

Fascinating Flags of Plundering Pirates and Profiteering Privateers

Robert S. Gauron

We all can probably remember, from our childhood days, romantic stories about pirates—such as *Treasure Island* and *Peter Pan*. They bring back memories of the ferocious pirate shown on the cover. As the “Pirate” article in *The World Book Encyclopedia* puts it: “He is pictured as a swarthy ruffian with a black beard or a fierce mustache. He wears gold earrings and a turban or a large hat, and carries a sword or dagger in his hand and a brace of pistols in his belt. He may be directing his men to bury treasure or ordering a victim to walk the plank.”

Pirates

A pirate is nothing more than a sea robber. The crime of piracy is armed robbery by ships of merchant ships at sea or of coastal cities. According to international law, piracy is punishable by death. The history of piracy is as old as the history of seafaring. It is said that piracy is the third oldest profession—after prostitution and medicine. It is also said that trade follows the flag, and robbery (whether by land or sea) follows trade. Pirates seized ships for cargo because they believed that the rewards of the crime were worth the risk. They often turned to piracy in protest against oppressive conditions at home or on merchant ships.

Piracy began in the Mediterranean Sea, and spread to the Atlantic Ocean and then to the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Pirates preyed upon the ships of the ancient Phoenicians about 3,000 years ago, and later on those of the Greeks and Romans, who sailed the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas.

In 78 BC, during the Roman republic, a young Julius Caesar was captured in the Aegean Sea by 350 pirates who held him for ransom. The pirates

demanded 20 talents for his release. However, he indignantly declared that he was worth at least 50 talents, or about \$187,500 today [1979]. After his release, he returned with a squadron of ships, seized the pirates, and executed every one of them—30 of the leaders by crucifixion. He showed some mercy on those leaders who had treated him well in captivity; to shorten their misery while being crucified, he had their throats slit.

The Vikings plundered ships and terrorized coastal cities between the 8th and 11th centuries AD, first in the Baltic Sea and the English Channel in northern Europe, and then later, in the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

Muslim pirates sailed out of North African ports to molest ships in the Mediterranean. The most famous of these *corsairs* were the two red-bearded brothers Barbarossa—Arouj and Khair-ed-Din. They were active in the late 1400s and early 1500s. By the 16th century, the *corsairs* had established a pirate empire, the Barbary States, spreading across today's Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. The governments of the Barbary States relied on piracy for the greater part of their revenues—probably the only countries in history to do so. They sold Christians into slavery and demanded large sums of money from other countries as protection. The United States paid such tribute from 1795 to 1801. It was not until France occupied Algiers in 1830 that piracy ended in the Mediterranean.

The Golden Age of piracy lasted from the 1500s through the 1700s. Contests between Spain and other European countries spurred piracy in the West Indies and along the coasts of South and North America. Spanish ships loaded with gold from Mexico and the Spanish Main, as South America came to be

called, attracted pirates to the Caribbean Sea. Later, Africa offered pirate haunts on the Guinea coast and the island of Madagascar.



The pirates in the Caribbean had a special name, "buccaneers", because before turning to piracy they had cured meat in a smokehouse, and sold it to passing ships. The smokehouse was called a *boucan*, the French word for the wooden grill on which they cured meat. One of the most famous buccaneers was Henry Morgan, who captured the city of Panama in 1671. Morgan was actually



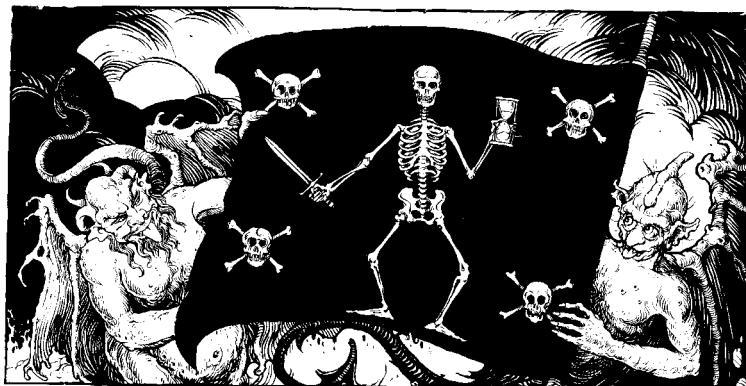
Buccaneers raiding a Spanish port in the Caribbean. Wood engraving by Theodore de Bry (1528-1598) from Newberry Library, Chicago.

knighted by the King of England. Other pirates became national heroes and respected citizens (in their own countries).

