

The Penobscot Expedition: A Tale of Two Indicted Patriots

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La plus grande opération amphibie américaine pendant la guerre révolutionnaire était l'expédition de Penobscot de 1779 qui a souffert une défaite éblouissante aux mains des forces britanniques. Le capitaine Dudley Saltonstall de la marine continentale, commandant de l'expédition, et le lieutenant colonel Paul Revere, qui a commandé l'artillerie de la milice du Massachusetts, étaient traduits en conseil de guerre par une articulation de faits de mauvaise conduite . Bien que la renommée de Revere n'est guère associée avec son service militaire, cet incident a souillé sa carrière légendaire. Cet article évalue les capacités de commande des deux hommes, la composition des forces américaines, les problèmes de maniment des navires pendant la bataille, et les implications politiques des conséquences de la bataille. Enfin, il compare l'application de la justice militaire pendant la guerre révolutionnaire aux normes actuelles.

In the fall of 1779 Captain Dudley Saltonstall of the Continental Navy and Lieutenant Colonel Paul Revere of the Massachusetts militia were court-martialled because of their alleged misconduct during the Penobscot Expedition, the largest American amphibious operation of the Revolutionary War and a dismal defeat. Although Revere's fame did not come from his military service, this incident stained his legendary career. The following essay attempts to assess the leadership abilities of both men, the composition of the American forces, the problems of ship handling at the battle, and the political implications of the battle's aftermath. Finally it compares the application of military justice during the Revolutionary War to present-day standards.

The Penobscot River is a major waterway, into which empty nearly 300 lakes and streams of central Maine (the colonial Eastern Province of Massachusetts). Near the river's mouth, a peninsula shaped like an inverted claw hammer borders its eastern bank. Only about a mile-and-a-half wide and about three-quarters of a mile in length, this headland is connected to the main peninsula to the north by a narrow salt-marsh neck. The peninsula's terrain slopes sharply upward from a small harbour on its southern edge. According to a current contour survey chart from the National Oceanic and Atmosphere Association, from the "hammerhead" western shore, a steep bluff rises to a height of 220 feet forming a dog-bone shaped knob that descends to about 180 feet to the east. Most

historians called this place Bagaduce (now Castine).¹ Bagaduce would change hands among the French, British, Dutch, and Americans six times following its charting by Samuel de Champlain in 1612.

The tiny and isolated Bagaduce peninsula became an important maritime plait of economic and political advantages. The Continental Congress gambled that the British navy could not significantly affect the relatively healthy American economy. The Congress also understood that a revolution could not successfully challenge the British without an American naval or privateer presence, but this presence could exact a heavy price. The King did not recognize the independence of the United Colonies; thus an attack on a British ship by a non-belligerent community was, by admiralty law, an act of piracy.

By early 1779, New England privateers were beginning to take a toll on British shipping sailing the New York – Halifax route. This harassment disrupted military supply lines and particularly commerce, driving up insurance rates. As a defensive move, the British were forced to utilize a convoy system to protect their vessels. In London, Undersecretary of State for the Colonies Henry Knox also noted that the eastern province of Massachusetts Bay had a relatively small isolated population who were not as ardently rebellious as the Boston revolutionaries. Some might assist the British in establishing a suitable naval base for support of these convoys. A naval installation in Maine would command the Bay of Fundy and prevent any American excursions into what is now New Brunswick. Of immediate military strategic value was the need to command the northern Maine coast and deny the rebels access to forests that furnished naval timber, building lumber, fuel, and a river-highway into the lands of north-central Maine.

In the longer term, this territory could serve as a nucleus for a new province for Tories fleeing the colonies and other refugees. The British contemplated splitting a portion of the Massachusetts Bay Colony into a Crown Province called "New Ireland" that would cover north-eastern Maine stretching from the Penobscot to the St. Croix Rivers. The establishment of a fort at the mouth of the Penobscot would give them a strategic advantage.²

As a counter-response to this localized British hegemony, the General Court of Massachusetts ordered the formation of the Penobscot Expedition, the largest American amphibious operation undertaken during the Revolutionary War. Until the summer of 1779 the defence of the Massachusetts coast was left to the seacoast merchant

¹ There are many spelling variations in the historical record of this peninsula such as Pentagöet, Magabagaduce, Majabigwaduce, Majorbagwayduce, Majibagquiaduce, Maja Biguyduce, Maj Bigueduce, Machebiggaduce, and Bagadoose.

² Chester B. Kevitt, *General Solomon Lovell and the Penobscot Expedition, 1779* (Weymouth, MA: Weymouth Historical Commission and C.B. Kevitt, 1976), 174-5. In July 1780 Dr. John Calef went to England as agent for the Loyalists in Penobscot with a memorial to the King requesting that this district be severed from the Province of Massachusetts Bay. Calef actively supported the formation of New Ireland, extolling the virtues of a tract of land much like a modern developer selling a project. The petition plan was drawn up and approved by the Cabinet in August 1780 and was then signed by the King. In spite of Cabinet approval, the King's signature, and Calef's efforts, the project failed because of the economic pressures brought about by the Revolution.

establishment, coastal traders and fishermen, and coastal militia artillery batteries. The policy of the Massachusetts Board of War was to furnish vessels to interdict British warships and merchantmen and to provide letters-of-marque. Sending armed vessels to capture prizes was advantageous and profitable to the state and, indeed, a sensible enterprise for the small Revolutionary fleets. The policy of the Massachusetts Board of War was initially successful, but unfortunately the American vessels cruising near the Massachusetts coast were also vulnerable and increasingly fell to the better-armed ships of the enemy. In April 1779 the Board of War changed their policy concluding that the fleet might also be employed to defend the harbours and seacoasts "which have been left in such an unguarded and defenceless Situation that where we have taken one Vessel of the Enemy their small privateers out of New York have taken ten from us."³

During the first half of 1779 British vessels were particularly destructive to New England trade and shipping. On 9 June the Admiralty's representative at Halifax ordered the occupation of Bagaduce.⁴ On 12 June 1779, the British landed the 74th and 82nd regiments, in total 640 men under the command of Brigadier General Francis McLean, at the peninsula to build a fort and gain the trust of any nearby loyalists. Captain Henry Mowat, who knew the coast of Maine well, was placed in command of the *Albany* (14 guns), *North* (14 guns), and *Nautilus* (16 guns). This naval contingent was stationed to protect the fort during the battlement's construction.

The citizens of Boston learned about the British landings in a letter dated 18 June from the Reverend John Murray of Georgetown in Lincoln County, Maine. Other letters from concerned Maine citizens followed, confirming that the British had landed a substantial force. The General Court of Massachusetts saw this incursion as a threat to the colony's (state's) agriculture, fisheries, coastal trade, and particularly the vital source of tall pines essential for masts for shipbuilding.

Without consultation of Continental authorities, in late June the General Court ordered the Board of War to engage as many armed vessels as could be procured on short notice. The vessel owners that complied were asked to make preparations to sail against the British at Bagaduce as soon as possible. In addition, the General Court authorized the Board of War to impress both vessels and sailors if need be, promising fair compensation for all losses of whatever kind. The seamen were guaranteed the same pay and allowances as those under Continental service. Sensing the inadequacy of leadership in the state's navy or as a calculated hedge to shift blame in the case of failure, the usually independent General Court of Massachusetts appealed directly to the Eastern Department of the Continental Navy Board for assistance. The Navy Board responded by placing three Continental ships, the frigate *Warren* (32 guns), sloop *Providence* (12 guns), and brig *Diligent* (14 guns) at the disposal of the state. Captain Dudley Saltonstall, on duty in nearby Connecticut and second in seniority on the list of Continental navy captains, would fly the broad pennant of commodore of the newly assembled fleet.

³ *Journals of Massachusetts House of Representatives*, 7 April 1779.

⁴ James Sullivan to John Sullivan, 30 August 1779 in Amory, Thomas Coffin, *Life of James Sullivan: with selections from his writings*, Vol. 2 (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and company, 1859), 376-78, James Sullivan stated that, the British occupation of Bagaduce greatly alarmed Boston and neighbouring seaports because of the prospect of a scarcity of timber.

