

Falmouth and the Second War of Independence

by E. Graham Ward

First three questions: 1) When did Francis Scott Key write the words for *The Star-Spangled Banner* and under what circumstances? 2) Who wrote to his commanding officer, "We have met the enemy and they are ours," and in what battle? 3) In what war did the British ship *Nimrod* bombard the town of Falmouth with cannon balls?

Answers: 1) After the successful defense of Fort McHenry (Baltimore) during the war of 1812. 2) Oliver Hazard Perry after the Battle of Lake Erie during the war of 1812. 3) - as you may have guessed by now - the war of 1812, sometimes called The Second War of Independence.

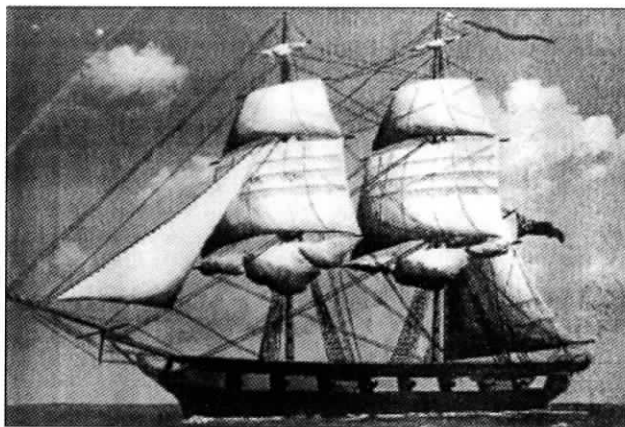
Coming so shortly after the Revolutionary War and featuring the same enemy, the war of 1812 is easy to confuse with that earlier conflict. In fact Falmouth Historical Society Archivist Mary Sicchio says, "I believe people have the events of the Battle of Falmouth and the War of 1812 confused." Indeed in this

the war's 200th anniversary year, so far, there has been little recognition that the war ever happened. James Ellis titled his book about the war (from which much of the following material has been taken) *A Ruinous and Unhappy War*. Ultimately the United States prevailed but there are no official holidays recognizing that accomplishment and those living

through the war were not in a mood to celebrate. In fact several states were close to secession at the war's end, including Massachusetts.

What brought this all about and what was Falmouth's role need a little background: Almost all the reasons for declaring war on Great Britain had to do with what the ex-colonists considered high-handed behavior leading to outright invasion of our national sovereignty. In 1807 Britain, at war with Napoleon's France, placed trade restrictions against Americans trading with France. Naturally the United States considered these restrictions illegal. Then

there was the matter of "impressment." Britain's war with France also increased the need for more sailors for the Royal Navy. Since the British didn't recognize the legality of their former citizens becoming naturalized Americans, they went after them by intercepting and searching U.S. merchant ships for "deserters," the search often in our territorial



HMS Nimrod

waters. In one particularly egregious act a British warship fired on an American warship and boarded it, seizing the sailors they desired. In addition the British had their eyes on the Northwest Territory of the young United States. To that end they supported and supplied the Indian tribes in the area who were opposed to American expansion.

President Thomas Jefferson was tired of war and sought out peaceful means to solve the problems with the English. He thought an embargo on Americans trading with anyone (later reduced to just England and France) would cause economic problems for the nations affected, somewhat like our U.N. sanctions of today. The strategy did not work. In fact the economic problems became ours as towns on the eastern seaboard like Falmouth, whose livelihood largely depended upon access to the sea, were bereft.

By 1812 the embargo was dropped. James Madison had succeeded Jefferson and, pressured by his party, became more aggressive against Britain. He proposed a declaration of war to Congress and signed the measure into law on June 18, 1812. It was the first time the United States had declared war on another country and the closest vote for so declaring (79-49 House, 19-13 Senate) in American history.

In many ways the War of 1812 was a maritime war and its field of battle, so to speak, was the New England states. Upon the declaration of war the British immediately began blockading harbors and ports in order to stifle trading and limit the activity of warships. Because the New England states housed significant anti-war elements, the British were persuaded to delay vigorous war activity. Falmouth was an exception. It had heartily supported Madison's position and was busy putting together a militia. As Samuel Eliot Morison said in his book *The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860*, "Falmouth best upheld the honor of the Cape." As a result the town became a target for a British attack and that "honor" would soon be tested.

Tarpaulin Cove on Naushon Island off Woods Hole was a favorite anchorage for British warships. The British attack on the town during the Revolutionary War had originated from Tarpaulin. The first incident

in the 1812 war, involving the Cove, happened late in 1813. Nine sailors from the 74-gun HMS *Albion* deserted the ship and hid out in the few houses on the island. The captain threatened to destroy the houses unless the men were returned but to no avail. He did not pursue the chase and sailed away.