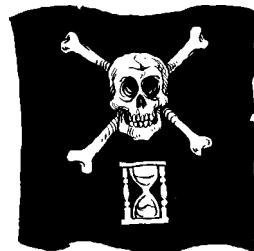
Pirates of New York and New England during colonial times had close connections with smuggling and other illegal trading, in defiance of British laws. Their activities often grew out of the fierce spirit of independence that finally led to the complete break with England in the Revolutionary War. The colonists received the pirates warmly because of the profits brought by their raids. One of the last American buccaneers was Jean Laffite, who operated from the Mississippi River delta. He helped General Andrew Jackson win the Battle of New Orleans against the British in 1815. In the 1800s and 1900s, piracy declined because of larger merchant ships, improved naval patrolling of sea-lanes, and the general recognition of piracy as an international crime. In recent years, some piracy has arisen in the South China Sea (of course air-



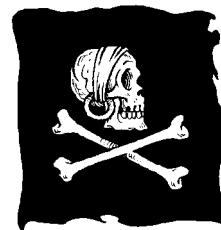
*Pirate Jean Laffite.
From Culver.*



A pirate flag from A General History of the Robberies & Murders of the Most notorious Pyrates, published in 1724.



*Capt. Emanuel Wynne's flag.
W/N*



*Capt. John Avery's flag.
W/N*



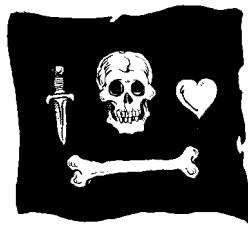
*Capt. Richard Worley's flag.
W/N*



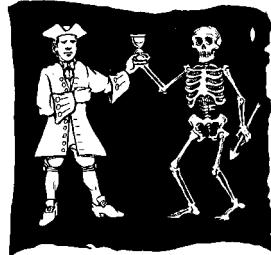
*Capt. John Rackam's flag.
W/N*



*Capt. Edward England's flag.
W/N*



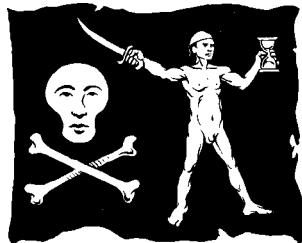
*Capt. Stede Bonnet's flag.
W/N*



*Capt. Bartholomew Roberts' tall mast flag and jack.
W/N*



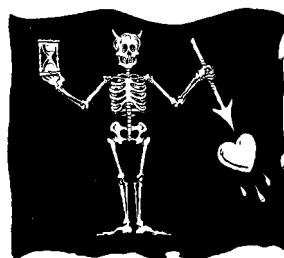
*Capt. Thomas Tew's flag.
W/N*



*Capt. Walter Kennedy's flag.
W/N*



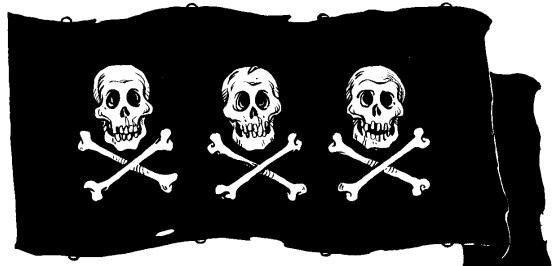
*Capt. Christopher Moody's flag.
B-wings; Y hourglass & skull/bones;
W arm/sword all on R*



*Capt. Edward Teach's flag.
W skeleton; R heart & drops on N*



*Capt. Edward Low's flag.
R/N*



*Capt. Christopher Condent's pennant.
W/N*

plane hijacking is another form of modern piracy, although usually accomplished for political reasons).

Pirate Flags

Now let us turn to the flags flown by pirates. They flew no nation's flag except to deceive others. From the romantic stories in print, one might believe that all pirates flew the white skull and crossbones on a black field, the "Jolly Roger". The origin of the name is uncertain—it may have come from *joli rouge*, for "pretty red", the French description of the bloody banner flown by early pirates. But pirates flew flags of many different designs. While most were variations of the skull and crossbones, others were personal flags of individual pirates.