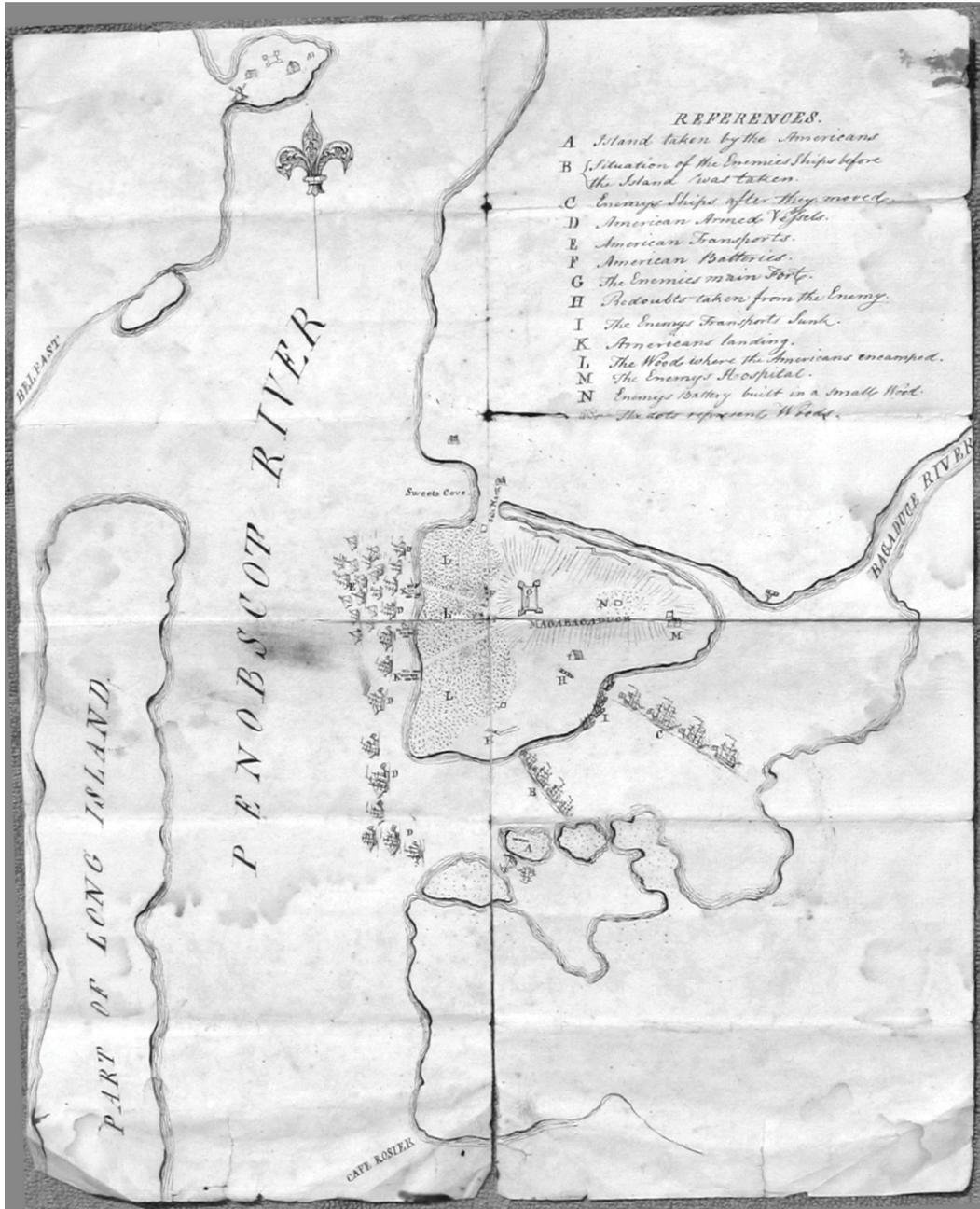


Figure 1: The map of the Penobscot Bay used by Saltonstall for the start of the expedition. On the back are the following notations:
An ideal Plan of Penobscot Bay, Machebiggaduce Harbor
A Sketch of part of Penobscot by Joseph Chadwick at Boston July 9th 1779
Dedicated to John Mastin, [signed] at Boston New England

The three Continental Navy vessels based in Boston were short handed by more than a hundred men. By contrast, Massachusetts's privateers were far better manned because this risky enterprise had been profitable during the war up to this point. In order to muster enough seamen for the three Continental ships and three Massachusetts state naval vessels the Massachusetts authorities ordered a forty-day embargo on merchant shipping.⁵ The embargo prevented seamen from securing other employment, making it easier to enlist sailors for the Continental fleet. Backed into an economic corner for the moment some privateer investors now considered offering their ships to the state government. Ever speculating, other Bostonians bought shares in privateer vessels assuming that success was assured and they might receive a handsome return on their investment. In order to compensate for the interruption in the citizen's usual pursuit of a livelihood, the recruiters proposed that the sailor's service would be brief, easy, and triumphant. Those ship owners who acceded to economic pressures and public patriotic zeal left room for a measure of Yankee discretion. Prudently they had their vessels appraised and insured by the state, in the event of suffering a loss or the failure of the expedition. In spite of appeals to patriotism, deal making, and clever speculation among the citizenry, the Massachusetts Navy Board was forced to impress the *General Putnam*, *Hector*, *Black Prince*, and *Hunter* for a two-month "cruise" to the Penobscot.⁶ Privateers were notorious for their independent behaviour and lack of discipline.

On 29 June, the Council of War informed Governor Mesech Weare of New Hampshire that the force was being raised and requested any assistance that he could provide. In response, a privateer, the *Hampden* (20 guns), was contracted by the state of New Hampshire to join the task force when it sailed past Portsmouth. The fleet consisted of between sixteen and eighteen armed vessels and twenty-four transports, carrying 314 to 344 guns. Reports of the number of ships vary as a result of new vessels joining as the armada sailed northward, but it is sufficient to say that the heavily armed Penobscot Expedition was substantial.

Saltonstall's 13 July instructions from the Continental Navy Board were to "Captivate, Kill or destroy the Enemies whole Force both by Sea & Land, & the more effectually to answer that purpose, you are to Consult measures & preserve the greatest harmony with the Commander of the Land Forces, that the navy & army may Cooperate & assist each other."⁷ Obviously Saltonstall faced problems of leadership and coordination to overcome so that he might accomplish the mission. The one essential element needed for military success is communication between the overall commander and the subordinate commanders, and this was a particular challenge.

Dudley Saltonstall, born in New London, Connecticut in 1738, was a descendant of Sir Richard Saltonstall, first associate of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and patentee of Connecticut, and grandson of Gurdon Saltonstall, clergyman, governor of Connecticut (1707–24), and a founder of the Collegiate School (first at Branford, later at Saybrook, the predecessor of Yale College). Dudley Saltonstall's mother, Mary Winthrop, was a

⁵ The Massachusetts State navy vessels were the *Active* (16 guns), *Tyrannicide* (16 guns), and the *Hazard* (10 guns).

⁶ Kevitt, *General Solomon Lovell*, 65, 69-70.

⁷ Kevitt, *General Solomon Lovell*, 72-3.

descendent of Governor John Winthrop of Massachusetts. In 1765 Dudley Saltonstall married Frances Babcock, the daughter of Dr. Joshua Babcock, the first physician at Westerly, Rhode Island. The highly influential doctor served as the representative of the town in the Rhode Island General Assembly for nine years, Chief justice of the Supreme Court of Rhode Island for sixteen years and, during the Revolutionary War, was appointed Major General of the Rhode Island Militia. Saltonstall's sister Elizabeth was married to Wethersfield lawyer Silas Deane. Deane became a member of the Marine Committee that administered the Continental Navy during the Revolutionary War. By colonial American standards, Saltonstall's pedigree and position in society was very aristocratic.

Dudley Saltonstall sailed on many mercantile voyages and served as a merchant captain during the French and Indian War (Seven Years' War). On 17 April 1762, at the age of twenty-four, he was assigned command of the letter-of-marque brigantine *Britannia* that made successful voyages to the West Indies and Europe.⁸

When the American Revolution began, Saltonstall was given command of the small artillery battery that protected New London harbour. Subsequently, according to John Adams, "At the solicitation of Mr. Deane [Silas Deane of the Naval Committee of Connecticut] We appointed his brother in Law, Captain Saltonstall [as captain in the nascent Continental Navy]."⁹

Many of naval officers appointed during the Revolution achieved their rank as a function of their position in society as opposed to demonstrated accomplishment or skill. Necessity spawned nepotism because the rebel government needed officers whom they could trust in positions of responsibility. Thus, Saltonstall was one of the five original captains appointed in the Continental Navy, and commanded the *Alfred* (24 guns), flagship of the navy's first commodore, Esek Hopkins. The *Alfred* led the February 1776 amphibious attack on New Providence (Nassau), the Bahamas. On their return voyage the squadron of five vessels encountered the *Glasgow* (20 guns) under the command of Captain Tyringham Howe, off Block Island. Saltonstall brought the *Alfred* into action, but the American ship was hit by gunfire, damaging its steering gear. The *Glasgow* escaped. The Marine Committee investigated the *Glasgow* incident, but on 11 July 1776 dropped all charges against Saltonstall.¹⁰ The gunfire that had disabled the *Alfred* was deemed a lucky shot – a chance misfortune of war. In addition, a combination of sea growth on its hull from its passage in the Gulf Stream and the weight of the cannons it was carrying from the New Providence foray had affected the *Alfred's* sailing abilities.

There is no surviving portrait of Captain Saltonstall, but on the back of his privateer's commission issued on 21 May 1781 by Governor Jonathan Trumbull of Connecticut, Saltonstall is described as "height 5 ft. 9 in. Sandy Colored hair, light

⁸ Louis F. Middlebrook, *History of Maritime Connecticut 1775-1783*, Vol. 1 (Salem: Essex Institute, 1925), 163.

⁹ L.H. Butterfield ed., *The Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), 350.

¹⁰ William James Morgan et al. eds. *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, Vol. 5 (Washington: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1970), 1029, (henceforth NDAR).

complexion, light hazel eyes and thick set.”¹¹ Saltonstall’s character has been described as “egotistical, arrogant, irascible, obstinate, overbearing, a marginal officer, dictatorial, haughty, indefatigable, and morose.”¹²

In his biography of John Paul Jones, Samuel E. Morison characterized Saltonstall in this unflattering fashion:

a scion of . . . first families of New England, he seemed not to have resembled the Saltonstalls who for generations have been noted for their genial and democratic manners, but rather his mother’s family, the Winthrops, who were notorious for their condescending attitude toward social inferiors . . . Captain Nicholas Biddle described Saltonstall as “a sensible indefatigable Morose man.” [John Paul Jones, who was his first lieutenant aboard the *Alfred*] complained of his “Rude unhappy Temper,” . . . Jones all his life had been angered and humiliated by snobs. . . now he had to endure a New England snob.¹³

In a letter to Joseph Hewes from Jones dated 19 May 1776 the lieutenant stated that in his “opinion a Captain of the Navy ought to be a man of Strong and well connected Sense with a tolerable Education. a Gentleman as well as a Seaman both in Theory and Practice, for, want of learning and rude Ungentle Manners are by no means the Characteristick of an Officer. I have been led into this Subject on feeling myself hurt as an Individual by the Censures that have been indiscriminately thrown out . . .”¹⁴ “[He] behaved toward inferiours indiscriminately as tho’ they were of a lower species;”¹⁵ “[He is]want of learning, [and is] rude ungentle;”¹⁶ “[The captain is] the sleepy gentleman;”¹⁷ “[He is] Ill-natured and narrow minded; [with] absence of refinement of character. . . On departing the *Alfred*, Jones again wrote to his friend Hewes expressing the hope that “May he [Saltonstall] soon become an affable, even disposition, and may he too find pleasure in communicating happiness around him.”¹⁸

Kenneth McCloud, an enlisted man, also expressed little respect for Saltonstall. When offered the position of quarter master under John Paul Jones he remarked that, “I would take the office of Quarter mastr if you Please But i am Content Ether Way for i am

¹¹ Edward Field, *Esek Hopkins Commodore in Chief of the Continental Navy During the American Revolution: 1775-1778* (Providence; Preston and Rounds, 1898), nn. 82 and 83.

