

Commodore John Barry: Father of the US Navy

Liam Gaul

John Barry was born in County Wexford on the south-east coast of Ireland during the reign of King George II (1727–60) in 1745. Horatio Nelson, third son of Edmund Nelson, a Norfolk Anglican priest, was born in 1758 in the final years of the king's reign. The parallels in their lives are noteworthy. As youths, Barry and Nelson expressed a desire to go to sea. Both young men first ventured to sea with their uncles. John Barry sailed with his uncle, Nicholas Barry, while Horatio Nelson set out at a mere twelve years of age with his uncle, Captain Maurice Suckling. Nelson was ennobled as a Knight of the Realm by King George III (1760–1820), and obtained the rank of Vice Admiral of the White in the Royal Navy. John Barry attained the signal honour of Commodore of the United States Navy, with the linear number of One – the most senior of all US Navy officers.

From their first ventures at sea and in the ensuing years, Barry and Nelson carved out illustrious naval careers as master mariners and leaders, engaging in many wars and sea battles with both men sustaining



Commodore John Barry statue
(erected 1956) on Crescent Quay, Wexford,
Ireland. (Wikipedia Commons, photo
by David Hawgood)

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serious injuries. The life and times of Lord Horatio Nelson are well acknowledged, while those of Commodore John Barry and his Wexford origins may not have attained such widespread documentation.

Commodore John Barry lived an exciting life as sailor and soldier during the American War for Independence and in the formative years of the United States of America, which afforded him some signal honours in its naval service. Historian John Frost (1800–59) wrote of John Barry:

The career of this distinguished officer commences with the infancy of our navy, and is marked by many brilliant services. His name occurs in connection with not a few of the more remarkable events in the history of the revolutionary war, and always with credit to himself, and honour to the flag under which he sailed. Few commanders in the navy were employed in a greater variety of service, or met the enemy under greater disadvantages. Yet, in not one of the numerous actions in which he was engaged, did Commodore Barry ever fail to acquit himself of his duty in a manner becoming a skilful seaman and an able warrior.¹

John Barry was born at Ballysampson in the Parish of Tacumshin, County Wexford.² His father was a tenant farmer evicted by his English landlord, forcing the family to relocate to the coastal village of Rosslare. It was here that young Barry acquired his love of the sea from his father's brother, Nicholas Barry, who was captain of a fishing skiff. John was determined at an early age to follow his uncle to the sea. Starting out as a ship's cabin boy, he graduated from ordinary seaman to able seaman and eventually obtained a mate's rating. Barry grew to be an imposing man of almost 6ft 4in tall, muscularly built and a well-respected seaman. His height was determined by Rear Admiral G. H. Preble (1816–85), naval historian, who examined John Barry's US Navy uniform, which dated from the 1790s.³

John Barry was held in high esteem in the services of his adopted country in a bid for her independence. The sea for John Barry represented an escape from the land and the restrictions on people of his creed and the opportunity for a new life in America. The young Barry travelled as a cabin boy on a ship trading out of Wexford via Liverpool to Spanishtown in Jamaica and from there sailed to Philadelphia. Besides having a growing population, Philadelphia was also emerging as a great maritime trade centre. It was from Philadelphia that Barry gained his early skills of command at the helm of several merchant ships plying back and forth from his new home port and the West Indies. 'Big John', as he was popularly known to Philadelphians, was noted for his reliability and personable nature.

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He soon became much sought after in the merchant shipping business. He was just twenty-one years of age when he took command of the 60-ton schooner, *Barbados* leaving Philadelphia on 2 October 1766. The schooner was owned by Edward Denny of Philadelphia and was built at Liverpool, Nova Scotia. John Barry was registered as her captain. Barry served as captain on several vessels, taking charge of the brig *Patty and Polly* in May 1771 sailing from St Croix to Philadelphia and in August of that year commanded the schooner *Industry* of 45 tons, sailing to and from Virginia with trips to New York and to Halifax, Nova Scotia. Later, in October 1772, he took command of the *Peggy* sailing to and from St Eustatia and Montserrat. John Nixon, owner of the *Black Prince*, whose grandfather, Richard, had settled in Philadelphia in 1686 from Wexford, issued a register to John Barry to act as the ship's master.

