

The Ill-Fated Voyage of the *Providentia*: Richard Vaux, Loyalist Merchant, and the Trans-Atlantic Mercantile World in the Late Eighteenth Century

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On July 28, 1781, the brig *Providentia* weighed anchor and slid down the Thames River to begin its ill-fated voyage to the island of St. Thomas in the Caribbean Sea. On board the *Providentia*, Richard Vaux, a Quaker merchant who had fled Philadelphia at the outset of the Revolution, sought to pursue a strategy that he had used successfully on several other occasions. From a rented store on St. Thomas or some other neutral island in the Caribbean, Vaux positioned himself to trade either in the lucrative, local West Indies market or with merchants from more distant Charleston, Baltimore or Philadelphia.

This study describes the voyage of the *Providentia*. Through the experience of Richard Vaux, it follows two fairly recent studies that explore the mercantile world of trans-Atlantic trade at the end of the eighteenth century. In doing so this article examines the methods by which merchants such as Vaux sought to protect themselves from the vicissitudes of an already perilous trade further disrupted by the tumult of the Revolutionary War.¹

Vaux was born "of pure Quaker extraction" in London on November 29, 1751. The son of George Vaux, a prominent physician, and Margaret Wistar Vaux, he was the youngest of four brothers. In 1768 George Vaux sent his seventeen-year-old son to America to be apprenticed to Philadelphia merchant Samuel Sansom and to be "trained for business." As an apprentice the young Vaux began his initiation into the arcana of mercantile knowledge: double entry bookkeeping in the Italian style, waste-books, daybooks, ledgers, promissory notes drawn on a third party, and bills of exchange.²

By 1776 Richard Vaux had established himself as an independent and prominent member of Philadelphia's mercantile community. However, as the American Revolution began and the already fractious population of Philadelphia divided into opposing groups of loyalists, patriots and neutrals, Richard Vaux encountered the wrath of the patriotic Committee of Safety. On October 15, 1776, the committee ordered his arrest and incarceration, apparently for joining in the public singing of "God Save the King." On December 13, 1776, his persecutors paroled Vaux under the condition of confinement to his home. Vaux promptly jumped parole and fled to England via the West Indies. He left behind his fiancée, Ann Roberts, and his business in the trust of his partner, John Nancarrow.³

While in exile in England for the next several years, Vaux settled into a familiar role, a merchant involved in the world of trans-Atlantic trade. Vaux's English exile

soon fell into a predictable pattern; he moved within a comfortable network of relatives; friends, and business acquaintances. Frequently, relatives and friends merged as partners and agents within Vaux's mercantile web. His older brother George, a physician, and his cousins John Warder and John Strettell, all participated as investors or factors in various enterprises. Within this network he visited, dined, supped, or just walked, but these seemingly innocuous social activities disguised a hidden mercantilist agenda, for conversations focused on goods, prices, markets, credit, ships, and shipping. On January 19, 1781, Vaux visited John Strettell, "having received my Account current for last year." Six weeks later he "called on Dr. Roberts and mentioned to him a quantity of hose to be bought low."⁴

Part of the orbit in which Vaux moved included regular visits to a number of coffee houses and the Royal Exchange. These two institutions sat at the center of London's mercantile universe. By visiting a particular coffee house Vaux met merchants and captains oriented towards specific parts of the far-flung trans-Atlantic world. Here merchants such as Vaux ascertained the current market value of commodities, sent or received mail, negotiated with captains or shipowners, or simply gathered information, especially about the Revolutionary War and its anticipated conclusion. On January 5, 1781, at the New York Coffee House, Vaux met with a Captain Watson "to ship by him a few goods to New York." On the following day Vaux visited another establishment, the famous Lloyd's, incorporated since 1769 and located in the Royal Exchange, to arrange with an underwriter for insurance on the cargo shipped to New York on Captain Watson's vessel. Visits to the West Indies and the Carolina Coffee Houses provided similar opportunities.⁵

