

Abraham Whipple: Audacity in the Atlantic

Despite the hardship and tragedies of the American Revolutionary War, there were extraordinary demonstrations of leadership and heroism amid the battle for freedom. Abraham Whipple is one excellent example of a man rising to the challenge to fight for his country's liberty under all circumstances. Born in 1733, Whipple pursued his passion for sailing at a very young age and later became a merchant and extremely capable seaman.ⁱ Whipple's exceptional nautical skills and bold courage proved valuable to him as a true patriot for the American cause.

During the initial stage of the Revolutionary War, Abraham Whipple and his crew of the small vessel *Gamecock* struck the first blow against the English in the naval front. The British ship *Gaspee* was run aground near New England when Whipple's men arrived, slaying the British captain and setting the *Gaspee* on fire. Sir James Wallace, another British captain, wrote to Whipple in consternation saying: "You, Abraham Whipple, on the 10th of June, 1772, burned His Majesty's vessel, the *Gaspee*, and I will hang you at the yard-arm." Whipple calmly replied with proverbial humor: "Always catch a man before you hang him!"ⁱⁱ On account of this spectacular victory, Congress later bestowed upon Whipple the position of Naval Commander and supplied him with the frigate *Providence* and a smaller ship called *Columbus*.ⁱⁱⁱ

Following his promotion, Commander Whipple became an Atlantic terror to the British. He was credited with countless captures of British ships and ran important communications between Congress and France. In the summer of 1779, while sailing the *Providence* and two other ships named *Ranger* and *Queen of France*, Whipple came upon a large British fleet stationed off the coast of Newfoundland. To avert his peril, Whipple commanded his crews to hoist the English flag on their masts. This tactic proved so successful in deceiving the British that Whipple decided not to sail away but instead attack the enemy's fleet under the stealthy proximity he gained. Without firing any cannon shots, which would have alerted the entire British fleet, the Americans quietly seized ten British ships through various means of deception. Due to the magnitude of the British fleet, no alarm was raised when Whipple's men quietly slipped away under the cover of darkness with their prizes. The treasure captured from these ships amounted to an extremely significant sum. Congress recognized the value in Whipple's achievement and commended him for his excellent service.^{iv}

On his final assignment, Abraham Whipple was captured with his crew while supporting the disastrous land-based defense of Charleston against the siege of British General Cornwallis. Released at the end of the war, Whipple found himself in financial turmoil and turned to Congress requesting another position in the Navy.^v Whipple was offered an appointment to the ship *George Washington* and most deservedly became the first to fly the American colors in England.^{vi} The courage and daring of Commander Whipple displayed in the Atlantic were essential for America's efforts to win her precious freedom.