¹² Mrs. Reginald De Koven, *The Life and Letters of John Paul Jones* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2 vols, 1913), 1: 100; Kevitt, *General Solomon Lovell*, 170-2; Wheeler, George Augustus, *History of Castine, Penobscot, and Brooksville, Maine* (Bangor, Me: Burr & Robinson, 1875), 38.

¹³ Morison, *John Paul Jones*, 42-3.

¹⁴ James C. Bradford, ed. *The Papers of John Paul Jones* (Alexandria, VA: Chadwyck-Healy, Microform, 1986), reel 1, doc. 23; NDAR 5:151-2.

¹⁵ Bradford, *Jones Papers*, reel 1, doc. 17.

¹⁶ Morison, *John Paul Jones*, 56.

¹⁷ Lincoln Lorenz, *John Paul Jones, Fighter for Freedom and Glory* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1943), 61.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

Determined to Stay By you So Long as I Recive the Same Good treatment as i always Have from you But Capt Saltison [Dudley Saltonstall] I will Not Saile with But you i Can Saile So Long is i Live.”¹⁹ In the same vein, a letter from Captain John Hazard to Commodore Esek Hopkins dated 12 May 1776 rebuked Saltonstall, the president of Hazard’s Court martial board. “And as to Captain Saltonstall has Deprived me of many Priveledges which I ought to have had at my Tryal and as proof of his partialty towards me I Send you a Copy of an Original [defence] I intend for him the first convenient oppertunity which is the usage I did receive from him at my Tryal. ”²⁰ In summary, Captain Dudley Saltonstall appeared to be class-conscious, curt, and unfriendly, but these offensive personality traits had little to do with his competence as a naval officer.

Apparently, Saltonstall continued to suffer from bad luck, some of which has been interpreted as ineptitude. On 5 September 1776 the frigate *Trumbull* (24 guns) was launched at Chatham (the Middle Haddam section of East Hampton), Connecticut about twenty-six miles up the Connecticut River. Again Silas Deane persuaded Congress to appoint Saltonstall captain of the *Trumbull*. The following spring, on 4 April 1777, the Marine Committee in Philadelphia ordered three of its frigates to sea to intercept enemy transports reinforcing or supplying the British army in New York. Saltonstall took the newly fitted *Trumbull* down the Connecticut River, but found his ship drew too much water to clear the Saybrook sandbar at the river's mouth. Trapped only yards from Long Island Sound, Saltonstall was unable to carry out the orders of the committee.²¹

Beside the boredom of being out of action, there were no prizes for Saltonstall and his crew. Being laid up was costly.²² Saltonstall’s continuing efforts to get the frigate over the bar the next summer were also not successful. He wrote to the Navy Board Eastern Department, recommending that camels be used to raise the *Trumbull* over the obstacle the following summer.²³

Saltonstall could not get permission to build camels because of fiscal restraints imposed by the Continental Congress. Therefore, the summer of 1778 was a repeat of 1777 with much effort and no success. In November the Marine Committee ordered Saltonstall to stop his attempt to get the *Trumbull* over the sand bar. In May 1779, Saltonstall left the still-stranded frigate. He was appointed commanding officer of the frigate *Warren* in Boston sometime between 10 and 16 June. The Navy Board reassigned the *Trumbull* to Captain Elisha Hinman. On the flood tide of 12 August 1779 the

¹⁹ NDAR 5: 294-5.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 64-5.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 8: 269.

²² On 12 April 1777 Saltonstall temporarily commanded of another vessel, also called the *Trumbull*. He captured two unidentified British transports, of eight and ten guns respectively, off the Virginia Capes. This has been the source of minor historical confusion, but apparently Saltonstall briefly took command of the ten-gun Connecticut privateer *Trumbull* to keep his men sharp and provide some much needed prize revenue.

²³ Camels are large watertight rectangular cask-like structures that can be placed under or adjacent to a ship's hull. When flooded to a required depth, they are fastened to the ship’s hull. The water can then be pumped out and the camels with a ship “on their back” are buoyant enough to float vessels over the shallow water, in essence, they are floating docks.

Trumbull passed over the bar, freed from river entrapment. Hinman had accomplished in two months what Saltonstall was unable to do for almost three years.²⁴

Saltonstall's appointment to command the *Warren* came by default rather than merit. James Warren wrote to John Adams on 30 July 1779 as follows: "Capt. Hopkins of the *Warren*, and Captain Olney of the *Queen of France* are suspended, for breach of Orders [two of only three officers senior to Saltonstall on the Continental Navy list]: Capt. Saltonstall takes command of the former."²⁵

When Captain Saltonstall joined the forces gathering for the Penobscot Expedition in late June 1779, he had apparently acquired credentials of competency. Fourth on the navy's seniority list of captains, he had commanded the Continental Navy vessels *Alfred*, *Trumbull*, and now the *Warren*. In truth, the enigmatic Saltonstall had few accomplishments from his own initiative, his ancestry being responsible for his senior naval appointments. Penobscot would be a test of his qualities as a leader. He was a Connecticut rather than a Massachusetts Saltonstall sailing with a complement of about one hundred untried crewmembers on his maiden cruise in the Continental Navy vessel *Warren*, hardly a prescription for battle-readiness. The commodore was to ferry an ill-prepared and undermanned Massachusetts (and Maine) militia force to an unfamiliar battleground and protect an armada that had never sailed together under a single commander.

Unlike Saltonstall, Paul Revere was born to a modest Huguenot family. His father, following in the Huguenot artisan tradition, was a well-respected precious metal smith of Boston and Revere followed in his occupation. Although he made a reasonable living as a tradesman, Revere's aspirations appear to have been toward greater acceptance in the highest strata of Boston society. As a respected artisan and Mason he had access to some of the most influential men of the city. Gaining high military rank, he noted, could help correct a perceived socially deficient pedigree. Thus on 18 February 1756, at the age of twenty-one, Paul Revere became a second lieutenant in William Gridley's artillery train of the Massachusetts militia. He saw non-combat service during the French and Indian War at Fort William Henry near Lake George. During this brief venture, Revere experienced the disdain that some British Regular army officers had for the colonial militia. The colonial militia was "unaccustomed to and often dumbfounded by the strict lines of vertical authority and blind submission to one's superiors British officers would long remember the insubordination of the provincials, while Paul Revere and [others] would not forget the contempt of their fellow Englishmen."²⁶

On 9 May 1776, twenty years later, Revere accepted military service once again as a major in the Massachusetts artillery regiment. Although pleased to have an opportunity to serve, Revere expressed his disappointment in a letter to a friend that he had not received a commission in the Continental Army.²⁷ In June 1776, his troops

²⁴ L. R. Harmersley, *Harmersley's Naval Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia: L. R. Harmersley and Company, 1881), 105.

²⁵ Taylor, *The Adams Papers*, 8: 30.

²⁶ Jayne E. Triber, *A True Republican* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 25.

²⁷ Elbridge Henry Goss, *Colonel Paul Revere*, Vol. 1 (Boston: Joseph George Cupples, 1891), 5, 280. In April 1777, Revere wrote to Colonel John Lamb. "I did expect before this to have been in

loaded cannons on transports in support of a militia raid on Nantasket.²⁸ The manoeuvre appeared inept because one heavy gun went through the bottom of a boat. Intelligence was lacking, and when the contingent arrived ready to fight, there was no battle because the British were in the process of evacuating the slim neck of land. Nevertheless on 27 November 1776 Revere was promoted to lieutenant colonel.

Assigned to Castle Island that controlled and defended the entrance to Boston Harbour, Revere successfully supervised the repair of the cannons left behind when the British evacuated the Island in early 1776. Boston had its first festive 4th of July celebration in 1777, and Revere's unit was asked to fire a cannon salute in honour of the occasion at noon from Castle Island. Later that afternoon, a military muster was held in town. A reproachful comment was made about the shabby appearance of the artillery militia compared with the other troops.²⁹

Revere's next assignments were uneventful. In August 1777, several hundred prisoners captured at Bennington, Vermont were transferred from Worcester to Boston under his supervision. On 27 September 1777, his unit was ordered to Newport, Rhode Island to help expel British troops, but he saw no action and the British remained entrenched. Eleven months later, Revere's artillery unit again went to Rhode Island for the Battle of Newport under the command of Generals John Hancock and Solomon Lovell along with Colonel Peleg Wadsworth and Colonel Thomas Craft. The latter officer was Revere's immediate commander. Once again he saw no action.

The General Court of Massachusetts was strapped for funds and unable to be very supportive of its militia. Chronic shortages of supplies, rations, and clothing eroded the morale of the troops. Other senior officers of Revere's unit decided to resign in protest over inadequate funding for the militia, but Revere, away on business during the dispute, stayed on and thus rose in seniority. This promotion appeared opportunistic to some. At length it created enemies of Captains William Burbeck, Thomas Carnes, Winthrop Gray, William Todd, and Lieutenant John Marston.

Revere's leadership abilities were questioned and he was accused of misappropriating some much-needed supplies for Castle Island. The colonel successfully defended his case, but morale in his command did not improve. Although the soldiers were based either at home or nearby, the economic rewards of serving in the state militia were paltry. Boston was a busy port and some of Revere's men deserted for profitable privateer ventures. Because of this, Revere was forced to raid suspected privateer vessels

the Continental Army, but do assure you, I have never been taken notice off, by those whom I thought my friends, am obliged to be contented in this State's service."

²⁸ Triber, *A True Republican*, 125.

²⁹ Esther Forbes, *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In* (New York: The American Past Book of the Month Club, 1942), 320. A detachment of Revere's militia artillerymen was ordered into town to fire a salute and the militia were to parade. "The Day being the anniversary of American Independence," wrote Boyle smugly after he got home that night, "the Regt of Militia . . . and the Company of Independents under Major Hitchborn were mustered and performed their Firings in Congress Street. . . . The Independent Company performed admirably; but nothing can be said in praise of the Militia, who Perform'd worse than ever." In fairness, Revere likely contributed only a few of his men to the forty-six militiamen who participated in this humiliating exhibition of the Boston regiments.

in order to reclaim his deserters. Although less lucrative, service in the Continental Navy had its attractions as well. Heysteed (Hoysteed, Heysted) Hacker, commander of the Continental Navy sloop *Providence*, brazenly recruited ten Castle Island artillerymen, but was forced to return them to the militia. Sometime later, the *Providence* tried to sail past Castle Island, but Revere suspected that more of his men were on board and fired on the vessel. When she complied by heaving-to, Revere unceremoniously retrieved five more deserters. This likely made the colonel unpopular with Hacker, later a fellow-participant in the Penobscot Expedition, as well as with the men taken off the *Providence*.