On February 21, 1781, amidst all of this commerical activity, Richard Vaux took another step to enlarge the safe network within which he operated and prospered. On this day he "attended Jerusalem Free Mason Lodge, and was made a free and accepted mason." Even though Vaux was born "of pure Quaker extraction" and moved within a well-defined Quaker circle, his diary reveals tension and contradiction between Quaker ideology and his social activities. His diary rarely mentions attendance at Quaker meetings, nor does it cite his involvement in the business of the Society of Friends. However, it does describe Vaux's participation in a number of "unfriendly" activities: the theater, the races, and initiation as a Free Mason. By becoming a mason, Vaux entered a second supportive, and sometimes overlapping, mercantilist network.⁶

In a 1983 article, historian Thomas Doerflinger identified most of the top stratum of successful and prosperous Philadelphia merchants as members of either the Society of Friends or the Anglican Church. The case of Richard Vaux, as illuminated in his diary, discloses the reason for one of these merchant's success and its connection to his membership in the Society of Friends. Within the Quaker network Vaux found information, goods, credit, and reliability, especially in debt collection, that merchants outside it lacked. Since this network extended across the Atlantic, from England and Ireland to Pennsylvania, Virginia, and South Carolina—even to the

West Indies—Quaker merchants operated on a level of security of which other merchants were deprived.⁷

In April 1781, the tone of the Vaux's diary changed and the tempo of his mercantile activity quickened. Instead of moving within his normal cricle, he began visiting shipyards and docks, inspecting ships and meeting with ship owners and masters. Instead of an occasional purchase or shipment, he began to accumulate a large quantity and variety of goods: "agreed for two hundred Doz. of worsted hose at Ten Shillings pr Doz" and "purchased 100, silk, thread and cotton hose . . . likewise . . . bought twenty Silk Gowns etc." Finally, a diary entry for April 22, 1781, describing yet another visit to John Strettell, reveals the purpose of this flurry of activity. Perhaps anticipating the end of the Revolutionary War and the re-opening of the American market, Richard Vaux feverishly prepared a cargo and a ship for a return voyage to the West Indies.⁸

In the middle of this preparation tragedy intruded. On May 25, 1781, the diary reports: "This morning my Cousin John Strettell departed this life." Vaux simply recorded the death and then returned to his commercial activity. Although Strettell was his cousin and the son of John Strettell, his mentor and chief financial backer, Vaux's diary entry does not mention a funeral or any feeling of loss or bereavement. Such entries in this diary and in other memoranda books portray Vaux as a cold, emotionless person where other human beings are concerned. The diary frequently mentions his father, mother, brothers, cousins, and other relatives, but it never connects them with affection or any other emotional attachment. On those infrequent occasions the diary records letters to "my friend A.R.," Vaux's long-suffering and faithful fiancée Ann Roberts," the references are similarly emotionally void. In fact, Vaux usually listed Ann among business acquaintances with whom he corresponded. Thomas Doerflinger argues that certain psychological characteristics, including a predisposition to risk-taking and a narrow-minded pursuit of financial success, marked eighteenth-century merchants. If one includes emotional detachment among those psychological characteristics, Richard Vaux fits the profile exactly.⁹

Attempts to explain the loyalism of Vaux and other Americans defy facile analysis. In his general discussion of southern loyalists, Robert Calhoun argues that they were marked by an "Augustan conservatism" and feared a breakdown of order and prosperity caused by "confused democracy." By contrast, in the interior of North Carolina and on the Delmarva peninsula, religious animosity divided Whigs and Tories. On the other hand, the Middle Colonies provide us with a third model, the desire to settle old scores. In Philadelphia these animosities proved particularly volatile.¹⁰

In 1775 the Philadelphia merchant community included 320 members with an elite consisting of the top 15 percent, or 48 merchants organized into 37 firms. By religious affiliation most of these were Quaker or Anglican. By wealth the remainder of the merchants, mostly Presbyterians, were barely discernible from the middling artisans.¹¹

The outbreak of the Revolution further divided this already diverse and antagonistic community into three groups: loyalists, neutrals, and rebels. Among these three groups the neutrals, composed mainly of Quakers, was the largest. Twenty-six merchants led by Robert Morris formed the core of supporters of the rebel cause. With the exception of Richard Vaux and a few other outspoken individuals, the number of loyalists is less certain. For good reasons, many loyalists remained quiet.¹²

