

Sea Captains & Privateers



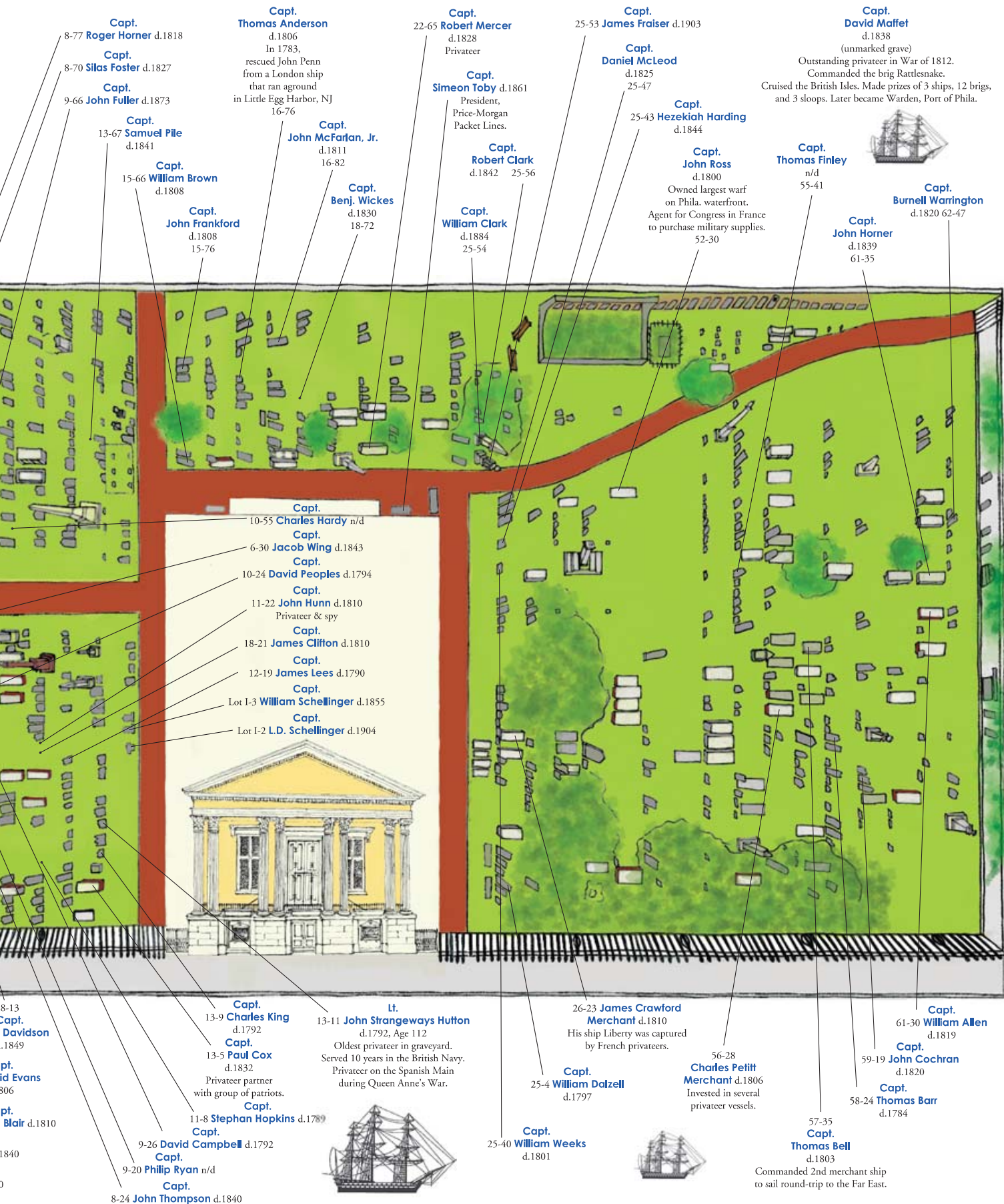
From its founding in 1768, Old Pine Street Presbyterian Church had close ties to both the shipbuilding and marine industries that stretched the length of Philadelphia's Colonial waterfront.