By 1772, Barry's abilities as a ship's master had come to the attention of Meredith and Clymer, one of Philadelphia's premier mercantile houses, who offered him command of the vessel *Peg*. Later, Barry transferred to the shipping firm of Willing, Morris and Cadwalader, who gave Barry command of the 200-ton ship *Black Prince*. It was on this vessel that Barry made the amazing and unparalleled record of sailing 237 miles by dead reckoning⁴ in a twenty-four-hour period, giving him the fastest day of sailing recorded in the eighteenth century. This recorded distance on the *Black Prince*, a sloop which was later armed and operated as an American privateer, happened during a voyage from England back home to America.⁵

On the outbreak of war between the Colonies and Great Britain, Barry was given the important task of outfitting the first Continental Navy ships that would put to sea from Philadelphia. He was responsible for overseeing the converting of merchant ships into warships; setting the rigging, piercing gun ports, strengthening bulwarks, procuring gun powder and canvas for the new warships, and loading provisions. Barry received a captain's commission in the Continental Navy, dated 7 December 1775, signed by the President of the Continental Congress, John Hancock. With this commission went command of his first warship, the brigantine *Lexington*. The young Wexford man was just thirty-one years of age.

The *Lexington* was 86ft long with a 24 ft beam and was heavily armed for her size, carrying 16 4pdrs and 12 swivel guns.⁶ Barry had a crew of 110 officers and men and was the first commander appointed under the direct authority of the Continental Congress. The *Lexington* cruised off the coast of Virginia, where, in a successful encounter, Barry's ship shattered the British sloop *Edward*, with several of her crew killed and wounded. Barry lost two men killed and two wounded. Captain Barry brought the battered *Edward* to Philadelphia with her commander, Lieutenant Richard Boger, and the crew of twenty-five

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Continental Navy Brig Lexington defeats HMS Edward on 7 April 1776.
 (Courtesy the Bruce Gallery, Memphis, Tennessee, NH 85211-A-KN)

prisoners. This was the first armed vessel taken under the authority of the Continental Marine Committee, proving that the Colonies had the ability to contest the sea against Great Britain. The *Edward* was deemed by the Court of Admiralty as a prize of war. Her ammunition, furniture and tackle went to public auction, with the government and Captain Barry and his crew sharing the proceeds.

Following the encounter with the *Edward*, the *Lexington* was in need of a refit. Barry sailed in the sloop *Hornet* down the Delaware River to help defend the pass at Fort Island in a bid to prevent the British coming to Philadelphia. The *Lexington* was sent down the Delaware Bay to Barry to join the rest of the fleet at Cape May. The Marine Committee built thirteen ships and assigned the fifth-rate frigate *Effingham* (32) to Barry.

On 2 July 1776, when the Resolution for Independence announced that the Colonies were free and independent, John Hancock, President of the Congress, notified Captain Barry:

... the frigate you are to command is not yet launched, her guns and anchors not yet ready, a piece of justice due to your merit to allow you to make a cruise in the *Lexington* for one or two months, in hopes that fortune may favour your industry and reward it with some good prizes.⁷

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Meanwhile, Barry returned to the refitted *Lexington*. Fortune smiled on him for on 2 August he captured the *Lady Susan* followed by the *Betsy*. Barry and his crew acquired a share of the value. Barry commanded *Lexington* until 18 October 1776. Then he was without a command, as *Effingham* was still not ready.

While awaiting *Effingham*'s completion, John Barry turned from sailor to soldier. In December 1776, Barry recruited a company of volunteers for land service, and the marines co-operating with them were highly commended by General Washington. Later Barry served as aide-de-camp to militia commander General John Cadwalader.⁸ Barry fought at the Battle of Trenton⁹ and led a spirited defence during the Battle of Princeton.¹⁰ General Washington chose him to convey wounded prisoners through British lines and to carry a dispatch under a flag of truce to General Cornwallis.¹¹ This was the same Cornwallis who later became Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, arriving in Wexford in June during the Insurrection of 1798. Barry returned to Philadelphia and assisted in defending the city. When the British took possession of Philadelphia in September 1777, Barry was ordered to sail the uncompleted *Effingham* up the Delaware River for safety. To prevent her from being captured, Barry scuttled her on 2 November near Bordentown, New Jersey. British forces later burned *Effingham*.