However, within several years three events: the British occupation of Philadelphia in fall, 1777, the British evacuation of the city in the following spring, and the subsequent imposition of a loyalty oath by the triumphant patriots, dramatically reconfigured Philadelphia's merchant community. Merchants such as Tench Coxe who had traded too warmly with the British were forced to evacuate with the British army; some Quakers who refused to take the loyalty oath were driven into exile, and even some moderates such as James Wilson experienced the anger of the radicalized populace.¹³

What makes analyzing the Philadelphia merchant community more complex, and perhaps inexplicable, is the aftermath of the conflict. Tench Coxe, probably aided by Thomas McKean, returned at the end of the war and prospered. So did Richard Vaux, while the business of radical leader George Bryan drowned in a sea of uncollected debts.¹⁴

For Richard Vaux, however, this remained in the future. Finally, by the end of July 1781, with goodbyes made, financial accounts settled, and the cargo loaded, the *Providentia* "Weighed Anchor about 4 Oclock — Many Vessels in company, with fresh breeze from ye westward — six sail of the line and many merchants being made a pleasant appearance," and "five days later for added protection the fleet was taken . . . under convoy of two frigates." Yet this idyllic beginning proved deceptive; within three days Vaux and the *Providentia* experienced the kind of adversity than made eighteenth-century voyages both perilous and irksome. On August 6 the captain became concerned about the water supply and considered putting into Plymouth or Falmouth. (How a captain could begin a voyage that might last four months or longer and then run low on water within one week baffles a modern reader.) Two days later, on August 8, the brig made Plymouth "in order to procure some water casks." At this point difficulties multiplied. For several days the captain, Anders Brun, had been ill, but, according to Vaux, "refuses to take proper advice. . . . I observed him to be delirious and had a very strong fever [sic]. The captain's own people appear to pay him little attention." For the next month the star-crossed ship laid at anchor. The captain's illness continued: "I was up several times with the Captain who is still exceedingly Ill and Delirious —at intervals he has his recollection and I wished to apply a Blister, but he would not consent to it," Vaux recorded. Like numerous educated eighteenth-century gentlemen, Vaux, the brother and son of prominent surgeons, frequently dabbled in medicine. A person sailed with Richard Vaux at his own peril as fellow passengers and crew alike experienced his ministrations; he liberally dosed them with emetics and physics. To make matters worse, on August 22, an otherwise unidentified Mr. Cruger appeared to make difficulties about

the papers of the *Providentia* having been signed by the Danish consul, for the vessel was bound for the Danish island of St. Thomas. By some unknown means Vaux resolved the issue of the papers to official satisfaction, and the diary mentions Mr. Cruger no more. Miraculously, perhaps, by the end of August the captain had recovered from his extended illness and once more the *Providentia* set sail only to be driven back into port by adverse winds. Finally, on September 9 the ship departed Plymouth to continue its long-delayed voyage. This episode, in which a ship took more than a month to leave British waters, reminds us of the multitude of difficulties with which eighteenth-century trans-Atlantic merchants such as Richard Vaux contended on a regular basis.¹⁵

At long last the *Providentia* continued towards its Caribbean destination. However, the worst was yet to come. At this point the dramatis personae of Richard Vaux changed. Richard Vaux, the merchant, became a seafaring traveler and amateur navigator walking the deck and carefully observing the wind, the weather, the set of the sails, and the routine activities of the officers and the crew. The diary reflects this transformation, for it takes on the appearance of a ship's log. During the enforced sojourn in Plymouth Vaux had purchased a quadrant and notations such as "Latde 46:56 Distance—Log 46 miles" replaced the previous careful accounting of daily expenditures in pounds, shillings, and pence.¹⁶

Trouble soon reared its ugly head. Not-too-subtle diary entries hint at tension between the elitist merchant Richard Vaux and the ship's crew. Within two weeks of departing from Plymouth the diary records that the steward informed Vaux "all our Rum + Brandy expended." Then two days later Vaux discovered that his larder was reduced to 46 bottles of porter and wine. Knowing the legendary proclivities of sailors this news proves less than startling. Yet further trouble followed, and the diary reveals animosity beyond mere thievery. On the same day that Vaux wrote about the depleted supply of porter and wine, he also reported the disappearance of the cat with the terse charge "some one of ye People threw her overboard." Other entries in this diary and similar entries in Vaux's other two extant diaries hint at an undercurrent of tension between Vaux's elitist pretensions and his relationship with the lesser people.¹⁷

