming home. Keep her wales free from the water half a streak of three inches at least, and be sure to avoid everything that is large and has any force in your way home, as your vessel will then be too valuable to run any risk. Don't even chase anything unless you are sure that she is small. We suppose the 30 tons of iron will be ballast enough with tea and bale goods. Mr. Merchant will send you down from Copenhagen a memorandum of the goods that are to come home, and you will be very careful that the tea, hemp and other goods that are subject to damage are very well stowed. It will be necessary to have your decks and upper works thoroughly recaulked and then put on a good coat of turpentine. You will have the goods properly dunnaged from the bottom and sides to guard against any water that may run down, and have the heaviest goods stowed at bottom. Be careful and take an amount of every package that is put on board with the marks etc. Mr. Joseph Winthrop who goes out in the ship will go directly to some other port to send you some goods that are to come from thence. These you will reserve room for provided they get over to Christian Sand by the last of September, but if they do not get there by that time you must fill up with goods from Copenhagen if enough should offer, or come away without being full by the 10th of October at farthest, for it will not do to make it later than that before you sail. You must be very careful in passing the Orkneys both going and coming. This passage in thick weather is a little difficult. You will advance to your men and officers the money mentioned in the shipping paper. The officers and crew are to have one third of all prizes that you take. Should you carry any prizes into that port or any goods taken out of prizes, they are to be sold and the money laid out in goods and shipped home in the ship by Mr. Merchant on the joint account of the crew and owners. The officers and men to pay at your return have the same freight as other people ---- for what is brought more than their privileges.

If you find that Americans are allowed to carry prizes into that port and you go out from thence to cruise, it might be only for a short time. You must be in again by the first of September to take in your cargo. If you find the ship sails very fast on your passage out, be sure to get as near the same trim when coming home as possible, and make no alteration in the masts or anything else. Mr. Merchant will supply you with money to pay off your men or will get Mr. Isackson for whom you have a letter to do it. You will remember that all vessels belonging to America that have two sets of papers are by late resolve of Congress good prizes. If therefore you meet any American vessel that is valuable and has two sets of Papers, man her and send her home and take exact copies of her papers witnessed by the passengers as true copies before you send her off. These copies you must keep with you to prevent disputes about the legality of taking. But if you must give your prize master orders not to go into Cape Cod Harbour as the British cruisers frequently go in there, and be careful always to keep copies of your commission by you ready and give one copy of it with proper orders to every prize master. You must also order them if they should be obliged to put into any other harbour than this to send a man express to us, and not attempt to go out again if it be a safe harbour till he receives orders from us. Direct them to hoist a Jack or ensign at the end of the jib boom, the color to hang down under the boom and pendant at foretopmast head as a signal for us to know them, and you will show us the same signal when coming in yourself.

Be very careful to keep good order on board the ship, see that the sailors are well used and that every man attends only to his own proper business. Be sure not to leave too many prisoners on board any prize, and especially that no officer, owner or navigator is among those that may be left. Use those prisoners that you take on board your own ship with humanity, but don't give them so much liberty as to endanger yourself. You are to have ---- and the amount of the freight that may be received as ---- from each passenger, except Mr. Merchant, Mr. Winthrop, Dr. Dexter and the officer. This they are to pay you on your arrival there and the ---- Mr. Merchant will pay you except for such goods as have their freight paid him. The ---- on all such you will receive hers. Your officers and men are to put on board as much tea and fine goods as they can buy with their own money, but must not take any for others on freight. You will attend to the ship constantly yourself and see that the goods are properly stored. They must not touch the ceiling of the ship but be well dinnaged from the sides.

You will write us by the prizes you may take exactly what you think of the ship as to her sailing, etc., as we shall be governed much by that in our conduct as to insuring, and if Captain Somes should be at Christian Sand when you arrive write us very particularly by him. If she sails as well as the Favorite we shall be very easy about her.

In your passage out don't go too near Halifax or Newfoundland but run over the middle or southern part of Georges and the Grand Bank, nor don't when near the longitude of Newfoundland chase any large ships for they have some very fast sailing frigates on that coast, and but very few large merchant men that are bound westward go very near the coast. But if you find your ship sails as well as we expect and you may wish, you can then venture to look at everything even in those places where there are frigates stationed to guard against our privateers.