The destruction of the *Effingham* left Barry without a command. On 30 May 1778 the Marine Committee appointed him to command of the fifth-rate frigate *Raleigh* (32), which was in Boston Harbour. Barry proceeded to Boston and had the *Raleigh* fitted out for service and put to sea. The vessel proved unfit for cruising and Barry proceeded to Portsmouth, Virginia, for further refurbishment. On Sunday, 27 September, Barry was spotted by the sixth-rate frigate HMS *Unicorn* (20) and the fourth-rate frigate *Experiment* (50),¹² which chased *Raleigh* from nine in the morning to five in the afternoon. As the ships neared each other, Barry's ship hoisted her colours and one of the frigates hoisted the White Ensign of the Royal Navy. A broadside from the British ship carried away the foretopmast and mizzen top gallant mast, causing Barry to lose control of the *Raleigh*, much to his grief. The enemy raked the American ship and Barry saw no way of escaping. On the advice of his officers, Barry decided to run his ship aground on the uninhabited Wooden Ball Island off the rocky coast of Maine.

Taking the boats from his wrecked frigate, Barry successfully eluded capture and guided his men to Boston. Once again John Barry was without a ship, although the loss did not lessen his reputation as a brave and skilful commander.

As the Continental Navy had no ship to give him, Barry entered the service of his adopted state, Pennsylvania, becoming a privateer and commander of

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The Continental Frigate Alliance (1778–85) by Nowland Van Powell, 1968.
(Courtesy the Bruce Gallery, Memphis, Tennessee, NH 92873-KN)

the letter of marque *Delaware*, a brig owned by Irwin and Company of Philadelphia. He took up this command on 15 February 1779. The *Delaware* was a new brig of 200 tons with 10 guns and a crew of forty-five men, which Barry increased to 12 guns and sixty men. On arriving home after two cruises, Barry was sent to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where the third-rate *America* (74) was under construction. His orders were to hasten the completion and fitting out of the ship of the line. However, Captain John Paul Jones replaced Barry in overseeing work as Barry was sent to command of the fifth-rate frigate *Alliance* (36).¹³

Early on the morning of 28 May 1781, Barry spotted two British warships, the sloop *Atalanta* (14) and the brig-sloop *Trepassy* (14), about a league distant from the *Alliance*.¹⁴ At sun up, the ships hoisted the British colours and beat to quarters. Around eleven o'clock, Barry hailed the nearest ship and was answered that she was His Britannic Majesty's sloop-of-war *Atalanta*. She was under the command of Captain Sampson Edwards. Barry replied that he was commander of the Continental frigate *Alliance* and advised Edwards to haul down the English colours. Captain Edwards declined, wishing to engage the American ship in battle. Due to lack of wind, the heavier *Alliance* could not manoeuvre quickly enough to avoid the gun fire from the *Atalanta* and the *Trepassy*.

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The frigate *Alliance* is bracketed by fire on her stern quarters from the sweep-fitted sloops-of-war HMS *Trepassy* and *Atalanta* on 29 May 1782, by Irwin John David Bevan (1852–1940).

The original is on display at the Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia. Navy History and Heritage Command (QW239).

Wounded in the left shoulder by canister shot, Barry remained on deck, bleeding from his many wounds for twenty minutes, until he lost consciousness from loss of blood. He was finally taken below decks for medical care by the ship's surgeon, Mr Kendall. The colours of the *Alliance* were shot through, leading the British to think that the American frigate had struck her colours. The *Alliance* ran her colours back up again and, with a rising breeze, was in position to give the much smaller *Atalanta* a broadside and another to the *Trepassy*. Outgunned, both British ships struck their colours. Captain Smith of the *Trepassy* was killed and the captain of the *Atalanta* was brought on board and taken before the wounded Barry in his cabin. Edwards advanced and presented his sword to Barry, who returned it to Edwards saying: 'I return it to you, Sir. You have merited it. Your King ought to give you a better ship. Here is my cabin at your service. Use it as your own.' The crews were taken prisoner and put on board the *Trepassy*, while the British officers were held on board the *Alliance*. Barry's ship made sail for Boston with her wounded captain.