The pirates were masters of psychological warfare and attempted to instill fear in the hearts of their victims. They did so by dressing ferociously; by brandishing an array of cutlasses, daggers, pistols, and other weapons; by shouting oaths and yelling threats; by beating drums and blowing bugles as they boarded ships; by throwing smoke bombs and stink pots of saltpeter and sulfur onto the decks of ships; and by displaying symbols of death on their flags. The symbols might be skulls, crossbones, bleeding hearts, daggers, cutlasses, hourglasses, or rattlesnakes on black, red, or white fields.



Capt. Edward England.

The skull and crossbones design was first used about 1700 when the French pirate Emanuel Wynne raised it in the Caribbean. He made his flag more fearsome with an hourglass to warn his victims that time was running out. The flag of Captain Richard Worley was the more typical death head and crossed bones.

Captain Edward England's black flag also had the common skull and crossbones. After the British Navy drove Captain England from the Caribbean in 1718, he terrorized African waters. Captain Charles Johnson (possibly a *nom de plume* of the English journalist Daniel Defoe)

characterized him in *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates*, written in 1724: "He had a good Nature and was always averse to the ill Usage Prisoners received." But Captain England's unusual kindness proved his undoing—he was relieved of his command by his crew for freeing a captured sea captain. They marooned him on the island of Mauritius, where he built a small boat and succeeded in reaching Madagascar, only to die there a beggar and a pauper.



Capt. John "Long Ben" Avery.

Captain John Avery's flag consisted of a bandana-covered skull turned sideways, with earrings and with crossed bones beneath it. At the turn of the 18th century "Long Ben", as he was called, made the very lucky capture of the ship of India's emperor and its vast booty. The Great Mogul's daughter was making a pilgrimage to Mecca in Arabia, bearing rich gifts to present at the shrine of Mahomet. Captain Avery not only took a fortune in diamonds, he also married the daughter. But when he tried to sell the diamonds to merchants in Bristol, England, they robbed him and he died penniless.

Captain John Rackam's black flag shows a skull and two crossed cutlasses instead of bones. He was nicknamed "Calico Jack" for his liking for fancy trousers. His life was entangled with two of the most famous woman pirates—Anne Bonny and Mary Read. Anne Bonny fell in love with Rackam, the dandified pirate captain who was a ladies' man, married him, and then masqueraded as a man to keep the superstitious crew from rebelling against having a woman aboard.

Mary Read had dressed as a boy from infancy to deceive a grandmother who would not leave her money to a granddaughter. Mary continued to masquerade as a soldier and then as an able-bodied seaman on a ship bound for the Caribbean. When Calico Jack captured her ship, she joined the pirates. She fell in love with one of her shipmates, and after she revealed her



*Capt. John "Calico Jack"
Rackam.*



*Woman pirates Anne
Bonny and Mary Read.*



*Mary Read fights to save her
lover's life.*



The Silver Oar, the official badge of authority of the Admiralty Court justices who tried the pirates.



Captain Stede Bonnet.

Captain Stede Bonnet was captured and hanged in 1718 at Charleston, South Carolina. Note in his hands the bouquet of flowers often given pirates when hanged.



identity, they were engaged. But her lover got into a quarrel with the worst bully and the best swordsman on ship and a duel was arranged. Fearing her lover would be killed, Mary provoked a quarrel with the bully and killed him. When a British warship later overtook the ship, Captain Rackam and his pirates were so frightened they hid below. Anne Bonny fired her pistols into the cabin and forced the pirates to come out and fight. When the British overcame the pirates, the last two fighting on deck were Anne Bonny and Mary Read.

Calico Jack, Anne, and Mary were taken prisoner. When the judge asked if there were any reason why any one of them should not be hanged, he was surprised to see two youths step forward. They were Anne and Mary, who said: "Your Honor, it is against the law to execute an unborn child." Examination proved they were telling the truth. They were not only women, but also expectant mothers. Under English law, they could not be executed until their children were born; they probably escaped hanging. When Mary Read was asked if she were sorry for the life she had led, she replied "no" and added that she was in favor of death for piracy. Without the threat of the noose, she explained, every fool would turn pirate and spoil the business for the experts. When Calico Jack was about to be hanged, he said he had one last request—to see his wife once more. When Anne Bonny saw him, she said, "I'm sorry to see you come to this." Then she added with a sneer: "If you had fought like a man, you need not have died like a dog".