At one time or another, 88 sea captains rented pews and worshipped at Old Pine; 75 are buried in the graveyard along with shipbuilders, owners and chandlers; mast, sail and rope makers, ship carpenters, marine blacksmiths and lumber merchants.

Masts and sails on the Delaware River could always be seen from the graveyard.



Sailing ships on the Delaware River were always visible from 4th & Pine Street during the late 18th & early 19th centuries.



Old Pine's ties to maritime life included:
ship owners, builders & chandlers; mast makers, sail & rope makers;
ship carpenters, blacksmiths & lumber merchants.

Unmarked graves of Sea Captains: west side of Church

Joseph Bennet d.1800
William Craig d.1820
James Gamble, Sr. d.1800
Joseph Hand d.1844
Francis Knox d.1809
John McHenry d.1798
Samuel Smith d.1783
William Vallenge d.1846

By Ronn Shaffer

On April 19, 1775 the first shots of the American Revolutionary War were fired in Lexington, Massachusetts. The British reacted by seizing control of all coastal seaports from New England to Georgia. In essence, sea trade by, or with, the rebellious American colonies was about to be cut off. To ensure compliance, the British enlisted some 200 loyalists living in New York City and many on Long Island to protect the East Coast from Maine to the West Indies. The British Navy and its adjunct privateer crew started to raid important colonial seaports and shut down all incoming and outgoing mercantile traffic.

Privateering had a long history since the 1400s and was recognized as a form of maritime warfare. Private ships and captains were recruited, commissioned, and regulated by sovereign governments in times of war to prey on an enemy's seaboard commerce. Owners and captains of these private ships had to post a security bond to ensure that the laws and trades were followed in good conduct. Philadelphia merchants, many of them ship owners, saw the handwriting on the wall. They knew it was only a matter of time before the British took control of the Delaware River, and closed it to trade. On September 10, 1775, 52 vessels loaded with commodity export cargo sailed from Philadelphia; by sundown only two ships remained.

At the start of armed hostilities with England, it became clear to the Patriots that they needed military supplies. In the city of Philadelphia, munitions and clothing were in short supply. Civic committees were appointed to go door-to-door and collect all lead gutters clock way and other metals that were to be melted down and turned into musket and cannonballs. Residents were required to take an inventory of shoes, clothing, and blankets in the household and donate excess items to the Continental Army.

Geographically, Philadelphia was important because it would act as a land-to-sea link the length of the Delaware River basin. It was 100 miles upriver from the Atlantic Ocean. The largest seaport in North America, Philadelphia was one of the largest freshwater ports in the world. For the first few months after hostilities broke out with England, the Continental Congress was reluctant to form a Navy, or authorize privateering, since it would be considered an overt act of rebellion. This quickly changed when the British Parliament passed the Prohibitory Act forbidding all trade and commerce



with the rebellious colonies. That act spurred Congress to pass legislation permitting privateering and issue a set of General Instructions to regulate privateers. This act required them to bring all captured cargo prizes into Court established in major ports of each colony.

An ideal privateer man was a mixture of gall, guts, bravery, and good seamanship, along with a fair amount of luck and the ability to bluff. The lure of prize money motivated men to become crewmembers. Capturing a fine ship with valuable cargo meant big money to a privateer owner, as well as the captain and crew. One of the most significant early supporters of privateering was John Adams. George Washington owned at least one privateer and may have invested in others. It is also noted that Thomas Paine, author of "Common Sense" had stock and privateers as well.

Congress finally decided to permit states to form their own Navy. The Pennsylvania Navy, after Massachusetts,



An East Prospect of the City of Philadelphia; taken by George Heap from the Jersey shore, under the direction of Nicholas Scull surveyor general of the Province of Pennsylvania / engrav'd by T. Jefferys. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

was the second-largest state navy in numbered vessels. Merchant ships were purchased and converted. Galleys and frigates were built to defend the Delaware and to keep British ships from coming up to Philadelphia. The individual states' navies, however, were short-lived, causing Congress to form the Continental Navy. But even this effort initially proved to be too small to seriously disrupt the supply side of the British army.