But a more serious incident, famous in Falmouth history, took place about a month later. HMS *Nimrod*, an 18-gun cruiser anchored in Tarpaulin Cove, had sent three barges (small boats in this case) to attack an American sloop that had gone aground in Woods Hole. The Falmouth militia heard about the attack, hastened to Woods Hole and fired on the British killing one and wounding another. *Nimrod's* Captain Mitchell wanted revenge and sailed for the town of Falmouth. When he arrived, around noon, he sent a boat ashore under a flag of truce and demanded a sloop at the town dock as well as Falmouth's two cannons or he would bombard the town. Captain Weston Jenkins, the head of the militia, allegedly said, "If you want them, come and take them; but I'll give you what is in them first." Jenkins was not about to disarm the town.

Capt. Mitchell gave Falmouth an hour to meet his demands or he would open fire with his 32-pounders. Town citizens used the time to evacuate women and children, to bury their valuables, and generally to prepare for a sacking. The militia used the time to dig in on the the Falmouth shore where Surf Drive and the old Town Dock is now. *Nimrod* was anchored about a quarter of a mile off the dock. At about 1 P.M. *Nimrod* began firing.

Between 250 and 300 rounds hit the town. Most of the cannon balls couldn't go beyond Main St. and, besides, by the time they reached Main St. they had slowed down so much they were easily avoided. Shore St. was the most heavily damaged.

Capt. John Crocker's house was almost completely destroyed. It was a prominent house easily seen from Vineyard Sound. It is now ShoreWay Acres Resort Inn where the Mayor of Falmouth, England, and his wife stayed during the town's tricentennial celebration. About 30 other buildings were hit but no one was hurt. The bombardment stopped in late afternoon. The militia stayed on the beach in case the British decided to land. By morning they had sailed away. The Falmouth Historical Society owns several cannon balls and one cannon purported to be from *Nimrod*. Townspeople collected the balls and used them for various purposes. Mrs. Harriet Shiverick found a cannon ball where St. Barnabas Church is now and used it as a gate weight for her house facing the the Town Green.



This house on Shore St., built by Capt. John Crocker, now known as ShoreWay Acres, was heavily damaged by the *Nimrod* bombardment. Property on Shore St. was right in the line of fire from *Nimrod*, anchored off the harbor at the end of the street.



This house, which is now part of the *Nimrod* restaurant on Dillingham Ave., was once on Main St. and was hit by one of *Nimrod's* cannon balls. The house was subsequently moved to its present location and the cannon ball hole can be seen in the Men's Room.

For Captain Mitchell it seemed like just another day's work.

Here is his log for the encounter:

28th Jan.

Wind N. W. At daylight weighed and made sail for Falmouth.

At 11:30 Anchored off Falmouth. Hoisted a Flag of Truce.

Sent a boat on shore. At 12 boat returned.

At 12:45 Sent a Boat to meet the American Flag of Truce.

At 1 boat returned, began firing on the town, to destroy it. Saw a ship standing in the Cove.

At 4:30 ceased firing on the town. At 12 moderate and fine.

29th Jan.

Wind west. At daylight weighed & beat to Tarpauling (sic) Cove. At 7 exchanged news with HMS Endymion. At 7 anchored in the Cove.

"Nimrod" is a name from the Bible meaning "mighty hunter" and, indeed, the ship was appropriately named. While other ships of the Royal Navy were giving up their patrols and attacks because of the bad weather in January, *Nimrod* stood out as the only British ship still actively engaged. And it wasn't through with Falmouth, this time with a new captain.

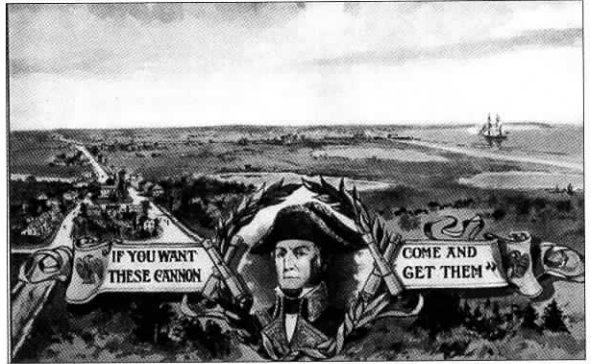
Here is Capt. Newton's log for the attack on Wareham:

13th June

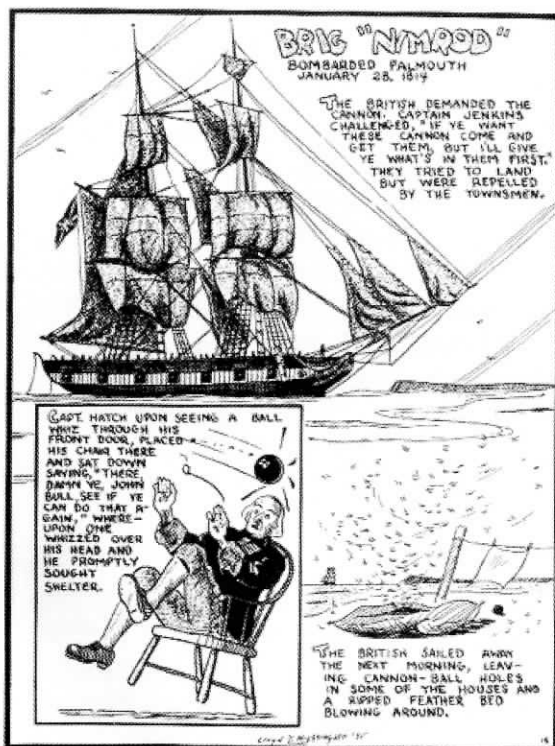
At 7:30 weighed & ran up Buzzard's Bay. At 11:30 anchored the Head of the Bay and sent the boats to Wareham.