Richard Vaux inhabited a world where rigid and clearly defined boundaries separated "the better sort" from the common people. The term "gentlemen" appears over and over throughout Vaux's diaries. He used the word to distinguish the closed circle of people with whom he walked, talked, visited, supped, and transacted business on a regular and comfortable basis from those social inferiors with whom he interacted only out of necessity. The diaries not only illuminate this class division but also vividly delineate Vaux's deferential expectations. An incident described in a later diary, for years 1781 and 1782, clearly highlights Vaux's engrained conceptions about social divisions and deference.

By April 1782, Vaux had returned to England. Once again he moved easily among his usual network of relatives, friends, and mercantile acquaintances. Again he acquired a cargo and a ship for yet another mercantile venture. At about 11:00 p.m. on Sunday April 14, Vaux left the Inn of the Swan with Two Necks where he had

supped in company with several "gentlemen." Upon leaving the tavern at this late hour, Vaux searched for transportation back to his lodgings. He hailed a coachman but "573 refused to go with me." Obviously, the idea that the coachman might have the right to refuse a passenger never occurred to him. Indignant at the coachman's lack of deference, Vaux called for the watchman. As he did, the coachman tried to drive away, but Vaux grabbed the cab's reins. Then the coachman "struck me twenty-eight times." Although this scene almost defies imagination, it is fairly easy to picture Richard Vaux, with his accountant's soul, counting each blow to record them in his diary for posterity.

Vaux pursued the matter like a vengeful wraith. Eleven days later he visited the coach office accompanied by a magistrate. When the coachman and his mistress failed to appear at the office the proprietor of the cab company was fined ten shillings and the coachman and his mistress were summoned to appear for the following week. At this time Vaux returned, accompanied by the magistrate and two other unnamed gentlemen. Perhaps Vaux thought the number of gentlemen would overawe the common people into subordination, but once again the coachman flaunted authority and failed to appear, and he also was fined ten shillings. Apparently, however, the coachman escaped further punishment, or at least, Vaux's diary lapses into silence on the matter. This incident, especially when added to similar encounters, such as Vaux's prosecution by the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety, demonstrates the gap between his expectations of deferential behavior and his ability to enforce those deferential demands. Great changes, both economic and social marked the eighteenth-century world in which Richard Vaux lived.¹⁸

Before the voyage came to its sudden end, Vaux had had one more unpleasant encounter with someone aboard the *Providentia*. On October 8, 1781, he had written, "On examining one of my Boxes I missed a Gold Brest Buckle, much inquiry was made respecting it but to no purpose." By October 26, as the brig neared its destination, disaster struck. That morning Vaux began a diary entry: "At 8 A.M. a Sail to Leward, at three P.M. they came up with us, first a shot and brought us too and proved to be the Hendrick Privateer." For the second time in his career as a trans-Atlantic trader Vaux experienced one of the most frequent eighteenth-century mercantilist disasters, loss of his valuable cargo to a privateer. One relatively insignificant merchant again fell victim to two overwhelming cosmic forces, war and profit.¹⁹

For more than two centuries, during the Age of Mercantilism, merchants, especially from western Europe's Atlantic shore, had engaged in bitter cutthroat competition for goods and markets. Because these merchants created heretofore undreamed of wealth, the bureaucracy of the newly-emerged nation states abetted their efforts by every means possible, by legal regulation where practical and by war when necessary. In these frequent mercantile wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, privateering, or legal piracy, flourished.