Privateers motivated as much by profit as patriotism made a significant contribution to the American Revolutionary War effort. The Continental Navy was too small to seriously disrupt the supplies of arriving British ships. So Congress authorized letters of Marque and Appraisal to some armed privateers, and on a per-voyage basis to others.

Many other privateers, thinking of themselves

as independent, continued to operate without authorization. Collectively these privateers captured or destroyed hundreds of British ships. They clearly disrupted England's economy and its army supply lines an ocean away.

While the Continental Army was encamped at Valley Forge, American navy ships, and especially privateers, searched near and distant waters of the Atlantic and West Indies, capturing great numbers of British war and merchant ships. During this time, American privateers captured eleven thousand prisoners, which was about equal to the number taken on land. There was one major difference. The land prisoners, mostly Hessians, were foreign merchants who could be replaced as long as reserves lasted. The men captured at sea were British, and absolutely necessary to England's existence as a



"Preparation for War to defend Commerce," drawn and engraved by W. Birch & Son (1799).

great naval power.

American privateers devastated British shipping even before the war. Insurance on a voyage was around 2 to 3% of the cargo value. During the war, even for voyages provided with armed escorts, insurance rose as much as 15%. This made British merchants quite furious. They had sufficient reason to demand that Parliament put an end to these armed hostilities. By the end of the war, British seagoing commerce was never free from the threat of American privateers. In retrospect, Cornwallis's surrender at Yorktown may have been a blessing in disguise for England's 18th-century economy and its many manufacturers and merchants.

Here are some interesting vignettes about seafaring Philadelphia patriots, many of whom are buried in Old Pine's churchyard:

John Thompson

Born 1766, Died 1840
(Age 74)

The first voyage ever accomplished by a vessel between Lake Erie and Philadelphia was made by the schooner *Whitefish* under command of John Thompson and David Lummis. The vessel was eighteen feet keel, twenty-three feet from stem to stern, and six feet beam, with a deck.

On Sept. 22, 1795, the route commenced from Presque Isle (now Erie City), by way of Buffalo harbor; thence by the Niagara River to the mouth of the Chippewa; thence by wagon on which the schooner was placed, by land to Queenstown, where the boat was launched; thence down the Niagara and along Lake Ontario to Great Sodus and Oswego; thence by the Oswego River

to the Falls; around the Falls by land carriage one mile; thence by water to the confluence of the Onondaga and Oneida Rivers; up the latter through Oneida Lake and Wood's Creek to a portage of one mile between the latter and the Mohawk River, over the same by land carriage; thence down the Mohawk to the Little Falls to the same; thence by portage one mile, and down the Mohawk again to Schenectady; then by land carriage to Albany where the schooner was for the last time launched thence by the Hudson River, the Narrows along the Jersey coast to Cape May and up the Delaware River, arriving in Philadelphia on Nov. 10th.

The *Whitefish*, after this voyage, was taken to Peale's Museum where, for many years, it remained in the State House Yard until it fell to pieces.

John Thompson, co-commander of the sloop *Whitefish*, died in 1840 and was buried at Old Pine Church.

Captain Thomas Bell

Born 1727, Died 1803
(Age 76)