Should you find the cruisers about the Naes of Norway so very thick that you cannot get in there, or you should chnace to be chased into Holland for protection, you may then go up to

Amsterdam and land there upon freight for home on the best terms you can and we think that you can not fail of getting a freight there though not on so good terms as in Denmark. We would not have you go to Holland by any means unless from absolute necessity but should that happen you will apply to Mr. John Hodshon merchant in Amsterdam who by Mr. Merchant's assistance will be able to procure you a freight home. If you meet any boats on that coast that you speak with be sure to inquire whether there is any new political alteration, such as a war between Denmark and England, etc. There is no event that can take place that will hurt you unless Denmark should take a part with England against us and our allies. This therefore you must, if such an opportunity offers, inquire very particularly about, and should this contrary to all expectations happens and you can be certain that such a commision has been formed between Denmark and England, you must then go to Holland unavoidably and apply to Mr. Hodshon.

If you take any prize that has a gentleman passenger on board keep him on board your ship till you arrive in Europe, and then let him go with Mr. Winthrop after pledging his sacred word that he will procure the release of John Higginson, who is in Fortune Prison and has been there for 20 months, or engaging that if he does not obtain his release he will then return and be your prisoner again. Or let him write by Mr. Winthrop to his friends and desire them to get said Higginson released and sent by Mr. Joseph Winthrop on board your ship, your prisoner in that case to remain on board your ship till Higginson is discharged and has joined you, and then to be immediately discharged and suffered to go home. If you should not take any such person in any of your prizes, you will then detain the captain which you think of the most importance and has the best friends, for the better his companions the more likely they will be to procure the release of said Higginson. The detaining your prisoner will be, we think, the surest way of effecting Higginson's release, and you will use that method of the sending the prisoner home on parole, as you and the passengers in your ship may think best, all circumstances considered.

As there can be no doubt but they will know in England of your being at Christian Sand and perhaps the time also of your sailing from there, it's very probable that one or two fast sailing vessels may be sent to lay waiting for you. Great cautioin must therefore be used when you come out. We would have you tarry there till there is a [page torn] and if the weather be thick, the better. Go out so as to pass the Naes two or three hours before sunset and either keep the shore of Norway close aboard or else run away to the westward all night nearly as circumstances may render expedient. If any cruisers should be waiting for you they will probably keep from 5 to 15 leagues to the NW of the Naes that being the common path. You must therefore endeavor to go either within or without that track before you haul to the northward. It will probably be most safe to go without them.

If you should take a vessel that has a good cable on board about the size of your new one, take it on board the ship for her use and put the old one on board the prize.

PSS: May 31. Mr. Winthrop thought of going to England to receive some money due to him and his friends, and to bring it home as British goods, but after examining closely the Resolves of Congress and the Acts of this State, we find that all such goods are strictly prohibited and will be subject to seizure. We have therefore advised him not to think of doing it, and we order you not to receive any such goods from him or any other person as we would not by any means encourage an illicit trade nor subject the ship to seizure. You will therefore

notwithstanding what was said about Mr. Winthrop's going to England and your receiving his goods, take no goods brought by Winthrop or any other person from England, nor any but such as are purchased at Copenhagen, Christian Sand, Gottenburg or some other part of that country.

We are etc.

S. Higginson
D. Sargent
Wm. Parsons

[Original transcription by: Peter Martin, November 1995.
Amended and corrected by Howard Thomas, July 2004]

Appendix

- I. Copy of Original Register #2 (processed Nov. 1995)
- II. Extract from Babson – History of Gloucester
- III. Extract from Pringle – History of Gloucester
- IV. Extract from Garland – Guns Off Gloucester
- V. Gloucester Daily Times – articles by Thomas E. Babson
- VI. Research Notes
- VII. Notes of Original Processor – Nov. 1995
- VIII. Notes of Subsequent Processor – July 2004
- IX. Library of Congress material – Dec. 1995