Privateering required three things: a ship, a crew, and some kind of legal document identifying a ship as the legitimate agent of a warring state. Since war disrupted

normal commerce and privateering promised great easy wealth, ships and crews, in spite of the inherent danger, came easily. Crews were rarely lacking, for they shared part of the seizures and enjoyed less onerous service than being on a naval ship, especially, in the much-hated British navy. Similarly, investors, perhaps with purses already fattened by war contracts, lined up to finance privateering ventures. The legal document required by privateers was a Letter of Marque. This legal nicety had originated in medieval feudal warfare, but by the American Revolution it had evolved into a tool of war against maritime trade. A shipowner, especially one with useful political connections and intent on privateering, could obtain the required letter from a variety of sources: a governor, a provincial congress, the Continental Congress, or any vice-admiralty court. With profits so tempting and sailors so willing during time of war, especially the American Revolution and the War of 1812, large numbers of privateers from America, as well as from other nations, prowled the shipping lanes searching for victims. One estimate suggests that during 1781 more than 440 American privateers preyed on British shipping.²⁰

An examination of privateering allows us to view the political and social conflict of the American Revolution from another dimension. Some recent works have pointed to specific geographical locations—Westchester and Queens counties in New York, the eastern shore of Maryland and Delaware, the interior of North and South Carolina, and Vermont—identifying these areas as “no-man’s lands” contested by rebels, Loyalists, and British forces alike. In the Atlantic Ocean and its adjacent bodies of water, especially the Caribbean Sea, the contest played out differently. This vast stretch of water, that by its fluid nature lacked recognizable boundaries, was not so much a “no-man’s land” as it was an “every-man’s land.” Here American privateers preyed on British shipping, while at the same time, the British navy, always hungry for prize money, scoured the seas for American privateers, American cargo ships, and on occasion, the French navy. In the midst of this ceaseless conflict American merchants, whether rebel, Loyalist, or neutral happily traded with British merchants, and both traded with merchants from neutral nations such as Denmark and the Netherlands. On the Caribbean islands of St. Thomas (Richard Vaux’s destination) and St. Eustatia’s warehouses brimmed with American tobacco and other commodities waiting exchange for weapons and ammunition to arm the Continental Army, while European merchants hawked goods for war-deprived American consumers. Bursting with such great wealth, these islands became the focal points for predators under sail. On October 26, 1781 Richard Vaux and the brig *Providentia* encountered one of those.²¹

References to strange sails lurking on the horizon appear throughout Richard Vaux’s sea-going diaries. The voyage on which this article focuses began with such an occurrence almost casually recorded, “We observed a lugger . . . we take to be a privateer.” When the *Providentia* had originally set sail it had done so as part of a convoy protected by frigates of the Royal Navy. As a result of the long delay in Plymouth, the *Providentia* sailed alone, vulnerable to attack and capture by the *Hendrick*, a sloop of 200 tons, 18 guns, and a crew of 90 armed men.²²

Vaux's diary entry for Oct. 26 continues:

The Hendrick Privateer commanded by Thomas Benson and belonging to Salem in New England, All the Passengers and Captain were ordered on board the Privateer, and Captain informed us should take charge of our Brig and send her as a prize to America however about (we were all sent on board our own vessel) Eight Oclock—an officer accompany'd us and took the Command from Capt. Andrus Brun—Our Stores were ransacked and some of them plundered.

On the following day, October 27, Captain Benson ordered Vaux and the other members of the party, along with Captain Brun and their personal baggage, removed to the *Hendrick*. In their place on board the captured brig, Benson installed a prize-master and a prize crew of ten sailors. Here, both Richard Vaux's diary and the ill-fated voyage of the *Providentia* ended abruptly.²³

But fortunately Vaux's story continued. The very next day the irrepressible merchant began another diary which revealed his fate. On November 4 Captain Benson hailed another American ship, a brig "bound to the Island of Guadaloup" and transferred Vaux and several others to it. By November 12 Vaux had arranged passage to St. Thomas, his original destination.

Over the next four months on St. Thomas, Vaux's activities reverberated with a single-minded dedication to the mercantilist drive for profits. Within weeks of his arrival Vaux had pushed the episode of the *Providentia* into the past, rented a store from an old acquaintance, John Perot, and began receiving cargoes of merchandise to sell to numerous customers, some local and some as far away as Baltimore. By February 1782, he prepared to conclude his interrupted mercantile trip and return to England. After a speedy but stormy voyage, during which several crewmen perished in the tempest-tossed sea, Vaux arrived in Glasgow, Scotland on March 30 and in London a week later.