The last battle at sea during the American War for Independence took place on 10 March 1783. While escorting a merchant ship, off the coast of Florida, the *Alliance* encountered a British squadron. To keep the merchantman from being captured, Barry engaged the nearest-most British ship, the sixth-rate

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frigate *Sybilie* (28), under the command of Captain James Vashon.¹⁵ The ensuing action left *Sybilie* wrecked, forcing Vashon to surrender. However, Barry had to abandon his prize in order to evade the rest of the British squadron. Following his escape from capture, Captain Vashon reported that he had never received such a drubbing as he had from the *Alliance*.

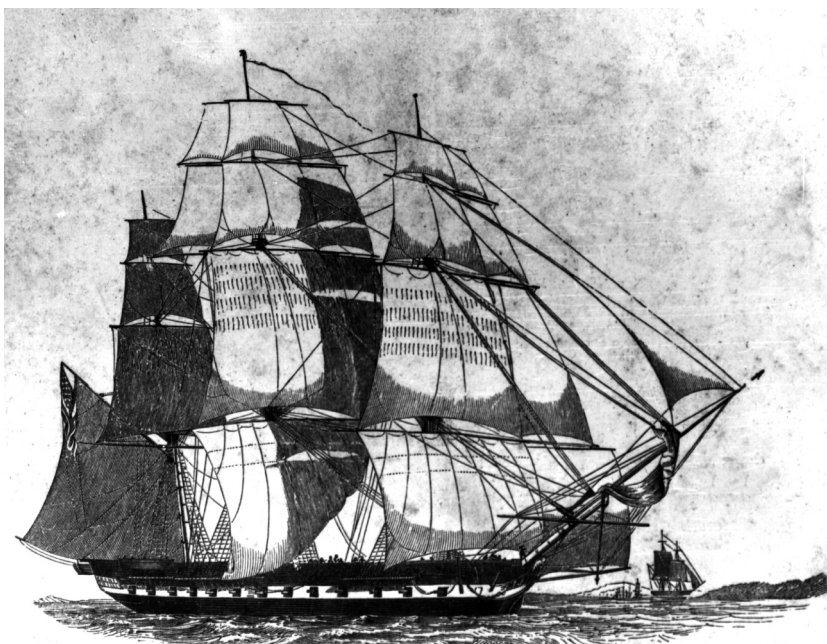
One month later, on 11 April 1783 the Continental Congress, by proclamation, ordered the cessation of arms by sea and land. On 19 April 1783 Washington announced the end of the war and the disbanding of the army. The disbanding of the Continental Navy followed thereafter.

In private life, John Barry married Mary Clary (Cleary) at Old St Joseph's Chapel in Philadelphia on 31 October 1767. However, tragedy struck with her premature death following a brief illness at the age of twenty-nine on 9 February 1774. By this time Barry's other brothers had made their way across the Atlantic. Patrick was already an experienced mariner, while Thomas embarked on a quieter career as a clerk. Mary died while John was at sea and it was Patrick who was rowed out to his brother's approaching vessel to break the news. Only twenty-nine, John Barry found himself a widower.¹⁶

This sad event was followed some years later when, in August 1778, his brother and fellow mariner Patrick was lost at sea. His ship, the *Union*, a letter of marque vessel, sailed from Bordeaux, France, and was never heard from again. Barry married Sarah Keen Austin, Sally, to her friends, in July 1777. Sally was an Episcopalian, who eventually converted to Barry's Roman Catholic faith. They had no children of their own but happily reared two boys from John's deceased sister Eleanor's household back in Wexford.¹⁷

It was a spring day in 1787 when John Barry received word that the *Rising Sun* was very soon to dock in Philadelphia. The ship, under Captain John Rossiter, a friend of Barry, was returning from a voyage to Wexford. Captain Rossiter, like Barry, was also a Wexford emigrant. While standing on the quay wall waiting the lowering of the gangplank and the disembarking of the ship's passengers, Barry and his wife glimpsed Captain Rossiter with two teenage boys – Barry's nephews. The boys received welcoming embraces from their uncle and a tearful aunt. Michael Hayes, at eighteen years of age, was the elder of the two brothers and the younger brother, Patrick, was sixteen years old. Their sister, Eleanor had recently married and remained at home in Ireland. Following a meal in the town, John and Sally Barry brought Michael and Patrick to their new home at Strawberry Hill. Although the Commodore had 'swallowed the anchor' (a seafaring phrase meaning retirement from sailing) he encouraged his nephews to go to sea. Michael returned to Captain Rossiter on the *Rising Sun* while Patrick set out on a series of voyages free from his uncle's eagle eye.¹⁸