Captain Stede Bonnet's black flag had several deadly symbols—a skull, a bone, a dagger, and a heart. Bonnet had been a wealthy and respected plantation owner in Barbados in the West Indies, having retired from an honorable career in the army with the rank of major. It is said he took to piracy to escape a nagging wife. After a brief but successful career, he was captured and hanged in 1718 at Charleston, South Carolina. The official badge of authority of the Admiralty Court justices who tried the pirates was a silver oar about two feet long. It bears the royal arms and a foul anchor on the blade.

Captain Bartholomew Roberts, was the greatest pirate of the golden age of pirates. He struck double fear in his victims with the two flags flown on his ship. From his tall mast, he flew a black flag with an effigy of himself on it drinking a toast to Death, in the guise of a skeleton. On the jack staff at the bow, he flew a black flag picturing himself with a sword in his right hand and each foot on a grinning skull, labeled ABH and AMH, for "A Barbadian's Head" and "A Martinican's Head". The flags showed his contempt for the governors of the two islands, who attempted to capture him. Black Bart made good on one threat—in 1720 he hanged the governor of Martinique. In three years' time, he captured over 400 ships.



Capt. Bartholomew "Bad Bart" Roberts.

The black flag of Captain Thomas Tew showed a pirate's arm swinging a cutlass. He might have been numbered among the lucky pirates if not for his kind heart. After capturing a fabulously rich ship of the great Mocha Fleet, which carried the treasures of India across the Red Sea to Arabia, he decided to retire and bought a mansion overlooking Narragansett Bay at Newport, Rhode Island. In a few months his crew had drunk and gambled away their share of the gold and jewels. They begged him to lead them in going after another rich Mocha frigate. He declined, but they persisted, because they believed he led a charmed life. Finally he gave in. As they prepared to board a rich Mocha ship, it gave them a booming broadside. A jagged piece of metal struck Tew and ripped his stomach open. None of his crew was even injured by the broadside; luck had run out only for Captain Tew.

The elaborate black flag of Captain Walter Kennedy depicted a naked sailor holding a cutlass and an hourglass alongside a skull and crossbones. Captain Kennedy sailed as a pirate, took ships as a pirate, and buried treasure as a pirate. But in his heart he was always a pickpocket—his original profession and eventual downfall. After stripping his victims of their valuables, he could not resist slipping a hand into an empty pocket—just to keep in practice. But Kennedy was no navigator. He sailed from the West Indies for Ireland, but ended up in a creek in Scotland. He went to England where he was arrested for picking pockets and for piracy and he was hanged.

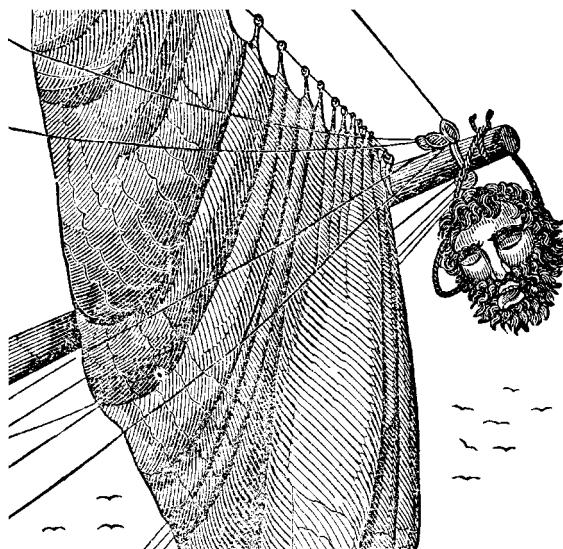


Capt. Edward "Blackbeard" Teach.

mere mention of his name terrified his victims. Blackbeard was killed by Lieutenant Robert Maynard on the James River during an attack by two sloops sent against Teach by the governor of Virginia. He fell with 25 wounds in his body. Lieutenant Maynard hung Teach's head on the bow of his sloop to announce his victory when he returned to Virginia.