On the eve of the expedition to Bagaduce, Paul Revere was the frustrated commander of a unit with little *esprit de corps*. Many of his actions as a commander had brought rebukes rather than praise. Through no fault of his own he had not been tested in combat and wished to prove himself. The time that Revere had to prepare for the invasion was only a matter of days. As a common practice of the day, the colonel kept a diary of his experiences during much of the Penobscot Expedition, a written account of what he presumed would be a military victory. This could lead to acceptance into the highest ranks of society, a goal that continually eluded Revere.

Paul Revere possessed honesty, intelligence, resourcefulness, perseverance, and courage, qualities that make a good military officer. He was a leader in a patriot body, the Sons of Liberty, and the Masons. In addition, he had in 1774-5 been an intrepid messenger of the Boston patriots alerting other groups of rebels of important news as far away as Philadelphia. Yet, his military record was undistinguished. He was not accepted into one of the more elite Boston regiments such as Hancock's Cadets or the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company. Indeed, he never had the opportunity to participate in an important battle. Revere was forty-four at the time of the Penobscot Expedition and held the rank of lieutenant colonel, the rank he achieved at the end of his first six months of duty in 1776. Except for the brief raid on Nantasket, the Penobscot Expedition would be his only amphibious assault.

The following narrative describes important events of the expedition, highlighting episodes in which the military competence of Saltonstall and Revere may be assessed through their actions or inactions.³⁰

A chronology of events that involved the planning and execution of the Penobscot Expedition is revealing.³¹ On 24 June, a directive was read in the Massachusetts House of Representatives ordering the formation of the expedition. General Lovell was appointed commander on 26 June with Brigadier General Peleg Wadsworth as second in command. On 28 June, Colonel Nathaniel Jordan was sent to Bagaduce as a spy to discover the number troops encamped and their deployment.³² The

³⁰ John E. Cayford, *The Penobscot Expedition* (Orrington, ME: C7H Publishing Company, 1976); Kevitt, *General Lovell*; Dudley Saltonstall Papers, Private collection, Bloomfield, CT.

³¹ *Proceedings of the General Assembly, and of the Council, of the State of Massachusetts-Bay, relating to the Penobscot expedition and the Orders of the Continental Navy-Board to the Commander of the Naval Forces* (First series, no. 16847) (Worcester: Early American imprints, 1964, reprint of 1779 edition), 29-40.

³² Bernard Bailyn et al., eds, *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts*, Vol. 55 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1990), 70.

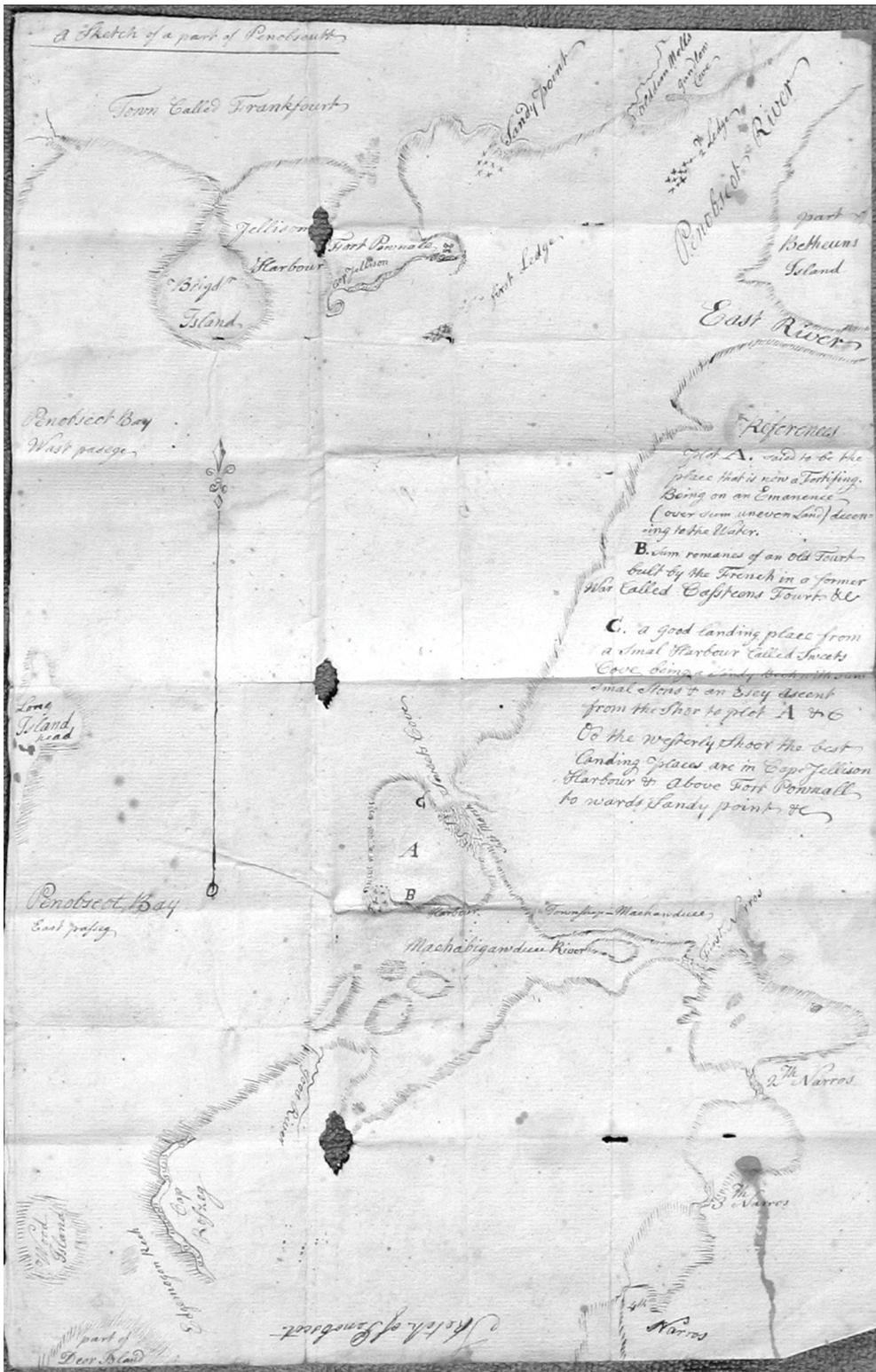


Figure 2. An undated detailed map of the Bagaduce peninsula (B) showing the disposition of the fortress, ships and troops during the siege.

Navy Board was asked prepare the Continental frigate and other two armed Continental ships of the expedition on 30 July. Saltonstall was formally appointed as commodore of the expedition on 2 July. Lieutenant Colonel Paul Revere was ordered to lead the crucial artillery company on 8 July.³³ None of the ground commanders had participated in recent combat missions.

Although assembled for departure on 14 July, Saltonstall's force left Boston (Nantasket Roads) on 19 July. It was a daunting task to muster over forty vessels, eighteen of which were armed, plus prepare troops and provisions for all these men and ships in merely eighteen days. In fact, they fell short of the number of men to be raised from the Boston area; therefore the force was supplemented with additional militiamen from the Townsend area (Boothbay, Maine). Mostly farmers, loggers, or fishermen, these raw Maine militiamen were described as "boys, old men, and invalids, if they belonged to the Train Band or Alarm List they were soldiers, whether they could carry a gun, walk a mile without crutches, or only *compos mentis* sufficient to keep themselves out of fire and water."³⁴ This was the first time that three Maine militia units representing different communities were to be joined under one command and likely face combat. Only 433 men were cajoled into duty in Maine making the expedition both short-handed and inexperienced. Lovell's land force now totalled 872 instead of the expected fifteen hundred men.

At Townsend, the first of many Councils of War was called. Normally, conclusions of these councils were passed to the line officers in the form of statements of specific objectives, together with information about the terrain and enemy they were about to face. By contrast, Paul Revere's description of one council meeting painted a picture of chaos:

"In the evening He [Lovell] called a Council of War, as it was an epitome of the whole campaign. . . . there was nothing proposed and consequently nothing done: It was more like a meeting in a Coffee House than a Council of War. There was no President appointed, nor minutes taken; . . . after four hours consultation, they agreed upon nothing."³⁵

Because of his rank and the importance of artillery to the success of the campaign, Revere was present at various councils. Records indicate that he attended general Councils of War on the *Warren* on 20 and 27 July and 10 August, plus army Councils of War at various places on 6, 11, and 13 August under General Lovell's command. Although Revere seemed eager to get into combat prior to sailing to Bagaduce, Revere's votes, when recorded, were mainly opposed to engaging the enemy.

³³ Revere's unit had four eighteen-pounders with 600 rounds, one twelve-pounder field piece with eighty-four rounds, two nine-pounders with six hundred rounds, two five and a half inch howitzers with two hundred rounds, and four four-pounder field pieces with an unknown number of rounds. The unit's strength was approximately eighty men.

³⁴ Smith, *Marines of the Revolution*, 207; Deposition of Jeremiah Hill, 29 September 1779, Massachusetts Archives Collection, 145: 284-300.

³⁵ Letter, Colonel Paul Revere to General William Heath, 24 October 1779, Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS), Microfiche box 19, vol. 14, Sept-Dec. 1779.

Before moving his fleet into Penobscot Bay, Saltonstall sent scouting parties to the area to determine the position of the British vessels. The expedition, having embarked from Boston on 19 July, arrived off Bagaduce on 25 July. Obviously keeping such a sizeable undertaking secret was impossible.³⁶ When General McLean heard of the expedition, he sent for reinforcements from New York and set about preparing his defences, a four-foot high rampart later to be known as Fort George. Secondary batteries were similarly established on the southern shore of the Bagaduce peninsula and on nearby Nautilus Island. Captain Mowat moored his three armed sloops, with a total of fifty-six guns, close together at the western entrance to the harbour with some small transports huddled behind. These transports could be easily turned into fire ships if needed or cut loose to drift as navigational hazards to harass the tightly clustered American fleet at anchor in the bay.