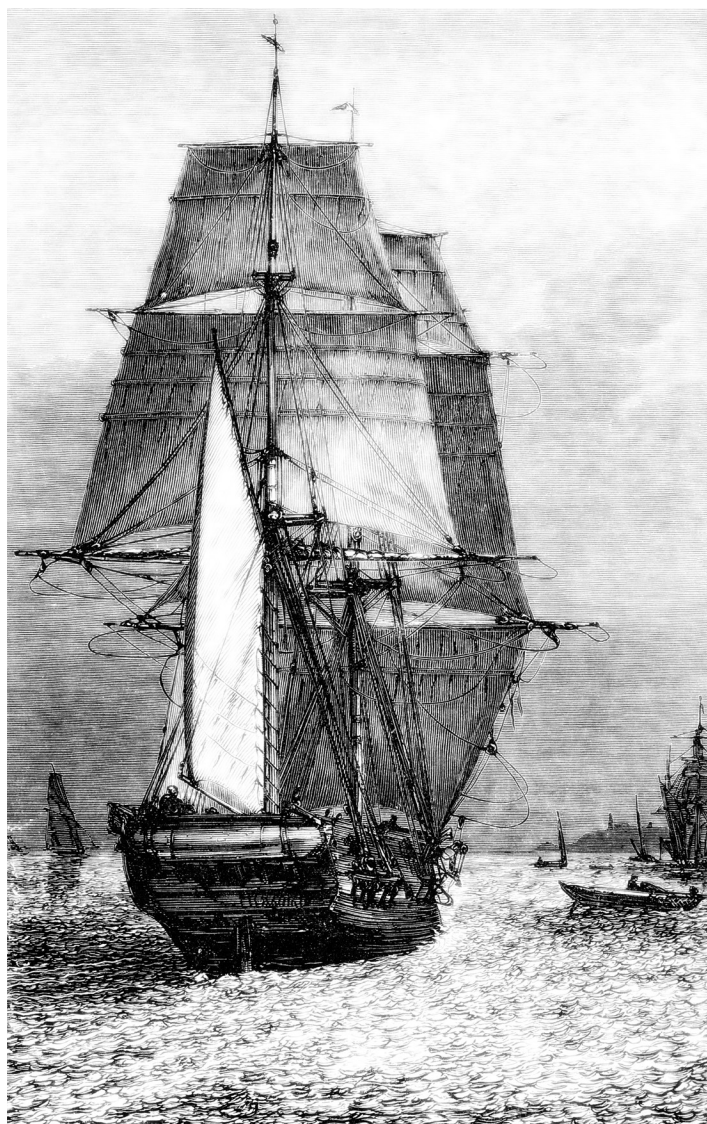
During the Revolution, Captain Bell commanded a number of armed vessels. He was captured by the British and escaped three times. Captured the first time aboard his ship *Speedwell*. He was imprisoned on the *Whitby*, a British ship docked in Brooklyn. Somehow he got permission to go ashore, whereupon he disappeared. A day or two later he turned up in Philadelphia, where he gave the Executive Committee of Congress a thorough report on the number and disposition of enemy forces in New York.

In Feb. 1777 Bell, operating as an independent privateer, was taking on investors. By August the deal fell apart. Reason The French go-betweens hired to procure the warship *Tartar* apparently fleeced the investors.

The American Commissioners in France gave Bell a continental commission in 1777. However, it was never certified by Congress.

The British took Captain Bell prisoner in 1781, when he commanded the *Luzerne*, and again in 1782 when they boarded the *Rennet*.

Following the Revolution, Bell was captain of the *United States*, a tall ship, in competition with the *Empress of China* to be the first ship to travel round trip to China and back. Bell's ship was the first to arrive in India flying the American flag, inaugurating trade between Britain's colonial "Jewel in the Crown" and its former colony, the newly independent United States.



Captain William Edger

Born 1753, Died 1794
(Age 41)

Stephan Girard enlisted Captain William Edger, a man familiar with the West Indies, to command his new ship *Polly*. Rather than a "per-voyage" commission, Girard offered Edger a straight salary of £7.10s a month. Previously, captains of trading ships held discretionary power over destinations among the islands in search of suitable markets and held latitude in prices to sell and buy cargo. Girard, an astute businessman, stationed his brother Jean as an agent on the islands. Arriving cargo was immediately offloaded and sold. Waiting cargo already purchased promptly loaded. Port time was greatly reduced.

The *Polly* held double the tonnage of older ships but, because of its design, sailed at a comparable speed. Girard recouped costs to build the *Polly* after two trips from Philadelphia to the West Indies.



A depiction of the continental marines supporting George Washington's army during the American Revolution by V. Zveg (1973).

After making eleven voyages, Captain Edger retired from non-stop travel and Girard's employ.