Almost immediately, Vaux re-established contact with the network of friends and relatives with whom he had operated so successfully and so profitably despite setbacks such as the ill-fated voyage of the *Providentia*. Within months of his arrival in England, Vaux began again to circulate within this network as he prepared for yet another mercantile voyage to St. Thomas. The protection from the worst results of financial disasters provided by this extended network helps to explain why some eighteenth-century merchants such as Richard Vaux survived and prospered when others failed.²⁴

For at least the next several years references to the *Providentia* disaster ran like an angry welt through Richard Vaux's diaries and surviving business correspondence. In May 1782, amidst preparation for yet another voyage, Vaux visited John Wilson, an underwriter of marine insurance with whom he regularly conducted business, "to consult respecting the *Providentia*, we came to the resolution to wait some time before we called on the Underwriters." Although Vaux did not explain this delay

here, other entries offer tempting hints. On Thursday May 30, his memorandum book reports "went with Mr. Woolf and Mr. Hawkins to the Danish ambassador but we were too late however left some papers respecting the Capture of the *Providentia*." Although the memorandum does not identify these two gentlemen, who appear nowhere else in Vaux diaries or correspondence, the context suggests that perhaps they were lawyers and that some bureaucratic paperwork entangled the insurance claims for the cargo of the *Providentia*. Three months later, while in Ostend, in the Austrian Netherlands, Vaux encountered Anders Brun, the former captain of the *Providentia*. Delighted by the surprise encounter, Vaux solicited Brun's assistance: "I requested him to deliver the copy of the condemnation of the Cargo of the Said Brig . . . he complied with my several requests" Even three years later in 1786 the claims for the *Providentia* apparently remained unsettled, for in the credit column in a letter headed "Mr. Richard Vaux his Acct with John Strettell" Vaux recorded the notation: "By two dividends together 6/6 in the Pound on Ab^{rm} Clibborns Subscription of 250 on the *Providentia* } 81/5." The precise meaning of this account entry is unclear but, obviously, as late as 1786 the account of the cargo of the *Providentia* remained unsettled.²⁵

In 1907 George Vaux VIII, a direct descendant of Richard Vaux, typed a transcription of Vaux's diary for 1781. To help readers George Vaux added some identifications of persons known to him who appear most frequently in the diary. The identification of one of those persons and Vaux's comments about him add a whole new dimension to our tale of the *Providentia*. John Warder was a cousin of Richard Vaux and a junior partner in the London firm of Jeremiah Warder and Sons. Like Richard Vaux, Warder had fled Philadelphia at the beginning of the American Revolution. He too continued to operate in England as a merchant for the duration of the war. In 1778 Warder collected a cargo of goods to ship to the West Indies. Like Vaux, Warder took out an insurance policy on the whole cargo even though two-thirds of it belonged to other merchants. When a privateer captured the ship and its cargo, Warder collected the insurance policy on the whole cargo and pocketed the money. In modern parlance, Warder ran a scam. For the next twenty years, much to George Vaux's shame, the Society of Friends employed all of its persuasive powers to force John Warder to pay the other investors. We know that Richard Vaux and John Warder engaged in a number of financial transactions: for example, Vaux's diary records the negotiation of a policy of £4,000 on the cargo of the *Providentia*. Had Vaux taken a page from his cousin's book? Had he copied a way to profit handsomely from seeming misfortune? If so, this sheds even more light on the methods by which some canny eighteenth century merchants could prosper in uncertain times while others slid into bankruptcy and ignominy.²⁶

Richard Vaux lived, traded, and prospered in a time of cataclysmic economic, intellectual, social, and political change. The Age of Mercantilism was yielding before the nascent, more powerful Age of Industrialism, while the tentacles of the Market Revolution embraced, or ensnared, more and more people in the consumer-producer

relationship. Combined with this economic transformation, certain ideas brought to fruition by the Enlightenment raised the individual to a place of eminence and disencumbered him of ancient economic and communal restraints. Richard Vaux succeeded in this new economic and intellectual world order. Yet he found some of the concomitant social change less congenial. In the incidents with the revolutionary rabble that drove him from Philadelphia in 1776, with the surly coachman in London in 1782, and with his disappearing cat and liquor on the *Providentia*, Vaux encountered, to his profound dismay, the beginning of the end—if it had ever really existed outside the self-delusion of the “better sort”—of deference. While deference was dying and political democracy was being born, wealthy men began to fashion governments which sanctified property and guaranteed power to those that held it. Although his social position was repeatedly questioned, Richard Vaux prospered in the midst of this era of profound tumult and transition. This story of the voyage of the *Providentia* allows us, in some small way, to glimpse the class tensions, political obstacles, and economic opportunities of the trans-Atlantic mercantile world at the end of the eighteenth century.²⁷