Upon arrival, Saltonstall deployed nine of his warships against the smaller three-ship British line in an ineffective exchange of fire for more than an hour. This gave the appearance that the commodore was reluctant to risk damage to his vessels. At dusk, General Lovell attempted to establish a beachhead on Bagaduce. In countering an amphibious operation, the defenders are forced to spread their troops in many sparsely manned positions because an assault may come from many directions. The attackers usually have an advantage because they can concentrate their forces at weak-points in the defence while their ship-based mobile supporting artillery is less vulnerable than static pieces in the ramparts of forts. Nature, however, is a wild card. In Lovell's first assault, strong winds and tidal currents forced the general to call off the surprise landing because he feared stranding his men on the beach.

On July 26, about 150 marines landed on Nautilus Island. Under cover of gunfire from their ships, they drove off the lightly entrenched British troops. From the captured island Revere's artillery commanded the British anchorage. Thus, Mowat moved his vessels about half a mile eastward into the harbour for their mutual protection. The British captain arrayed them in a line across the mouth of the harbour on spring cables enabling each of his ships to deliver destructive broadsides at any approaching ships. Most of Saltonstall's armed vessels were square rigged and likely required approximately ten labour-intensive minutes to tack or wear (change sailing directions) given sufficient headway and proper wind direction. The custom was to have their courses clewed-up (the square sails on the lowest yard fastened aloft to their yards) in a battle-ready configuration. Unfortunately, the fewer the sails aloft a ship carried, the slower the headway, thus compromising its manoeuvrability. Finally, if the Americans did get close to Mowat's vessels, the wind and tide would likely be against them and retreat would have been impossible.

³⁶ Smith, *Marines of the Revolution*, 335. Excerpt from the Diary of John Trevett, a Captain of Marines.

“Now is an Expedition out att Boston for PerNobscut and our sloop [*Providence*] Prparing to Join the Fleet now I have some buzness to Settel and have no Enclenaton to go [to] Pernbscut as I think the British well Get information Either att New York or Newport before tha Can Gett Redy to sail and if tha Due I now thre or fore Large British ships can Block them in and that will be the Lors of All our shiping.”

It appears strange that Saltonstall did not try to convert some transports into fire ships to harry Mowat's fleet in the small harbour. The prevailing summer winds in the area are westerly or south westerly. The incoming tide, sometimes exceeding ten feet, swiftly fills or empties the bay. The cool sea air frequent generates entrapping fogs. Vessels could easily move silently and quickly under these conditions and, once set ablaze, they could be a great hazard to the anchored British ships. In addition, smoke from the burning materials on the fire-ships should have provided a screen for the advancing American ships even if they did not ignite any British warship. Shore-based guns would have difficulty finding their targets. McLean later said that after seeing the vast American force assembled off the peninsula he was prepared to surrender in order to save British lives following token resistance. Conceivably a well-planned American assault should have quickly brought about this end.

Colonel Josiah Brewer of the militia recalled that he told the commodore that in his opinion the three British vessels could be silenced in a half-hour. Saltonstall was said to have curtly replied, "You seem to be damn knowing about this matter! I am not going to risk my shipping in that damn hole!"³⁷ Most historians have interpreted this often-quoted comment as evidence of Saltonstall's cowardice, but was this a sign of weakness or a way of avoiding damage to the *Warren*? Brewer recalled the commodore's words long after the battle, thus their accuracy may be questionable. Even if the quote is true, more likely Saltonstall the seaman meant something more pragmatic. If the commodore got into the harbour, his ships would have had restricted manoeuvring room due to shifting winds, aberrant tidal and river currents, and inherent difficulties in handling square rigged vessels. His chart did not show details of shoals and sandbars. Some sailing vessels of the era could be rowed by sweeps from their decks if the tides and currents permitted. One can presume that some of Saltonstall's fleet had this capability. Practically however, it was difficult if not impossible to operate the long sweep oars and effectively man guns at the same time. Saltonstall would have been at an untenable disadvantage sailing into "a hole."

On 27 July 1779 thirty-two lieutenants and masters of several privateer vessels, none of whom were Continental officers, petitioned Saltonstall to engage the enemy before the British could fortify and strengthen their positions.³⁸ Saltonstall was quoted as

³⁷ Bangor, Maine' *Whig and Courier*, 13 August 1846, letter from David Pelham giving Colonel David Brewer's reminiscences of the Penobscot Expedition,

³⁸ Cayford, *The Penobscot Expedition*, 19.

"Humbly sheweth. That we your petitioners, strongly impressed with the importance of the Expedition, and earnestly desiring to render to our country all the service in our power, would represent to Your Honor that the most speedy exertions should be used to accomplish the design we came upon. We think delays, in the present case, are extremely dangerous —as our enemies are duly fortifying and strengthening themselves, and are stimulated so to do, being in daily expectation of a reinforcement. We do not mean to advise, or censure your past conduct, but intend only to express our desire of improving the present opportunity to go immediately into the harbor, and attack the enemy's ships. However, we humbly submit our sentiments to the better judgment of those in superior command. We, therefore, wait your orders, whether in answer to our petition, or otherwise." [signed David Porter, 1st Lieutenant of the Ship *Putnam* and thirty others.]

Navy Board East^{on} Dept.
Boston May 29th 1779.

To Zudley Saltonstall Esq^r?

Sir You are hereby directed to leave the Ship Juno but, under your command, and repair on board & take command of the Ship Warren, now laying in this Harbours, Man, and prepare her for the Sea, with all possible expedition. You will apply for all necessaries that you may have occasion for, in the pursuit of your Service, to this Board.

Wm. Pitt

Figure 6: Navy Board letter, to Saltonstall

Subj. of Impressed Men
Cmde. Order July 15. 1779.

Ordered that Capt. Saltonstall turn over such of the impressed men now on board the Warren as he has no occasion for to the Ship General Putnam if that he desires them to Capt. Waters accordingly.

From his Highness's Servants
J. Adams Secy

Figure 3: Order to Saltonstall to turn over impressed men serving on the Warren and turn them over to Captain Waters of the ship General Putnam. The document is signed by Sam Adams.

Figure 4: Saltonstall's list of ships, their captains and armament that were assigned to him for the Penobscot Expedition.

A List of Armed Vessels on the Expedition to Penobscot Boston July 15. 1779.

Narron Schooner	Sudley Saltonstall Esq ^r	32 Guns	Commander
✓ Sloop	✓	12	
✓ Schooner	✓	12	
✓ Brig	✓	16	
✓ Brig	✓	14	
✓ Brig	✓	11	
✓ Schooner	✓	20	
✓ Schooner	✓	20	
✓ Schooner	✓	24	
✓ Schooner	✓	16	
✓ Schooner	✓	16	
✓ Schooner	✓	20	
✓ Schooner	✓	20	
✓ Schooner	✓	18	
✓ Schooner	✓	16	
✓ Schooner	✓	20	
✓ Schooner	✓	6	
✓ Schooner	✓	20	

Figure 5: Battle plan order for the 11 August assault that never took place.

Order for attacking the Enemies Ships lying in Harb^r Penobscot.

The Warren - Putnam - Thompson - and Scarborough will lead on in a line abreast well anchored at a higher Distance from the Enemies than the Ships.

The Warren opposite the northern Ship but one.
The Putnam opposite the northern Ship but two.
The Thompson the Center.
The Scarborough the Southern.

The Warren - Putnam - Thompson - and Scarborough to follow and form a line against the Enemies Ships, on the right keeping up a brisk Fire to divert their Attention from our Ships engaged with the Enemies, and to afford every Aid and Assistance to the Warren - Putnam - Thompson - and Scarborough that they may appear to stand in need of, either of Ships, or Boats.

Signal of Victory will be a Continental Salute by Cannon.

The usual Signal for sailing will be the going in.

Warren 11 August 1779.

J. Adams Secy

A true Copy from the Original Examined
Zudley Saltonstall

The several Captains of the aforementioned Ships.

saying, “What advantage would it be to go and take the Enemy’s Shipping?”³⁹ Because of his background as captain of a privateer, the commodore’s answer could be considered sensible. The primary tactic of a privateer was to avoid conflict by using bluff and bluster to subdue and preserve the prize. This likely accounted for Saltonstall’s hesitancy, but he yielded to his fellow officers’ entreaty.

A small party had reconnoitred the British position to locate any weakness in their defences. On 28 July an amphibious assault was launched on Bagaduce under cover of a naval bombardment. Fort George, however, was at an approximate elevation of about 160 feet and inland about a thousand yards, a very difficult target given the flat trajectory of naval guns, and this would account for the limited artillery support Saltonstall’s ships provided. Mortars fired from bomb ships might have been useful, but there is no evidence that they were part of the expeditionary force. Revere’s two howitzers, mounted on field carriages, had high trajectories and might have been effective against the fort or troops under cover.

The battery on Nautilus Island duelled with Mowat’s warships at long-range, causing little harm. Firing slackened and the transports carrying three divisions of Yankee militia and marines nosed up to the beach. The marines met the stiffest resistance, but fought their way up the steep western bluff while British defenders fired down upon them. Despite heavy casualties, the Americans scaled the heights and drove the defenders back from their outlying positions to the safety of their fort. This was the most significant American victory of the expedition.

At what should have been the critical point, the cooperation between the American land and sea forces collapsed. Lovell’s men had fought to within six hundred yards of the British defences, but Lovell refused to order a second assault. He insisted that Saltonstall’s fleet deal with the enemy’s ships before the ground troops attacked the bastion. With the British protected by their entrenchment, Lovell felt that his exhausted force was insufficient to take the enemy stronghold if Mowat’s warships supported the nearby fort. Revere would later disagree, commenting that the British “not knowing our strength, and we being flush with victory, I have no doubt they would have lain down their arms.”⁴⁰ Saltonstall refused to attack even though he enjoyed overwhelming naval superiority. He argued that if Fort George was taken and the British ships were isolated, then he would move against Mowat. Thus the two commanders had fallen into siege mentalities.