At noon at single anchor Buzzards Bay. At 4:30 boats returned having destroyed 17 sail of shipping.

Hoisted in the boats. At 8:30 Superb's boats parted for the ship. Calm.



The Bombardment of the Town of Falmouth by the British Brig "Nimrod," 1812. Illustration from Residential Falmouth by Board of Industry, Falmouth c.1897. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.



Cartoon by Lloyd Turner Nightingale, a Falmouth artist, dated 1935. Printed in *From Falmouth's Past* by Lloyd Turner Nightingale c.1936. The sketch of *Nimrod* is remarkably accurate. Courtesy Falmouth Historical Society.

The terse nature of a log doesn't allow for nuances or why things happened the way they did, at least in these examples. The British landed, about 200 strong, under a flag of truce. Wareham officials responded with their own flag of truce, an indication of the unpopularity of the war (compare Falmouth). The British demanded to know what vessels belonged to Falmouth. The officials complied and down came the British flag of truce and up in flames went everything belonging to Falmouth. The British torched other boats as well. When they were finished they took hostages with them on their barges so that sharpshooters on the shore wouldn't fire on them as they returned to the ship. The hostages were let go after the return.

As the year progressed the combatants began to see that the war had no future. The British had their symbolic victories on land, the burning of the U.S Capitol building in Washington being one of them. But they suffered major defeats in the Great Lakes area, such as Perry's success in the Battle of Lake Erie. American control of the lakes also hampered any aspirations the British had about the Northwest Territory. And to complicate matters, the British still had Napoleon to deal with. Americans were equally frustrated, especially those along the eastern coast. They were tired of waiting for the next *Nimrod* to harass them and tired of struggling for the necessities of life. The women and children of Falmouth, for example, continued to stay in their evacuated area

until the threat was over. One Falmouth resident, Zenas Robinson, moved to Ohio with his family. Nantucket's returning whaling ships had been intercepted by the British and burned. Nantucket, supported by a substantial Quaker community, was frustrated enough to negotiate a "neutrality agreement" with the British by which they would be allowed to bring supplies to the island from the mainland. By summer representatives from both sides met in a Dutch town, Ghent, to try and work out a peace settlement.

But Falmouth, ever active, had one more military action to add to its "honor" list. In the early fall of 1814 the Canadian privateer *Retaliation* (5-guns), had been chasing local shipping and transportation. It chased the Nantucket packet into Falmouth Harbor, for example, where it was repulsed by locals "with a field piece and musketry." Capt. Weston Jenkins, of *Nimrod* fame, decided to do something about the situation. Knowing the privateer was anchored in Tarpaulin Cove, he put together an armed crew of 32 men and set sail from Woods Hole for Tarpaulin. Sighting Weston's sloop approaching, *Retaliation* fired a shot across its bow, a signal to stop. Weston did, anchored, and sent all but two or three of his men below. When a barge from the *Retaliation* approached and asked who was in command, Weston answered, "I am," and stamped his foot. At that point the men below sprang onto the deck, overpowered the men in the barge and took over the barge themselves. The captured British were put below deck on the sloop and the two vessels, barge and sloop, sailed for the *Retaliation*. The six men left aboard wisely decided against resisting. Weston found two American prisoners on board,

released them, and sailed back to Falmouth Harbor with the freed prisoners, the new British prisoners, and the *Retaliation* itself as a prize.

In December, the British tried a raid on Orleans but were repulsed. According to historian Ellis that action was "the last military intrusion on New England soil." Despite individual patriotic acts of daring, the New England States remained opposed to the war and were critical of government policies. The situation was so bad that they were prepared to go to extremes. At one point, prompted by the Federalist party, an inquiry was made of the British as to whether they could get military support from Britain if they went ahead with a "separation movement." All of this unease was more or less put to rest when President Madison signed, on Christmas Eve, a preliminary peace agreement with Great Britain. The final Treaty of Ghent was ratified in February.

Ironically probably the greatest land battle of the war was fought after the preliminary treaty was signed. The Battle of New Orleans (January 8, 1815) produced an overwhelming victory for American forces who had not yet heard that a treaty of peace had been signed. General Andrew Jackson was in charge and largely as a result of his success in battle he was elected the seventh President of the United States.

E. Graham Ward was a member of the Spritsail editorial board from 2005 to his death in 2012. His wife, Maria, has been on the editorial board since 2005.

Sources: Mary Sicchio and The Falmouth Historical Society Archives; James Ellis, *A Ruinous and Unhappy War: New England and the War of 1812*; *Residential Falmouth* by Board of Industry, Falmouth 1897; *From Falmouth's Past* by Lloyd Turner Nightingale, c1936.