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John Brown, third of the 'Four Brothers' should have been a sailor. He was brought up on salt water. He owned many vessels on his own account; he was partner with his brothers in many more. He built Rhode Island sloops, brigs and ships at his own shipyard at India Point. He sailed up and down Narragansett Bay in his own craft and he sent his captains to sea with a sailor's instinct for good voyages.

John's father, James Brown, was a sailor and owned a good sized fleet in partnership with his brother Obadiah. John was less than four years old when his father died, but Uncle Obadiah, bringing up the four brothers to succeed in the partnership, was a deep-seat sailor of note, voyaging to and from the West Indies.[1]

John's older brother James was a sailor who died in Virginia when on a coasting voyage when John was fourteen.

Thus by inheritance and up-bringing John Brown should have been a sea captain. But life was too full; certainly the press of many activities crowded his career. Ship owner, ship builder, merchant, distiller, candle manufacturer, partner in iron works and cannon foundry, founder of the Providence Bank, adventurer in opening a great East Indies export and import business—a man of such abounding energy and wide interests could not go to sea. If John Brown had made his voyages himself he would have come home owning half the Orient. As it was, he sailed a bit in Narragansett Bay, sent his ships up and down the coast, to the West Indies, to Africa and later to the East Indies; and stayed at home to take part in the burning of the *Gaspee*, to defy the British tyrants, to help build Rhode Island College [now Brown University-ed.], of which he was treasurer for twenty-one years, to pull his weight in the leadership of the General Assembly and in the councils of the movement for independence that was to bring forth a new Republic. Meantime he made money hand over fist.

John Brown was thirty-nine years old when the critical year of 1775 came. One Wednesday in April he was sailing up the Bay from Newport with a cargo of flour. He was arrested—on orders of Captain Wallace of H.M.S. *Rose*—and spent several days in custody on Admiral Graves' flagship in Boston Harbor. Tradition has it that Brother Moses helped him get off and rode home with him on the same horse. This was on May 3. Four weeks later John put one of his vessels alongside his dock and began the work of arming her. She was the sloop *Katy*.

At its session on "the second Monday in June 1775" the General Assembly had passed a vote "that the Committee of Safety be, and they are hereby, directed to charter [2] two suitable Vessels, for the use of the Colony, and fit out the same in the best manner, to protect the trade of this Colony: ... That the largest of the said vessels be manned with eighty men, exclusive of officers; and be equipped with ten guns, four-pounders, fourteen Swivel Guns, a sufficient number of Small-Arms, and all necessary warlike stores."

The General Assembly further voted "that the following officers be, and are hereby, appointed to command the said vessels, to wit:

"Of the largest vessel,—

"Abraham Whipple, commander, with the rank and power of Commodore of both vessels. . . ."[3]

The *Katy* sailed that same week of her charter by the Colony. On that day she dropped down Narragansett Bay and let blaze her long four-pounders at a tender of Capt. Wallace's ship *Rose*. The encounter drove the tender ashore on Conanicut Island where Capt. Whipple captured her. The fight was over in a half hour; no one was hurt on the *Katy* and two men wounded on the tender.[4] But the *Katy* had made history; she had fired the first authorized naval shot of the Revolution. The people of Rhode Island were delighted. In October the General Assembly carried out the purchase of John Brown's *Katy*. [5]

The allowance for hire was "Ninety Dollars per month", beginning June 12."

All summer Abraham Whipple sailed the *Katy* up and down Narragansett Bay, "protecting the trade of the Colony," and moving sheep and cows from Conanicut and Prudence Islands to the mainland to save them from the British. In September Whipple made a cruise to Bermuda for powder but returned empty handed; his instructions appear [at the end of this paper

Then in December, 1775, *Katy* was sent for by the Naval Committee and Capt. Whipple sailed her to Philadelphia to become ship number 5 in the infant Navy of the United Colonies. Here she was rechristened *Providence*. Two more long-fours were added to her armament, making her a twelve-gun sloop, and Captain John Hazard of Rhode Island was given command.

For four years the little *Providence* made history. She sailed under men who drove her hard, she lived hard and fought hard. A sizable volume can be made of her four years career. Space here permits only the bare chronology.