Epilogue

While Vaux survived the voyage of the *Providentia*, the gods proved less kind to his antagonist (and fellow Free Mason) Captain Thomas Benson. Bits and pieces of sparse and sketchy records permit us to follow his career after he captured the *Providentia*. Benson's fate lends credence to the cliché “He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword.” In October 1782, as Benson returned from another successful privateering expedition in the West Indies, the *Hendrick*, along with its companion ship the *Mohawk*, were “captured by the enemy and carried into New York.” Here Benson, with hundreds of other American seamen, was imprisoned in the “Old Jersey prison ship.” Fortunately, Benson found succor. Upon a petition from the Massachusetts General Court, he was exchanged for Captain Henry Deane, an English prisoner held in Salem. The records do not tell us if Thomas Benson returned to sea; they only note his death in 1819.²⁸

Notes

* The author thanks Linda Stanley of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania and Elizabeth Carroll-Horrocks and Marty Levitt of the American Philosophical Society for their assistance.

1. The two studies are Thomas M. Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), especially chapters 1 and 2, and John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1609-1789* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), especially chapter 9.
2. A typed transcript of "The Diary of Richard Vaux from January 1st, 1781 To October 27th 1781," may be found at the American Philosophical Society, in the George Vaux Papers, Ms. Coll. 73. (Hereafter cited as "Diary".) See the letters of "George Vaux to Judge Pennypacker, 1896 Jan. 20" (folded into the above-mentioned diary; hereafter cited as "Letter"); and Robert A. Guffin, "The Satisfaction of Arriving To a Good Market': Richard Vaux and the Eighteenth Century world of Trade," M.A. Thesis, University of Delaware, 1991.
3. "Letter" and Guffin, "The Satisfaction," p. 20.
4. Vaux's mercantile network is described throughout his diaries and memorandum books; for his visits to John Strettell and Dr. Roberts see "Diary," entries for Jan. 19, 1781 and Mar. 5, 1781 respectively.
5. For the role of coffee houses in the eighteenth mercantile world see: William D. Winter, *Marine Insurance: Its Principles and Practices*, 2nd edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1929), pp. 13-16 and Alison G. Olson, "The Mercantile Coffee House Lobbies in the Eighteenth Century," *History Today* 41 (Jan. 1991), pp. 35-37. For Vaux's arrangements with Capt. Watson see: "Diary" entries for Jan. 5, 1781 and Jan. 6, 1781.
6. "Diary," entry Feb. 21, 1781.
7. Thomas Doerflinger, "Philadelphia Merchants and the Logic of Moderation, 1760-1775," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser. 40 (April 1983), p. 212. In a recent biography, Joseph S. Foster, *In Pursuit of Equal Liberty:*

George Bryan and the Revolution in Pennsylvania, (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), p. 8, the author points to the problem of debt collecting for merchants who were not Quakers.

8. "Diary," entries for April 22, May 5, and June 22, 1781. Previous voyages to the West Indies are described in "Richard Vaux's Memorandum Book of the Year 1779," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Vaux Papers, Box XIV, Miscellaneous (Hereafter cited as "Memorandum Book, 1779").

9. For the death of John Strettell see "Diary," May 25, 1781. The diary which runs from January to October 1781, never mentions Ann Roberts or letters to her. An earlier diary, "The Memorandum Book, 1779," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Vaux Papers, Box XIV, refers to one letter to Ann Roberts on September 22, 1779. A third diary, "Memorandum Book of Richard Vaux 1781-2" Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Vaux Papers, Box XIX (hereafter cited as "Memorandum Book, 1781-2") makes no mention of Ann Roberts, yet she and Vaux were married in 1784 upon Vaux's return to Philadelphia; see Guffin, "Satisfaction," p.70. For Doerflinger's argument about the psychological profile of eighteenth century merchants see, *Vigorous*, p.63.