James McClure

Born 1750, Died 1812 or 1813
(Age 63 or 62)

Born in Ireland, McClure came to Philadelphia at an early age. At 26, on June 25, 1776, McClure was commissioned a Second Lt. of Marines in the Company of Andrew Porter and was assigned to the frigate *Effingham*, then being built at a shipyard in Southwark. Two months later he was transferred to the *Randolph*, a ship under construction in Kensington. On January 2, 1777 McClure's company of Marines was attached to Washington's main Army and fought at Assunpink (Trenton) en route to the Battle of Princeton on Jan. 3from there, winter camp was established at Morristown, NJ. At Morristown, Washington was overwhelmed with manpower problems as enlistments began to expire for artillery men. To the rescue, three companies of Marines took over those duties. In March, Captain Porter and Lt. McClure, hoping to be

promoted, resigned from the Marines and took new commissions by joining Col. John Lamb's Continental Artillery Regiment....Porter as a Captain; McClure as a Captain in Lt. Lamb's unit, made up mostly of men from New York and New England, was joined by two companies from the city and county of Philadelphia and sent to New England. In June 1780, McClure, along with other artillery officers, petitioned to be transferred to the Pennsylvania Line. Reasonsinadequate pay and rations. Seven months later, after the Pennsylvania Line was reformed, McClure became part of Capt. Proctor's 4th Continental Artillery Regiment stationed at West Point. On April 19, 1781 Porter was promoted to Major of this Regiment. McClure was promoted to Captain taking Porter's place as a Company Commander. With the reorganizing of the Pennsylvania Line in January 1783, McClure retired from the service ending seven years as an officer in the Revolutionary War.

McClure returned to Philadelphia. He signed the "Parchment Roll" of the Society of the Cincinnati of Philadelphia in the fall of 1783. Back in Philadelphia, McClure established himself as a baker on Water Street in Southwark. He became a member of the 3rd

Presbyterian Church on Pine Street.... by then already called the “Church of the Patriots,” a moniker attributed to John Adams.

On Dec. 26, 1786 Rev. George Duffield married James McClure, age 36 and Ann Sloan. The marriage produced two daughters; Ann born in 1806; and Alice in 1809. In 1793 McClure was elected a Trustee of the Mutual Assurance Company. On July 4, 1894 he was elected a member of the Standby Committee of the Society of the Cincinnati of Pennsylvania. The year of McClure’s death is undeterminedbut it had to occur before March 23, 1814 when the Society of the Cincinnati of Pennsylvania began paying support to “Miss Ann McClure” daughter of the late Captain McClure. The relief continued until she was 14 years old in 1820. One could safely conclude that Captain James McClure is buried at Old Pine knowing his pew number, 136 in January 1814, is held by Mrs. McClure, widow.

John Strangeways Hutton

Born 1684, Died 1792
(Age 108)

No, he didn’t sign the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. He didn’t ring the Liberty Bell. He wasn’t martyred in the Revolution. He wasn’t the first or the oldest person to be buried here. Yet, in the last year of his life, his 109th year, “he was deemed so rare an instance of lusty old age” that he captivated the eminent painter, Charles Willson Peale. Peale painted a portrait of Mr. Hutton and displayed it in his museum in the building now known as Independence Hall.

John Hutton was born in 1684 in New York – where his father had emigrated from Scotland. In his youth, he was bound apprentice to a sea captain to learn the art of navigation, and he followed the seafaring life for thirty years.

On one occasion, while he was serving as Lieutenant of a privateer in Queen Anne’s War, his ship descended on the Spanish Main and pillaged a village. He learned a life-long lesson in temperance from that venture. The men gave themselves up to revelry in the village, and returning to their boats drunk, were intercepted. Only John and one other man escaped with their lives. They were taken prisoner and held in long confinement.

John knew the pirate Teach, called Blackbeard, and met him in Barbados shortly before Blackbeard was killed in Carolina.

While at sea, John became skilled as a silversmith



Portrait of John Strangeways Hutton by Charles Willson Peale (c. 1792).

through the friendship of a shipmate. When he eventually settled in Philadelphia, he established himself in the trade and was esteemed as one of the best in the city at hollow work. His career as a silversmith was long, and he was still able to turn out a silver tumbler at the age of 94.

John was fond of hunting and fishing, and carried a heavy English musket on his hunting trips until he was 80 years old. He also loved to tell tales, especially a bloody one about a scouting mission against the Indians that induced the tribe to make peace.

He was known as a quiet, temperate, hard-working, cheerful, and good-humored man. In his last year, he was still able to see, hear and walk about. He had a good appetite. In fact, he claimed to have no complaints except for the debility of old age.