In February the fleet under command of Commodore Esek Hopkins of Rhode Island, sailed against New Providence Island of the Bahamas, and the *Providence* did useful service in the capture of the forts and seizure of quantities of powder, shot and supplies much needed by the Colonies. On the voyage home the heavily laden fleet off

Block Island engaged with the British frigate *Glasgow* out of Newport Harbor. The fleet suffered severely and *Glasgow* retired with slight injuries. Four weeks later Captain Hazard of the *Providence* was court-martialed, found guilty of misconduct and neglect of duty, and was 'broke.'

Next day, May 10th, 1776, command of *Providence* was given to John Paul Jones, a young lieutenant on board the fleet's flagship *Alfred*. This was Jones' first command.

After two months of service as a troop-ship and convoy, Captain Jones put to sea and had a noteworthy service. When the *Providence* put in to Newport in October she had met two British frigates and escaped, had descended on Canso, Nova Scotia, destroyed considerable British shipping and had captured and sent in or destroyed sixteen prizes. Capt. Jones was given command of the *Alfred*; the *Providence* went to Captain Hoysted Hacker. The two vessels sailed from Newport for Cape Breton to repeat Jones' tactics of harassing the British shipping. Among several prizes taken was the British ship *Mellish*, richly laden with soldiers' clothing, a capture of great importance to the Continental Army. Twelve days out the *Providence*, leaking badly, her crew complaining, put back to Newport.

The British fleet entered Narragansett Bay and took possession of the Island of Rhode Island December 8, 1776. The American vessels under command of Commodore Esek Hopkins retired up the Providence River and were there blockaded for months. The *Providence* was the first vessel to run the blockade. Under Lieutenant Jonathan Pitcher she slipped past the fleet at 2 A. M. one morning in April, 1777, and put to sea for a cruise as far as Cape Breton, She captured one prize and returned to New Bedford. A new commander took her over, Captain John Peck Rathbun, and under him she sailed for the next two years, until the Spring of 1779. His cruises included a successful action with an English privateer off South Carolina, and an expedition against New Providence Island, where he took the fort and prizes without firing a gun. The spoils of war included six vessels, one mounting sixteen guns, and a quantity of powder and stores of great value. This was in January, 1778. The *Providence*, with her prizes laden with stores, reached New Bedford early in March.

Captain Hoysted Hacker took her over again in May, 1779, and captured a twelve gun British brig, the *Diligent*, off Sandy Hook.

Providence met her fate at the hands of her own crew. She was one of the fleet which was bottled up in Penobscot Bay by a greatly superior British force, and in order to prevent her falling into the hands of the enemy she was run up the river, set on fire and blown up. A tribute from J. Fennimore Cooper in his naval history runs, "Among the vessels blown up was the *Providence* 12, one of the first cruisers ever sent to sea by the United States, and which had become noted for exploits greatly exceeding what might have been expected from her force."

The Katy in Person

No blue prints guided the builders of a Rhode Island Sloop of 1775. But from many sources come contemporary descriptions,—reference to her color, her square topsail, her two deck-pumps, her straight stem without figure-head, and many hints which give students of that particular period of maritime America a basis for reconstructing the *Katy*. From such research has come the model which is now housed in John Brown House.

Several years ago Mr. Charles G. Davis (author of many books on American sailing vessels and himself a builder of many notable ship models) became interested in the type referred to in manuscripts of the latter half of the 1700's as the "Rhode Island sloop." He worked out drawings, and built two models of the *Katy*. The Ship Model Society of Rhode Island became much interested. There ensued several years of interesting search for authentic details. Mr. Alfred S. Brownell of Providence, President of the Ship Model Society, the late George C. Wales, Boston architect and painter, and the writer joined with Mr. Davis in the pastime. Out of the interchange came the present model, built by Mr. Brownell during three years of dexterous handicraft.

Katy was doubtless a typical Rhode Island built sloop. She was substantially built,—rugged, sturdy, beamy, heavy timbered and heavy sparred. The New England mariner thought little of putting out to sea in such a vessel. *Katy* sailed to the West Indies in mid-winter on what was probably her maiden voyage in February, 1775. The sloop would measure approximately sixty feet long from stem to sternpost; her breadth would be roughly twenty feet. Such tremendous beam goes far to account for the large crew the sloop carried, eighty under Whipple, seventy under Junes, nearly sixty under Rathbun.