At 10 A.M. on 29 July the commodore engaged Mowat’s ships with the *Warren* and three other American vessels. An unfavourable wind made manoeuvring difficult so the naval engagement was limited to long-range cannon exchanges. Many of the *Warren*’s men were new to their ship as well as new to naval gunnery; therefore it was not surprising that the British guns found their mark more often than those of the Americans. The *Warren* suffered damage to her mainmast; in addition her bowsprit and forestay rigging were shot away. This unfortunate encounter apparently influenced

³⁹ Deposition of Lieutenant George Little, 25 September 1779, “Papers Relating to the Penobscot Expedition, 1779.” Transcripts from the Massachusetts Archives, New York Historical Society.

⁴⁰ Letter, Colonel Paul Revere to General William Heath, 24 October 1779, MHS.

Saltonstall. He never again placed the *Warren* in harm's way, but was this cowardice or military prudence?

As the Penobscot Expedition continued, arguments between the navy and militia officers seesawed back and forth. Days stretched into weeks as an operation that should have easily been completed turned into a stalemate. Meanwhile Fort George grew into a formidable structure. The privateers, largely participating for financial gain, became disenchanted as they sensed that victory was slipping away. They reasoned that their time could be more profitably spent hunting quarry. Similarly, the tired disillusioned militiamen wanted to return to their families, farms and businesses. Mass desertions were a constant threat. "Six Capt's of the Armed vessels said, their men were so uneasy, and deserted so fast that if we staid 3 days longer, they should not have men enough to work their vessels."⁴¹

Some of American captains, worried about the threat of a British squadron appearing from Halifax or New York, pleaded with Saltonstall to launch an immediate attack. A battle plan was formulated by Captain Hacker of the Continental sloop *Providence* and accepted by most of the expedition leaders. Saltonstall remained reluctant to risk his ships to protect a land assault and realized that he would be personally blamed for the loss of any vessel.⁴² Finally, on 11 August 1779, General Lovell made a forceful appeal to Saltonstall for naval cooperation for an assault on the British fortifications.⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Hoysteed Hacker had an uncertain reputation as a captain, according to various biographical sketches of JPJ. Hacker, who was sailing in his home waters of Rhode Island, hit a submerged rock and damaged his ship the *Hampden*, so that it could not be used in the a naval mission (27 October 1776). Jones wrote on 12 January 1777 that Hacker on the sloop *Providence* should have been court-martialled for deserting his ship, the *Alfred*, during a snow storm on 16 November 1776 off Nova Scotia.

⁴³ Dudley Saltonstall Papers, private collection:

"Headquarters, Majabagaduce Heights, 11 August 1779

Sir,

In this alarming posture of affairs, I am once more obliged to request the most speedy service from your department; and that a moment be no longer delayed to put into execution, what I have been given to understand, was the determination of your last council. The destruction of the enemy's ships must be effected at any rate, although it might cost us half our own. I cannot possibly conceive of that danger or that the attempt will miscarry. I mean not to determine upon your mode of attack; but it appears to me that any further delays must be infamous. I have it this moment, by a deserter from one of their ships, that the moment you enter the harbor, they will destroy themselves--which will effectually answer our purpose.

The idea of more batteries against them was sufficiently reprobated. If the situation of ground would admit to such proceedings, it would not take up dangerous time, and we have already experienced their obstinacy in that respect. . . . My situation is confined, and while the enemy's ships are safe, the operations of the army cannot possibly be extended an inch beyond the present limits. The alternative now remains, to destroy the ships, or raise the siege.

The information of the British ships at the Hook [probably those that sailed past Sandy Hook many days earlier] is not to be dispised [ignored], not a moment is to be lost.

Lovell wrote "I request the most speedy service in your department; and that a moment be no longer delayed I feel the honour of America, in an expedition which is a nobler exertion had long before this crowned with success; [you have] the necessity of undertaking the destruction of the ships, or quitting the place."⁴⁴ Paradoxically, in a Council of War on that same day Lovell stated that "the great want of Discipline & Subordination of many of the Officers being so exceedingly slack in their Duty, the Soldiers so averse to the Service & the wood in which we are encamped so very thick that on an alarm or any special occasion nearly one fourth part of the Army are skulked out of the way and conceal'd."⁴⁵

News of Commodore Saltonstall's inaction reached Boston. On 12 August, the Navy Board sent him a steely rebuke: "We have for sometime been at a loss to know why the enemy's ships have not been attacked.... It is agreed on all hands that they are at all times in your power, . . . It is therefore our orders that as soon as you receive this you take the most effectual measures for the capture or destruction of the enemy's ships."⁴⁶ The American naval and militia officers at long last agreed to mount a combined coordinated assault on 13 August.

Just before sunset on 13 August two American vessels patrolling the mouth of Penobscot Bay sighted a British naval force that had come to reinforce the besieged British garrison. Commodore Sir George Collier had left New York on 3 August on board the *Raisnable* (64 guns) in company with the frigates *Blonde* (32 guns) and *Virginia* (32 guns), plus *Greyhound* (28 guns), *Galatea* (20 guns), *Camilla* (20 guns), and the sloop *Otter* (14 guns). Counting Mowat's three vessels the British now had a naval armament of two hundred sixty-six guns, many of which threw more weight of metal than did those of the Americans.

Evening fog and the onset of darkness slowed the final approach of the British ships, and that should have given the American troops time to organize an orderly withdrawal onto the transports. Revere described what in fact happened.

When a Reinforcement to the Enemy appeared, it being near Night, we returned to the woods and Retreated on board the Transports before daylight and brought off every thing. Next morning when the tide made, we were ordered up the River, the Ships drew in a line to wait the Enemy. The Transports came to Anchor being no wind and tide against them. About one oclock the wind began to blow from the South all our

We must determine instantly, or it may be productive of disgrace, loss of ships and men. As for the troops, their retreat is secure, though I would die to save the necessity of it.

I feel the honor of America is at stake, especially in an expedition which a nobler exertion had long before this crowned with success. I have now only to repeat the [a]bsolute necessity of undertaking the destruction of the ships, or quitting this place. I impatiently await your answer. I am, Sir, Your, etc.

S. Lovell, Brig. Gen."

⁴⁴ Kevitt, *General Solomon Lovell*, 100-1.

⁴⁵ Massachusetts State Papers, 1775-1787, National Archives Microfilm Publication, Record Group 360, roll 47, vol. 2.

⁴⁶ Nathan Miller, *Sea of Glory* (New York: David McKay Company, 1974), 415.

Armed vessels got under way and stood up the River. When we found that the Transports got under sail, but the ships soon caught them and left them in the rear. They ran on shore & sett them on fire. Then the men took to the woods. The Gen' got on board the *Warren* and went up the River.⁴⁷

The demoralized American militiamen abandoned their cannons and equipment and, in panic, raced for the safety of the transports. During a frantic meeting on the *Warren*, some determined officers argued that the fleet could make a stand if the ships drew up in a crescent and raked the approaching British men-of-war with broadsides. The Americans observed that the river channel funnelled northward from the bay making it necessary for the enemy to approach in a line-ahead manoeuvre, making it impossible for the British to use their heavy broadside guns. By firing grape and canister shot into the rigging and bows of the British men-of-war, enough damage might be done to allow some of the American ships to escape. Saltonstall initially appeared to agree, but the incoming tide (measured today at two to three knots and occasionally up to five knots during flood tides) and a south-westerly wind favoured the British and he demurred. About noon on 14 August, Saltonstall signalled his captains to retreat, to deny the ships to the enemy, and ordered every man to be responsible for himself. Fighting against the obviously superior British force would bring loss of American life, ships, and arms. Certainly, Americans commonly employed tactical retreats during the Revolution. Unfortunately, discipline quickly disintegrated and a rush for safety resulted. All of the American armed ships and most of transports sailed up the river with Collier's vessels in pursuit.

Saltonstall, in one of the few surviving documents that give his version of events, described the closing events of the expedition to a board of enquiry.

[I was] totally not acquitted with the river, [and] the counsel of Massachusetts Bay refused upon Application to be at the expense of obtaining the necessary Information of the Nature and Situation of the country, I did not suffer her [the *Warren*] to be destroyed till every hope of preserving her to ourselves was vanished- . . . when I reached the other ships [I] found their men in an ungovernable state swearing that as the Militia had deserted them they would be held-no longer. I was [told by two captains] that they could not pacify their men or keep them together any other way than by assuring them that the ships should be burned the next day - . . . the land force were scattered and gone home and there were no entrenching tools provided - . . . with every Effort we had scarcely time enough to escape falling into the Enemies possession, . . . a Number of our Ships abreast were then proceeding up the river with all the sail they could crowd and had the *Warren* had fired her stern

⁴⁷ Letter, Colonel Paul Revere to General William Heath, 24 October 1779, MHS, box 19, vol. 14., no. 1, 374.

Chasers, it might have thrown the whole into confusion and given the enemy and eminent Advantage in the pursuit .⁴⁸

With the order to evacuate, Revere sent a boat to Grant's Mill to find and reorganize his men. General Lovell passed him in another transport and ordered the colonel to bring up his artillery to make a stand against the British. Revere obeyed but was unable to locate enough of his militia to reconstitute an effective unit. He boarded the *Vengeance* (20 guns) to inquire about planned naval defensive initiatives. He was told that the vessel was to be burned in the morning, so he commandeered a transport and loaded it with his personal gear. General Wadsworth ordered Revere to give up the vessel so that the crew of a disabled schooner that was drifting toward the advancing enemy could be evacuated. Revere initially refused the request without orders from Lovell and argued with Wadsworth, an act of overt insubordination. The colonel later recanted and gave up his boat. Revere then left the retreating forces without orders and went about a mile into the woods with two of his officers and eight men not telling his commanders where he was going. These actions led to charges of misconduct.