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The US Frigate *United States* (44). Engraving by Master William Brady, USN (NH 1016)

When the War for Independence ended and the Continental Navy was dissolved, Barry re-entered the maritime trade. He sailed to the Orient, bringing back many porcelain and ivory treasures, which the citizens of Philadelphia bought eagerly. On 22 February 1797, President George Washington gave John Barry Commission Number One in the new United States Navy.

Barry outfitted the first frigates under the Naval Act of 1794, including his own fourth-rate frigate

Commodore John Barry – in uniform – seated. An engraving from the original painting by Alonzo Chappel. (Public domain)



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the USS *United States* (44), which served as his flagship. He held the courtesy title of Commodore. The title 'Father of the Navy' first appeared with the publication of a biographical sketch in Nicholas Biddle's literary journal, *Port Folio*, in 1813. Of the many ships that Barry commanded, the *Alliance* was his favourite and carried his own personal flag of yellow silk with a pine tree and rattlesnake emblazoned on it bearing the motto 'Don't tread on me'.

Barry's last day of active service came on 6 March 1801, when he brought the USS *United States* into port. He remained head of the navy until his death on 12 September 1803 from the complications of asthma brought on by the rigours of life at sea. He was buried on 14 September in Old St Mary's Churchyard (St Mary's Roman Catholic Church, Philadelphia) with full military honours. He was just fifty-eight years of age.

The US Navy has named four ships after Barry in remembrance of this wonderful seaman of the nation's formative years. The latest such ship is the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer the USS *Barry*, DDG-52, commissioned in 1992 and presently serving with the United States Seventh Fleet, homeported at the US naval base at Yokosuka, Japan.¹⁹

In 1914, US President Woodrow Wilson dedicated a statue to Barry at Franklin Square in Washington, DC. Admiral of the Navy George Dewey was among the officials. In 2014 the Ancient Order of Hibernians, joined by other Irish heritage groups, dedicated a memorial to Barry at the US Naval Academy, Annapolis, Maryland, at what is now the Barry Gate.



Another naval hero and emigrant son of Wexford, John F. Kennedy, laying a wreath at the statue of John Barry at Crescent Quay, Wexford, in 1963. (Photograph: Robert Knudsen/White House)



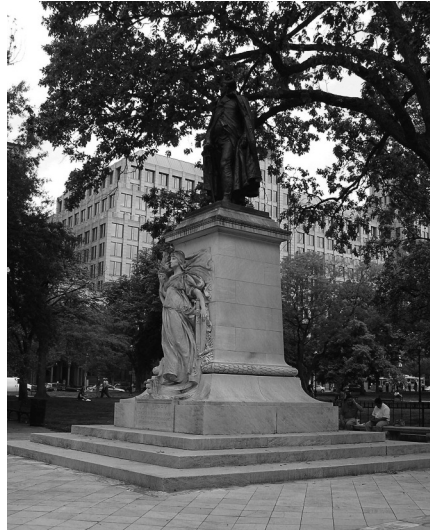
USS *Barry* DDG-52 is the fourth US Navy destroyer named for the Father of the US Navy. (NH L45-21.01.02)

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John Barry Memorial at the US Naval Academy at the Barry Gate, Annapolis, Maryland, placed by the Ancient Order of Hibernians, 2012. Sculptor: Ron Tunison.

John Barry Statue at Franklin Square, Washington, District of Columbia, dedicated by President Woodrow Wilson, 1914. Sculptor: John Boyle. Architect: Edward P. Casey. The inscription reads: John Barry, Commodore United States Navy, Born Wexford, Ireland, 1745, Died in Philadelphia, 1803.



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Commodore John Barry statue in Wexford, Ireland – in silhouette.
(Patrick Sheridan collection)

General Washington presenting Captain Barry with his commission, see colour plate 7