The flag of Captain Christopher Moody had a distinctive red field with several ghastly symbols, including an arm wielding a cutlass in white, a yellow skull and crossbones, and a yellow hourglass with blue wings. Usually, if a pirate ship flew a black flag it meant the pirates would "give quarter"—that is, they would show mercy in sparing the lives of the captive crew if they did not resist. A red pirate flag usually meant that no

The black flag of Captain Edward Teach, or Thatch, had a white horned skeleton holding an hourglass and a spear pointed at a red heart dripping blood. Nicknamed "Blackbeard", he turned pirate in the West Indies in 1716. Blackbeard was a most ferocious-looking pirate. He was a giant—over six feet and over 220 pounds. His skin was dark and his eyes were red-rimmed and bleary. Black hair covered almost every inch of his head and face. He made braids of his long beard and tied them with ribbons. He wore long, sputtering sulfur matches in his hair during raids. He terrorized the people of Carolina and Virginia. The



Blackbeard's head swinging from the bowsprit of Lieut. Maynard's sloop.

quarter would be given. If a ship surrendered, it did so by “striking its colors”—that is, it hauled down its flag.

The black flag of Captain Edward Low bore the figure of Death in red. Low had a split personality. He was a loving husband and father and usually was kind to the married men whom he captured. But he could be a “ferocious brute of unequalled cruelty”, once killing 53 Spanish captives. An Englishman, he hated all New Englanders, often cutting off their ears, splitting their noses, or cutting off their heads. He was also a coward, deserting his fellow pirate ships in battle.

The black flag of Captain Christopher Condent is unusual because it is pennant-shaped, has three skulls and crossbones, and has vertical battens to stiffen it. When the American and West Indies colonies offered rising resistance to piracy, Captain Condent re-established Madagascar and the surrounding islands as pirate havens. When he took an Arab ship rich in gold and silver near Bombay, he decided to retire. He received a French pardon and went to Saint-Malo in France, where he became a wealthy shipowner.

Not all pirate flags were black or red. The fictitious Captain Misson, called “Misson the Holy” and one of the kindest of pirates, flew a white flag. He was studying for a career in the French navy when he came under the influence of a former Dominican priest, Signor Carricoli, while on a holiday in Rome. He turned pirate but instead of the usual black flag, his was white, embroidered with the astounding motto, “For God and Liberty”.^{*} He was the “Robin Hood” of the high seas. His Christian pirates took only what they needed and only from those who could afford it. He treated one captive ship so well that its crew actually gave him three rousing cheers as he sailed away. He flogged any crewman who swore and dumped overboard anyone who drank. He met an unhappy fate, drowning during a hurricane.



The great seal of the Bahamas in 1723. It depicts a merchant ship sailing triumphantly into Nassau harbor as pirate ships flee over the horizon. The motto on the seal, Expulsis Piratis, Restituta Commercia, translates “With the Expulsion of the Pirates, Trade Has Been Revived”.

^{*}Capt. Misson's flag was described as “... a white ensign, with liberty painted in the fly, and if you like the motto, *A Deo a Libertate, For God and Liberty*, as an emblem of our uprightness and resolution.” Captain Misson and the settlement of Libertalia by pirates in Africa was a fantasy described by Captain Johnson (Defoe) in the 1728 edition of *A General History ... of the Most notorious Pyrates*.

THE BOSTON GAZETTE
NOVEMBER 13, 1780.

An Invitation to all brave Seamen and Marines, who have an inclination to serve their Country and make their Fortunes.

The grand Privateer Ship DEANE, commanded by **ELISHA HINMAN, Esq;** and prov'd to be a very capital Sailor, will sail on a Cruile against the Enemies of the United States of America, by the 20th instant. The **DEANE** mounts thirty Carriage Guns, and is excellently well calculated for Attacks, Defence and Pursuite-- This therefore is to invite all those Jolly Fellows, who love their Country, and want to make their Fortunes at one Stroke, to repair immediately to the Rendezvous at the Head of His Excellency Governor Hancock's Wharf, where they will be received with a hearty Welcome by a Number of Brave Fellows there assembled, and treated with that excellent Liquor call'd **GREG** which is allow'd by all true Seamen, to be the **Liquor of LIFE.**