The American warships *Hampden* (20 guns) and *Hunter* (20 guns) tried to run through the British line and were captured. Most other vessels were run aground. Before the seamen and soldiers fled into the surrounding woods, the Americans set fire to as many of their ships as they could to keep them from falling into enemy hands. By nightfall the chaos was complete. Lovell wrote in his journal "To attempt to give a description of this terrible Day is out of my Power Transports on fire. Men of war blowing up . . . and as much confusion as can possibly be conceived."⁴⁹ A disorganized rabble of dispirited soldiers, sailors and marines trudged through the Maine wilderness toward scattered townships in Maine, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Boston. By 16 August, Revere had trekked the arduous trail to Fort Western (Augusta, Maine) with whomever he could muster. Most of the artillerymen returned to Boston on 26 August, probably by way of the Kennebec River, then by sea.⁵⁰

The American casualties numbered 474 killed or taken prisoner while only seventy British were killed during the assaults. All of the American ships present at the action were lost, a total of forty-three. Forty-six American vessels of various kinds had taken part in the expedition, but the brig *Pallas* (14 guns), on patrol duty at Blue Hill Bay when the British fleet arrived, escaped. The privateers *Charming Polly* (6 guns) and *Renown* (14 guns) had left the scene after completing convoy duty. All of the British vessels at Penobscot survived without significant damage. The American cost was tallied at £1,041,760 in the colonial currency of the time, but it was noted that "All of the monies the public could raise, the General Court promise[s] to make provision for all payments of said debit as soon as the state treasury would permit."⁵¹

⁴⁸ Dudley Saltonstall Papers, private collection.

⁴⁹ Letter, Colonel Paul Revere to General William Heath, 24 October 1779, MHS, box 19, vol.14, no. 1, 374.

⁵⁰ *Revolution: Penobscot Expedition*, Massachusetts Archives Collection, microfilm, box 154, vol. 145, 337.

⁵¹ Papers of Nathan Dane, Esquire, Massachusetts Attorney, 14 July 1780.

The Penobscot Expedition had sailed before the fair winds of great expectations, but the results were an enormous loss of vessels, heavy casualties, disgruntled citizens, and two potentially ruined military reputations. A couplet from the nineteenth-century New England poet John Greenleaf Whittier provides a fitting epitaph:

For all the sad words of tongue and pen,
the saddest are these: "It might have been."⁵²

The Massachusetts House of Representatives reported the debacle as follows:

This failure has occasioned universal uneasiness and the public in general will expect that a thorough enquiry will be made into the causes of it; We also earnestly recommend, that speedy and effectual provision be made for the payment of those persons who have cheerfully engaged their vessels in the service, or have furnished to the government with such supplies of provisions and other articles as were necessary for carrying on this expedition. . . . the public credit will be greatly affected, and the public spirited exertions in the future, it is to be feared, will be greatly discouraged, if there should be any delay in this matter. . . the board of war [is] to furnish . . . an estimate of what may be due to the several creditors of the government upon this account.⁵³

Financial responsibility, although mentioned last, was clearly an important issue for the legislators. The officers of the militia blamed the navy and privateer fleet for the failure of the expedition, while the sea captains blamed the leaders of the militia. Failings lay on both sides, caused by hasty preparations, an inadequately trained fleet and militia, and timid battle plans, coupled with weak uncooperative leadership.

In an attempt to establish a claim to recover the cost of the expedition against the Continental Congress, Massachusetts's authorities blamed Saltonstall's lack of aggressive spirit and energy for the fiasco.⁵⁴ In a deposition on 25 September 1779 for a General Assembly Committee chaired by General Artemas Ward, Captain John Williams of the brig *Hazard* (10) said "it is [my] opinion that it was in the power of Our Fleet to have taken or destroyed the enemy's Shipping at any time before the arrival of their reinforcement."⁵⁵

General Wadsworth, in a similar 29 September deposition, made this report: "Uniform Backwardness of the Commander of the Fleet appear'd in several Councils of War at which I was present; Where he always held up the Idea that the Damage that his ships would receive in attempting the enemys Shipping would more than counterbalance

⁵² "Maud Miller" (1856), stanza 53,54 in Brenda Wineapple, ed., *John Greenleaf Whittier, Selected Poems* (New York: American Poets Project, The Library of America, 2004), 53.

⁵³ *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts*, 55: 78.

⁵⁴ In 1793 Massachusetts authorities succeeded in persuading Congress to partially reimburse the state for the cost of the expedition.

⁵⁵ Kevitt, *General Solomon Lovell*, 133.

the Advantage of Destroying them.”⁵⁶ Wadsworth argued that if Saltonstall had supported the land attack by suppressing Mowat’s ships, the expedition would have been successful. He concurred with Captain Williams’s testimony saying, “I believe that the Enemys Ships might have been destroy’d at any time during the Siege.”⁵⁷ The aristocrat who should have proven his competency as a naval officer in the expedition ultimately led one of the sorriest episodes in American naval history.

The Penobscot Expedition has been the subject of historical debate and criticism for many years. In 1845, naval historian and novelist James Fenimore Cooper was generally sympathetic toward Saltonstall:

Captain Saltonstall was . . .justly censured . . .though . . . more from . . . publicity . . . than from any other cause. Had a due regard been paid to secrecy, time might have been gained . . . before a sufficient force could be collected to go against the assailants. In a military sense, the principal faults appear to have been a miscalculation of means, at the commencement, and a neglect to raise such batteries as might have protected the shipping against the heavy vessels of the enemy. It could not surely have been thought that privateers, armed with light guns, were able to resist [British] two deckers.⁵⁸

One hundred and twenty years after the expedition Richard Saltonstall compiled a comprehensive Saltonstall genealogy in which Dudley Saltonstall was a minor figure. The author, however, defended his ancestor’s conduct before and after the Bagaduce battle. Richard Saltonstall noted that the Board of War tried to assemble the expedition and prepare the armed Continental, state and privateer armada in less than two weeks. Lovell was a farmer and an amateur general who had little command experience and none in an amphibious assault operation. He commanded a Massachusetts militia that was ill trained, inexperienced, and insufficient in number. The Massachusetts Board of War did not consult with the Continental Army’s General Horatio Gates in Rhode Island about offering troops or advice about strategy and tactics. A proposal had been introduced into the Massachusetts House of Representatives calling for aid from Continental troops but was rejected out of hubris. Some members felt that if only a small contingent was involved, the Continental army would take full credit for an expedition that promised to be an easy victory.⁵⁹

Richard Saltonstall also argued that there was state nepotism. The state officers, with the possible exception of Revere, were all exonerated and praised. If culpability could be shifted to the naval officer in charge, the Continental Congress would be liable for any losses. In fact, evidence of the “insurance” preparation of the expedition indicated that this was the intent of the General Court. Richard Saltonstall made the final point that

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ James Fenimore Cooper, *The History of the Navy of the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Thomas, Cowperthwait & Company, 1845), 107.

⁵⁹ Richard Saltonstall, *The Ancestry and Descendents of Sir Richard Saltonstall* (New York: The Riverside Press, 1897), 230.

the commodore could have mounted an appeal concerning his dismissal by “an address to Congress . . . though he never made application in person . . . He appears to have been treated shamefully and cruelly sacrificed.”⁶⁰ Essentially Richard Saltonstall agreed with Cooper’s assessment that Dudley Saltonstall was chosen as a scapegoat for a military humiliation not least to assure economic recompense.⁶¹ There appears to be some support for this thesis. Lovell, Wadsworth, and other leaders of the Massachusetts militia defended their own actions at Bagaduce before a sympathetic Massachusetts investigatory commission. It was clearly in their interest to shift blame. Examination of depositions taken during the investigation reveals some minor inconsistencies in individual recollections of events, but it is not unusual for witnesses to recall the details of an event differently. Still, it is unlikely that all of these men colluded to blame the defeat upon Saltonstall. A conspiracy involving so many men, particularly with such strong egos, appears improbable.

Saltonstall was given command of the Penobscot Expedition because of his long experience as a seaman and his Continental Navy rank. The commodore may have had some personal shortcomings, but the reasons behind some of his actions appear justified in the light of the many problems he faced. He was given command of a vessel with which he was unfamiliar, manned by an under-trained crew, and asked to fight in the restrictive, dangerous confines of the Penobscot and Bagaduce Rivers. Little is recorded about Saltonstall’s court martial defence, but there is ample documentation of the defence of Lovell, Wadsworth, Revere, and other officers who took part in the failed mission. Existing records of the Penobscot Expedition are one sided, but an unbiased re-examination of the naval tactics employed in light of the limited scope for manoeuvre within the confines of the rivers suggest that Saltonstall may have been unfairly treated by history. He was correct in deciding that when the British reinforcements had entered the Penobscot, the attackers had an advantage with respect to wind and tide as well as arms. An acceptable course of action in the face of probable defeat is to deny the enemy material (ships) and weapons (cannons) and save your men to fight another day.

As for Revere, the most devastating allegations against him came from General Wadsworth’s deposition of 29 September 1779. Wadsworth said that he was evacuating a vessel, but encountered difficulty because of the tide. He ordered Revere who was in a boat nearby to help take out the crew, but he said:

I was directly oppos’d by Lieutenant Colonel Revere who said that I had no right to command either him or the Boat & give orders to the contrary He was promis’d An Arrest as soon as the Army should collect. The Reason . . . Revere gave . . . was that he had all his baggage at Stake & asd who would thank him for loosing that, in attempting to save the Schooner to the State. I ask’d him whether he came there to take Care of his private Baggage, or to serve the State.⁶²

⁶⁰Ibid., 231.

⁶¹ Captain Hoysted Hacker of the sloop *Providence* faced a court of naval inquiry for his conduct during the expedition. The evidence showed that he consistently voted for offensive actions at the various Councils of War. Therefore, he was cleared of the charges against him.

⁶² Kevitt, *General Solomon Lovell*, 144.