Her after-deck rose high out of water with airy living quarters for the officers. Her single mast, hewn probably from a native pine tree, carried a huge fore-and-aft main-sail loose-footed and furling in brails. A square topsail, bent on two tapering yards that swung in old-fashioned rope slings, bellied out above her crosstrees from a sturdy topmast. "I hove my topsail to the mast," wrote Captain Hazard, "for Capt. Whipple to come up." This would clearly refer to a square topsail trimmed by his weather brace so as to be taken aback and stop his headway. Her rugged bowsprit with its long jib-boom over her full and bluff bow carried probably three headsails; a staysail from cap to stem, a jib to her bowsprit and a jib-topsail to her jib-boom end. Her stem was straight, without a figurehead; this we learn from a description in a letter to London giving intelligence of the "rebel vessels." "A black sloop without a head," the British writer put it. This was not remarkable one way or the other; when a vessel had a figure head, common enough at the period, such characteristic was often used as a distinguishing bit of description.

That the sloop was able and a fast sailer we know. You will see how she behaved in the dead of winter well out in the Atlantic playing rebel tag with British ships. Captain John Paul Jones exulted in her showing a clean pair of heels to a much bigger

enemy frigate. "Our 'hair-breadth escape,' and the saucy manner of making it, must have mortified him not a little," Jones wrote to Admiral Hopkins.

It is a pity we have no contemporary drawing of the little *Katy*. Our knowledge of her comes from allusions, from scraps of manuscript written by her commanders and her crew, from contemporary descriptions and from a rare sketch or two of vessels of her time together with average dimensions of body plan, spars and sails culled from various sources of the period. The ship builders of the colonies did not build from models; rarely do we find records of detailed drawings, and then I think only in the case of ships of considerable importance, like the frigates *Providence* and *Warren* built in Providence in 1776 for the Continental fleet. Occasionally there comes to light a rather complete document of instructions commissioning the building of a vessel according to the owner's description. Such a document is of great interest to one who loves ships; old Christopher Champlin, doughty Rhode Island merchant of 1773, left one such description among his papers.

Those who find pleasure in the lines and model of a vessel will enjoy the plans and the photographs of the *Katy* as reconstructed and carefully prepared by ardent students of maritime history; these plans may be seen at the John Brown House.

Instructions to Capt. Whipple

Commander of the Sloop *Katy*.

By the Committee appointed by the General Assembly of the Colony of Rhode Island & Providence Plantations to act during the Recess of the General Assembly.

Instructions to be observed by Captain Abraham Whipple—Commander of the Sloop *Katy* in the Service of the said Colony.

You are to embrace the First suitable Wind & Weather and proceed immediately with the said Sloop, and the Officers and Men to her belonging under your Command, off Sandy-Hook, and there cruise Fourteen Days for the Packet expected from England at New-York with the Ministerial Dispatches, the Mail etc.—During the Cruise off Sandy-Hook you are to speak with no Vessel unless it appears probable to you that she is the Packet.—If you are so fortunate as to meet her you are to take all the Letters out of her, land them at South-Hampton and send them by Express to the Deputy-Governor in this Town.—You are also to take out of her all the Arms Ammunition and warlike Stores she may have on board, and light Sails if you shall have Occasion for them for the said Sloop's Use, and then dismiss the said Packet to pursue her Voyage. In Case she makes any Resistance you are to take her by Force.

After taking the Packet, or the Expiration of the said Fourteen Days, you are immediately to proceed to the Island of Bermuda to possess yourself of a Quantity of Powder, in a Magazine upon the said Island, and to take the same on board your said

Sloop, and immediately return therewith.—In conducting this Enterprise every Thing is submitted to your Judgment and Discretion with Respect to the most prudent Measures to be taken to become Masters of the Powder—We only recommend to you to effect it, if possible, without desiring any other Assistance from the Inhabitants than being piloted in, and having a Guide to the Magazine; and of Course you will make no Use of General Washington's Address to the Inhabitants unless it be absolutely necessary.

At the Request of the Committee I have hereunto set my Hand and Seal at Providence this Eleventh Day of September A. D. 1775.

[Signed] Nicholas Cooke, Chairman

[Endorsed] Instructions to Capt. Whipple, Commander of the Sloop *Katy*

Notes:

1. John Carter Brown Woods, Foreword, *The Letter Book of James Browne, 1735-1738*, (Providence, 1929).
2. A copy of this Charter is in the Moses Brown Manuscripts, Vol. 11, Rhode Island Historical Society. This Charter reads as follows:

Providence June 22, 1775

An Agreement between John Brown on one part and the Commune in behalf of the Colony for hiring & Fixing an armed Vessel On the other part Viz the Said John agrees to Lett to the Said Committee the Sloop *Katy* from the 12 Inst to the Latter part of December next at Ninety Dollars per month the Said Committee in behalf of the Colony to Resque the Said Sloop at Four Hundred pounds L Money to be paid to Said John on Demand after the Loss of Said Sloop with Int. from this Day but in Case the Sloop should be Returned to the Said John She is to be in as Good order as she now is, Common ware & Tare Excepted or if the General assembly at their next setting shall chose to purchase Said Sloop at Four Hundred pounds with Int from this Day they have Liberty So to do or to Continue her on hire as above, whatever Expense the Said John has put to Said Sloop Since begun to Fix her for the Colony's use Viz Since the 12 inst., Excepting only for Cordage, the Said Committee is to pay the Said Int For

3. *R. I. Col. Records*, VII, 346-7; also *Am. Archives*, 4th ii, 1138.

4. Particulars of an Action between the *Diana* Packet a Tender belonging to His Majesty's Ship *Rose*, and two Armed Sloops belonging to the Rebels, Volume 485, pp. 409-413. April 1774-June 1775. Letters of Vice Admiral Samuel Graves, Esq.[7] to Philip Stephens Esq, Admiralty Secretary, from the transcripts in the Library of Congress.

The 15th June 1775 about 9 o'clock AM. being ordered by Captain Wallace to proceed with the *Diana* Sloop, a Tender to His Majesty's Ship *Rose*, up the River towards Providence with a Petty Officer, eleven Men and myself, armed with Small Arms and four Swivels to reconnoitre the different Passages, having Intelligence of Armed Vessels being fitted out by the Rebels at Providence.

The 16th PM about half past 5. as I was standing off between the North end of Conanicut Island and Gould' Island between two and three Leagues from the Ship, a Sloop coming down before the wind. I layed too to speak her—a little after six being within hail, She hailed Us and told Us to bring too or she would sink Us immediately and directly fired a shot which we returned with our Small Arms and Swivels and kept a smart tire on both Sides for near half an hour, till by accident the Powder Chest with the remainder of the swivel Cartridges blew up—In this Sloop we saw Six Carriage Guns mounted and a great number of Men Onboard—The Ammunition for the Small Arms being near expended and another armed Vessel with Carriage Guns belonging to the Rebels joining and bringing Us between two fires, so that there was no possibility of saving the Vessel—I thought it prudent to run her ashore which t accordingly accomplished near the North end of Conanicut and got on shore with the People and part of the Small Arms—They immediately landed a number of Men from the Vessels in whale Boats who closely pursued and fired at Us—being so closely pursued and night coming on thought it necessary to separate and conceal Ourselves till a proper Opportunity offered of joining the Ship which was accomplished the next day without the loss of one Man. Mr. Stevenson the Petty Officer and one Man being the only People that were hurt occasioned by the Powder Chest blowing up--During the course of the engagement the People behaved with the greatest Spirit.

Signed Savage Gardner, Master

Endorsed, Mr. Savage Gardner's / Account of an Action / between the *Diana* , Packet & a Tender/ belonging to the *Rose*, received by Vice Admiral Graves/ the 26th June 1775 / In Vice Admiral Graves's./ Letter of 26 June 1775.

Letter from Deputy Governor Cooke to Capt. Wallace, see Force, 4th Series, II, 985 & VII, 338 Endorsed Nicholas Cooke Deputy Governor of Rhode Island to: Capt. Wallace dated 14/ June received 26th by Vice Admiral Graves/ In A. Graves's/ Letter of June 26, 1775.

Answer to above, Force, 4th Series, II 986, & *R. I. C. R.*, VII, 338. Endorsed Captain Jas Wallace of H.M.S./ *Rose* to / Nicholas Cooke Esq. / at Newport / dated 15 June received by Vice Admiral Graves the/ 26th June/ In Vice Admiral Graves's / Letter of 26 June 1775.

5. "It is voted and resolved, with the consent of Mr. John Brown, that the colony will purchase the sloop *Katy.*, as she is now, with her boats, stores and appurtenances, at the rate of \$1250.

"That the said John Brown he allowed the hire of said sloop, at the price agreed upon, from the 12th day of June last, to this day, out of the general Treasury.

"And that in case the said sloop be taken or lost. before this day, that then the said John Brown shall receive out of the general Treasury the said \$1250, with interest from the said 12th day of June, in full compensation, without any allowance for hire." *R. I. Col. Records*, VII, 405.

6. See copy of the Charter, footnote above.

7. MS. in R.I.H.S., see page 103.