Privateers

Now let us look to the second aspect of our topic—the privateers. Piracy and privateering are so similar in sound and performance that it is sometimes difficult to draw the line between them. While *piracy* was (and still is) robbery on the seas, one might say realistically that *privateering* was *legal* robbery on the sea. A privateer was an armed ship, privately owned, privately manned, and commissioned by a government in time of war to capture or sink enemy ships or to rob enemy cargoes. It was legal because the government granted a commission, or license, called a *letter of marque and reprisal*. Private ownership distinguished a privateer from a warship; a letter of marque distinguished a privateer from a pirate ship. Crews were not paid by the commissioning government, but were entitled to the ships and cargo they captured.



An embossed seal from a letter of marque issued by Massachusetts during the Revolutionary War.

Privateering was carried on by many nations from the earliest times until the late 1800s. The privateers became auxiliaries or substitutes for regular navies, especially when a country had a weak navy. Privateersmen kept all of their loot or shared part with the government, often gaining great wealth

and becoming prominent citizens. In an attempt to curb abuses, na-

tions required that captured ships be condemned in admiralty courts. Privateers often made no distinction between the ships of enemy and friendly countries. When wars ended, the thousands of out-of-work privateers often became pirates. During Queen Elizabeth I's reign, Sir Francis Drake was a pirate-turned-privateer and was knighted. But during James I's time, Sir Walter Raleigh started out as privateer and was executed.

The American colonists had long experience as privateers under the British flag in the wars with France. During the American Revolutionary War, Massachusetts and other colonies and the Continental Congress issued letters of marque, and George Washington and Benjamin Franklin personally financed privateers. Congress issued instructions to privateers beginning, "You may, by Force of Arms, attack, subdue, and take all ships and other vessels belonging to the inhabitants of Great Britain, on the high seas..." All privateers had to post a substantial bond—\$5,000 for ships under 100 tons and \$10,000 for ships over 100 tons—which was forfeited if the instructions were not followed to the letter. Some 2,000 American privateers in the Atlantic, West Indies, and even British Isles waters captured about 600 British ships and took prizes valued at \$6,000,000. British losses in ships and cargo and high insurance rates made the war unpopular in England and contributed to its end.

During the War of 1812, letters of marque were granted to more than 500 American privateers; 200 of them succeeded in capturing about 1,350 British ships. The Declaration of Paris in 1856, signed by most European powers, abolished privateering, but the United States refused to sign it because its small navy and large merchant fleet would be a disadvantage in a war with a strong naval power. During the American Civil War, the Confederate government issued letters of marque to privateers, but the Union blockade limited their effectiveness. By the end of the 1800s, the United States recognized the need to abolish privateering.

An advertisement for privateersman ends by inviting "all those Jolly Fellows" to join and "...be received with a hearty Welcome...and treated with that excellent Liquor call'd GROG, which is allow'd by all true Seamen, to be the LIQUOR OF LIFE."

While privateers usually preferred to work alone, so as not to share the booty, when working together they would use flag signals to communicate between their ships. The American privateers' flag of 13 red and white stripes was a variant of the Continental Colors, while the British red ensign was flown by British merchant ships.

There were times when a group of privateers banded together and hunted as a pack. Strength of numbers replaced individual daring. A code of signals was then a necessity. Such a code was discovered on the Charleston schooner "Cassandra" when captured by the H.M.S. "Bristol" in 1780. The "Cassandra" had been working with other American privateers - the ship "Marquis", the brigs "Trooper", "Adventure", "Randolph", and "Betsey", and the schooner "Vengeance" and "Young Neptune".