In addition, a group of officers in the Massachusetts militia raised formal charges against Revere. The colonel's feelings about the complainants are found in his letter to General William Heath: "You have no doubt heard, that I was Arrested for supposed bad conduct Several of the officers [objected] because I would not resign as they did. [They] have done everything in their power, in an underhanded way to hurte my reputation. . . . I have reason to think they wrote up things to my disadvantage, which happened to arrive just before the News of our defeat."⁶³

Marine Captain Carnes accused Revere of disobedience to his commanding officers, neglect of duty, unsoldierly behaviour tending toward cowardice, abandoning his men, allowing them to disperse with no provision for their care.⁶⁴ "I thought it impossible," he added, "that a Colonel of Artillery should make of such bad shot, and know more about artillery."⁶⁵ In addition, Carnes said that when General Lovell ordered Revere to reorganize his troops for a secondary defensive position, Revere allegedly replied, "When the Siege was rais'd, [I] considered the expedition at an end, and therefore did not consider [myself] any longer under General Lovell's Command."⁶⁶ Major Todd testified that Wadsworth felt that Revere was inattentive to duty, and that even if the siege had continued for years, Wadsworth would not have asked Revere to take command. From Revere's observation concerning the Councils of War quoted above he may have reached an early conclusion that the expedition had poor prospects for a victory. In an undated letter to the committee investigating the aftermath of the expedition Revere wrote that "it was always my sentiment, that if we could not Dislodge the Enemy in seven days, we ought to quit the ground."⁶⁷

In response to the charge of cowardice, Revere said that "I never was in any Sharp Action, nor was any of the Artillery; but in what little I was, no one has dared to say I flinched. My Officers all swear, that when ever there was an alarm, I was one of the first in the battery; I think that no mark of cowardice."⁶⁸ Revere had the advantage of presenting contradictory evidence in his defence before his jurors and accusers.

In the face of continuing criticism, Revere mentioned that during his foray in Maine, his replacement on Castle Island found fault with the state of the garrison. This became the subject of a report to General Hancock accusing Revere of incompetence. Thus, Revere felt victimized, the object of a vendetta. He also worried that his best witnesses against these accusations would be at sea if an enquiry were convened.

The trials of the two indicted patriots had disparate outcomes. Massachusetts could not try Saltonstall because he was under orders from the Continental Congress and therefore out of their jurisdiction. Although the records of Naval Board that convened the

⁶³ Letter, Colonel Paul Revere to General William Heath, 24 October 1779, MHS, Box 19, vol. 14, no. 1, 374.

⁶⁴ Frederic Grant, Jr., "The Court-Martial of Paul Revere," *Boston Bar Journal*, vol. 21, no. 5 (May 1977), 8.

⁶⁵ Triber, *A True Republican*, 137.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁶⁷ Massachusetts Archives Collection, 145: 336-40; Goss, *Colonel Revere*, 2: 355.

⁶⁸ *Revolution: Penobscot*, 272.

court martial of Saltonstall are lost, the account of the charges against him survives.⁶⁹ The commodore was tried in Boston on 28 September 1779 onboard the frigate *Deane* (32 guns), the ship named for his brother-in-law. Saltonstall was evidently found guilty of at least some of the charges. He was first placed in a reserve status called “out of actual service,” and subsequently dismissed from the navy.⁷⁰ Because of the very great challenges Saltonstall faced, and the fact that his actions were on occasion reasonable and seaman-like responses, the penalty of dismissal from the service for a defeat of such magnitude appears both justifiable and compassionate. Saltonstall blundered at critical junctures and to paraphrase an often-repeated maxim: victory spawns many fathers; defeat is an orphan.

In forced retirement Saltonstall became captain of the Connecticut privateer *Minerva* that, in 1781, captured the *Hannah* and its cargo worth approximately £80,000. This was the greatest single prize taken by a Connecticut ship during the war. In an ironic twist or perhaps a gesture of support for a fellow Penobscot inductee, Revere purchased shares in Saltonstall’s Connecticut privateer venture.

Initially, in the immediate wake of the failed operation, Revere was convicted in the court of Massachusetts public opinion, a devastating blow to both his ego and reputation. In spite of this, Revere appealed to the General Court, and perhaps public sympathy, for back rations. The Commissary General of Massachusetts was moved by the request and restored all back rations to Revere and his men that were withheld during their absence while on a mission for the state.

On 16 November 1779, General Ward’s committee from both houses of the state legislature heard testimony. The committee subsequently reported that the preponderance of evidence pointed toward Revere being guilty of misconduct by leaving the Penobscot without keeping in contact with his commanders and particularly with regard to his disputing orders from Wadsworth.⁷¹

In order to restore his standing in his community, Revere repeatedly requested the General Court to convene a formal court martial so that his defence could be heard, and this finally took place on 22 January 1782. He was, in a ruling reached on 19 February 1782, acquitted of the charge of disobedience against Wadsworth. Because of the confusion during the retreat and the dispersal of his men, the court felt that no consequential order could have been given. His refusal to give up the vessel he had commandeered was also justified because it came during the rampant turmoil of the retreat. Moreover, he subsequently relinquished the boat to Wadsworth, and the stranded men were saved.

Todd and Carnes continued to press their charges of cowardice, fighting their battle through letters published under pseudonyms in the *Boston Gazette*. The court martial hearing ended in exoneration on 15 April 1782. Revere felt vindicated and

⁶⁹ Jacob B. Gurley, “Collection of Naval Manuscripts, 1734-1784 - Saltonstall, Dudley, Court Martial” (Hartford: Connecticut State Library [if a publication, as laid out here, then we need a year of publication, or at least “nd” to indicate no year is indicated]), 7 a,b,c.

⁷⁰ Admiralty to Navy Board, 25 January 1780, National Archives, microfilm publication record group 360, M 332, roll 6, no. 249.

⁷¹ Only one other militiaman in the entire expedition, Jonathan Mitchel of North Yarmouth, Maine, was confirmed to have left the Penobscot without orders.

returned to his life in the community as a respected entrepreneur. Although Revere was a relative footnote in the history of the American Revolution, his fame increased with the publication in 1863 of the poem “Paul Revere’s Ride” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, grandson of General Peleg Wadsworth, plaintiff in Revere’s court martial.⁷²

Massachusetts petitioned to recover the cost of the failed expedition from the Continental Congress and, after the victory of the revolution, from the United States Congress. The General Court argued that although this had been a state action, it was part of the overall war effort of the colonies during the revolution, therefore all costs should be shared. On 29 June 1793, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts received \$1,248,000 as its share in the cost of the Penobscot Expedition.

In conclusion, the American defeat at Bagaduce, its cost in deaths, injuries, ruined reputations, ships, and treasure was a waste. Saltonstall may not have been as ineffectual a leader as many historians have portrayed him. Revere was a patriot and an intelligent man deserving of respect, but perhaps not as a military leader. Finally, even if the American expedition had succeeded, the British doubtless could have recaptured Fort George very readily. The British had vastly superior sea power, which gave them an enormous advantage in controlling such an isolated coastal area, and possessed the seasoned army and marine troops needed to accomplish the mission. A better planned and led American Penobscot Expedition might have produced a temporary victory, but it was likely to have been only temporary. The wisdom of the entire Massachusetts venture could be questioned.

After the passage of 220 years, how would Saltonstall and Revere fare under the current American uniform code of military justice (UCMJ)?⁷³ The most obvious change is that both officers would be tried under the federal rules of the UCMJ. Today Saltonstall, as a Continental officer, would be considered the commander of the joint army and navy force responsible for the accomplishment of the mission. He could lawfully order Lovell to take Fort George without the aid of naval artillery and the general would be obligated to follow the commodore’s instructions. If Saltonstall’s plan was militarily unsound or the mission was jeopardized by indecision, the commodore could be charged with dereliction of duty.

To introduce charges of dereliction of duty the prosecution must show that an officer was given a legal order and that the officer was aware of his duty. The Continental Navy Board ordered Captain Saltonstall to obey the mandate of the General Court of Massachusetts. These orders were legal and the captain obviously knew what was expected of him. In the face of a failed mission, three general criteria would be applied to prove dereliction. One must establish that there was there an intentional dereliction of duty on the commander’s part; negligence in his collection of military intelligence, preparation of battle plans or defences; finally, there must be evidence of professional ineptitude. The historical evidence suggests that Saltonstall was, to varying degrees, guilty under all three criteria, even in the face of some mitigating circumstances. He

⁷² Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), 18-25.

⁷³ I thank Lt. Commander Jonathan Scott Thow, judge and instructor at the Naval Justice School, Newport, RI for his help and professional opinions.

would likely be found guilty of dereliction and/or conduct unbecoming an officer. An administrative proceeding sentence would have the option of recommending removal of Saltonstall from command as well as dismissal from service. This, in fact, was his fate.

Local laws were used to determine the outcome of Revere's court martial.⁷⁴ Today the Massachusetts Court would not have jurisdiction. Revere, who was activated to serve the national government during the expedition, would be tried federally. The charges of unsoldierly conduct (currently termed conduct unbecoming an officer) and cowardice were unsubstantiated according to the evidence available, and it is likely that a modern military court would recommend acquittal. The loss of contact with his superior officers in the confusion of the retreat and the inhospitable terrain was understandable. The charge of insubordination to General Wadsworth is a more difficult matter to assess. There is evidence that a direct order was not obeyed, but questioning an order not clearly understood or one that appears in contradiction of a previous order is not a crime. Certainly, Revere was acting under a non-specific order to retreat and for every man to shift for himself that led to mass confusion and disorganization. Still, Revere should have assumed that an order from a general officer to surrender his boat was legal. The colonel initially failed to comply, but later acquiesced. This was not dereliction of duty, but questionable conduct during a time of stress related to combat. The time line is not clear from the depositions, but if the boat was relinquished in a politic fashion and the outburst of disrespect was followed by an apology, Revere would likely have been exonerated or, at worse, received a letter of reprimand. In other words, the ruling of a modern court might well be the same as that of the court martial of 1782.

Appendix:

Orders for Attacking the Enemies Ships in Bagg: Harbour

The Warren-Putnam-Hampden-and Vengeance will lead nearly in a line Abreast, & will Anchor at a proper Distance from the Enemies Ships.

The Warren opposite the outermost Ship but one.

The Putnam opposite the outermost Ship but two.

The Hampden the Innermost.

The Vengeance the Outermost.

The Sally-Monmouth-Hector-Black Prince-and Hunter to follow and form a line against the Enemies Citadel on the Hill keeping up a brisk Fire to divert their Attention from the Ships engaged with the Enemies, and to afford every Aid and Assistance to the Warren-Putnam-Hampden-and Vengeance that they may appear to stand in need of, either of Ships, or Boats. Signal of Distress will be a Continental Jack Miz; Shroud. The Usual signal for Sailing will be going in.

Warren 11 August 1779

D Saltonstall

{To the several Captains of
The withinmentioned Ships}

⁷⁴ Grant, "The Court Martial of Paul Revere," 5-13.