10. For extensive discussions of Loyalists see: Robert M. Calhoun, *The Loyalists in Revolutionary America, 1760-1781* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1973), and *The Loyalist Perception and Other Essays* (Columbia University of South Carolina Press, 1989).

11. Doerflinger, *Vigorous*, pp. 15-33.

12. Doerflinger, *Vigorous*, pp. 213-243.

13. Jacob E. Cooke, *Tench Coxe and the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), pp. 25-45 and Steven Rosswurm, *Arms, Country, and Class: The Philadelphia Militia and the "Lower Sort" During the American Revolution, 1775-1783* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 219-222.

14. Cooke, *Tench Coxe*, pp. 32-45, and Foster, *In Pursuit*, pp.10-13.

15. "Diary," entries from July 27, 1781 to Sept. 9, 1781.

16. "Diary," entry Sept. 13, 1781.

17. "Diary," entries for Sept. 21, 1781 and Sept. 23, 1781.

18. "Memorandum Book, 1781-2," entries April 14, and 25 and May 2, 1782.
19. "Diary," entries Oct. 8 and 26, 1781.
20. Surprisingly, the scholarly literature on privateers, especially their role in capital formation in early America, appears skimpy. Among the sources are: Ralph Mason Eastman, *Some Famous Privateers of New England* (Boston: privately printed, State Street Trust Company, 1928), pp. 1-79; Donald Barr Chidsey, *The American Privateer* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1962), pp. 9-45; and John A. McManemin, *Captains of the Privateers during the Revolutionary War* (Spring Lake, New Jersey: Ho-Ho-Kus Publishing Co.), *passim*.
21. For conflict between loyalists, rebels and the British see: Joseph S. Tiedemann, "Patriots by Default: Queens County, New York and the British Army, 1776-1784," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3d ser. 43 (Jan. 1986), pp. 36-62, and Sung Bok Kim, "The Limits of Politicization in the American Revolution: The Experience of Westchester County, New York," *Journal of American History* 80 (Dec. 1993), pp. 868-889. For a discussion of the conflict between merchants and the Royal Navy in the Caribbean see: Barbara Tuchman, *The First Salute: A View of the American Revolution* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), chapters 1 and 2.
22. "Diary," entry Aug. 31, 1781. For the description of the Hendrick see McManemin, *Captains*, p. 147.
23. "Diary," entries Oct. 27 and 27, 1781.
24. "Memorandum Book, 1781-2," see entries from Oct. 28 1781 to April 13, 1782.
25. "Memorandum Book, 1781-2," entries May 8 and 30 and June 30, 1782; the account letter to John Strettell is located in "Vaux Papers: Correspondence, Business Papers," Box XI, Folder 1772-1790, Historical Society of

Pennsylvania.

26. For George Vaux's remarks on John Warder see "Letter." For Richard Vaux's policy on the *Providentia* see "Diary" entry June 20, 1781.

27. Steven Rosswurm argues that deferential behavior by the lower class in Philadelphia was ended by the timidity of the better sort in accepting the surge towards independence in 1776; see Rosswurm, *Arms*, pp. 24-27 and 249-251. For other discussions of deference in early America see: J.G.A. Pocock, "The Classical Theory of Deference," *American Historical Review* 81 (1976), p. 18; Michael Kammen, (ed.), *Politics and Society in Colonial America: Democracy or Deference?* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1967), *passim*; Joy B. and Robert R. Gilsdorf, "Elite and Electorates: Plain Truths for Historians of Colonial America," in *Saints and Revolutionaries: Essays on Early American History*, edited by David D. Hall, John M. Murrin and Thad W. Tate (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984), pp. 211-218, and Thomas L. Purvis, "Were Colonial Americans Politically Deferential?: A Case Study from the Delaware Valley" (an unpublished paper presented at the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies, Feb. 21, 1986).

28. The records of Thomas Benson may be found in: Gardner Weld Allen, *Massachusetts Privateers of the American Revolution* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1927) and *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, Vol. 3, p. 121. For a recent article on American seamen held prisoner by the British on the *Jersey* in New York harbor in the Revolutionary War see Philip Ranlet, "David Sproat of Pennsylvania and the Death of American Prisoners of War," *Pennsylvania History*, 61 (April, 1994), pp. 185-205.