"To Sail upon a Wind - A Continental Jack at Main or Mizzen Peak



To Sail Large - A Pendant at Maintopgallant masthead



To Chase - A Pendant at Foretopgallant masthead and hoist an English Ensign at Ensign staff



To Leave off Chase - Haul down the English Ensign and pendant and shorten sail



To Engage - Haul down the English Ensign and hoist a Continental One



To Board - Hoist a Pendant at Ensign Staff and Board Amedately



To know Each Other after Boarding - The men to have their shirts off

To Separate at the Approach of a Superior Enemy - An Ensign at the Main or Mizzen Topgallant



To Know Each Other - The Enquirer Shall give 6 flashes to be answered by One - the Ship who hauls shall ask What Ship - the Hailed shall Answer Mouthholly - then the other shall reply Samboy



For Discovering a Strange Sail - Hoist a light at the Ensign staff and lower it three times distinctly

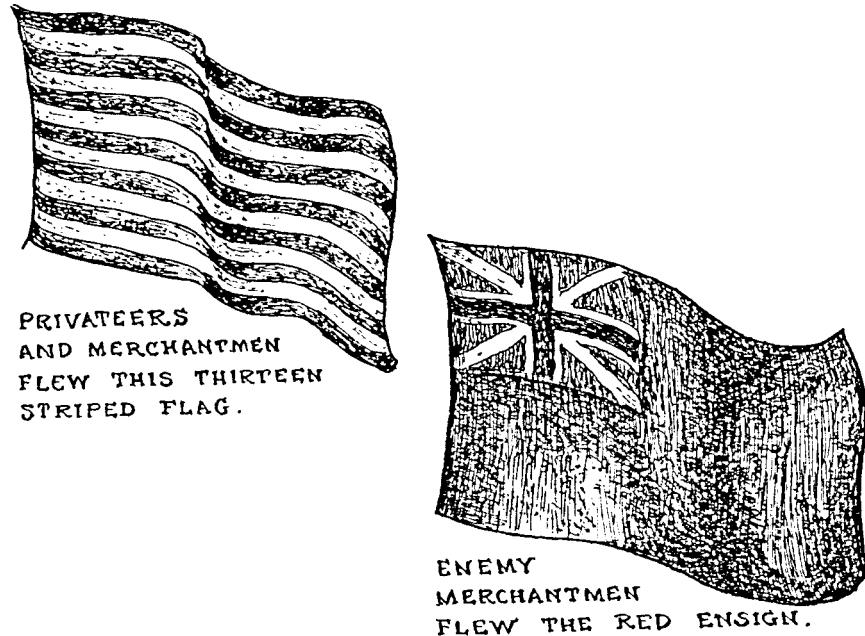
If the Enemy is thought Superior and is Necessary to separate - three flashes not to be answerd

If Equal or Inferior - the divers ships Continue Chase making False Fires

To Know Each Other if Attacked - Each Vessel Shall hang a lantern over her off bow and Quarter and Keep them their during the Action...."



Flag signals for communication among Privateers.



Conclusion

It was not a desire to relive these exciting fantasies that determined the selection of this topic about pirates and privateers for presentation at the 13th NAVA meeting here in Salem, Massachusetts. During the American Revolutionary War, Salem's fine harbor became a great seaport for privateers commissioned to fight British merchant and war ships. When peace came, Salem merchant ships sailed to the far corners of the seas. During the War of 1812, Salem again became a privateering port, but its importance later declined as ships became too large for its port. But today flags fly here again as our continent's vexillologists gather in a less bloody but equally enthusiastic manner.

SOURCES

A General History of the Robberies & Murders of the Most notorious Pyrates, by Capt. Charles Johnson, 1724-25, 1727-28, (attributed to Daniel Defoe): A pirate flag with a skeleton with an hourglass and sword, and four more skulls and crossbones, frontispiece; Capt. England, Capt. Bonnet, Capt. Rackam; Blackbeard; Blackbeard's death.

Bahamian Symbols: The First Five Centuries, by Whitney Smith, *The Flag Bulletin*, Vol. XV, Nos. 2-3, March-June 1976: The great seal of the Bahamas in 1723, Fig. 11, page 29.

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Pirates, Bellerophon Books, Santa Barbara, California: Capt. Rackam's flag; Capt. Avery's flag, Capt. Bonnet's flag, Capt. Tew's flag, Capt. Wynne's flag, Capt. Kennedy's flag, Capt. England's flag, Capt. Roberts' tall mast flag and jack, Blackbeard's flag, Capt. Condent's pennant, all on page 23. Capt. Worley's flag is a composite by Dave Martucci from material in this publication.

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World Book Encyclopedia, 1981: Buccaneer raid, vol. 2, B, page 545; Pirate Jean Lafitte, vol. 12, L, page 31.