When he died in 1792, he was survived by many children. He was borne to his grave in the Old Pine Street churchyard by his fellow silversmiths, directly outside the east wall of the church, a few feet from the yard door. Although the inscription of his gravestone



Illustration of the "Famous whiskey insurrection in Pennsylvania" by R. M. Devens (1882).

is now nearly gone, we know exactly where his final resting place is and will always remain.

Captain Charles Ross

Born 1772, Died 1817
(Age 45)

As a 22-year-old, Charles Ross served under Captain Dunlap to quell the Whiskey Rebellion, stirred up by angry farmers, in Western Pennsylvania. These farmers found it more profitable to ship their alcohol, rather than grain, because of a poor transportation network. Federal tax law, at the time, permitted government agents to enter homes and collect whiskey taxes.

In 1794, a mob of 600 armed men faced off with a division of the U.S. Army at Bower Hill, Pa. and burned the home of George Washington's Inspector of Revenue.

President Washington sent troops to stop the rebellion. The "Whiskey Rebellion" was an early testing ground on the use of federal power to enforce a federal law within a state.

Charles Ross' father, John Ross, a merchant of high standing, was also a ship owner trading in India goods. Like his father, Charles became an eminent merchant in the East India trade. He made six voyages to China as supercargo and part owner of the *Caledonia*.

He died in Oct. 1817 from a disease contracted on shipboard attributable to impure water.

His impressive monument of white marble – surmounted by a bronze trophy of arms modeled and cast in Philadelphia – was an example of early bronze casting in the city. Today, the bronze components atop the monument are missing, as is the wrought iron fence enclosure ... victims to graveyard vandalism in the 1960's.

Captain John Ross

Born 1729, Died 1800
(Age 71)

John Ross was born 1729 in Tain, Ross-shire, Scotland, and died in 1800 at age 71 in Philadelphia. He came to Philadelphia at age 36 and immediately established a successful mercantile business. John married Clementina Cruickshank on Dec. 8, 1768 at the First Presbyterian Church. At the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, Ross sided with the patriots and soon became an emissary for his adopted country. He was a trusted friend of Robert Morris. By 1777 he was a maritime agent in Nantes, France for the firm of Willing & Morris, purchasing military supplies for the Continental Army. At one point, Ross advanced £20,000 of his own money when Congress had a financial shortfall.

Ross made several trips to Paris, always interfacing with Benjamin Franklin and Silas Dean. By war's end in 1783, he was well established in the import/export business. In 1789, having considerable wealth, he built an impressive brick mansion facing Headhouse Market at the southeast corner of 2nd and Pine Streets. The house is still standing today. John and Clementina Ross lavishly entertained the "who's who" of the day including: George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton and the Marquis de Lafayette. Ross's cook was always discreetly tipped with silver coins as guests departed. She saved her money.

A reversal of Ross's fortune left him in poverty at death. Reason: he trusted in paper money printed by Congress which proved to be worth less than the paper it was printed on.

In Memory of Ronn Shaffer



Ronn Shaffer, longtime historian, tour guide and friend of Old Pine, who died in 2019.

This second publication of *Heritage Magazine* is dedicated to the memory of Ronn Shaffer. Since 2001, Ronn and his loving wife, Ellen, conducted tireless research into the more than 4,000 lives of the residents of our graveyard. Ronn once jokingly referred to himself as “a Digger O’Dell,” saying, “I dig into history about dead people.”

At a moment’s notice, Ronn was ready to provide a tour of the graveyard, enchanting the listeners with his wit and sense of humor that he would weave into historical facts. Ronn responded to countless requests from descendants for information on their ancestors. His wife and research partner, Ellen says, “He loved the graveyard and was so pleased with the Duffield tree sculpture.”

In a video posted on the Old Pine Conservancy website, Ronn voiced this concern: “My fear about the graveyard is that scholarship will cease when I’m gone. And time for me is running out. I’m hoping there is someone or someones who will pick up the cudgel and become addicted like I have become addicted and continue.”

Ronn passed away on March 28, 2019. Old Pine Conservancy is committed to continuing his work. Ongoing research into the lives of those buried in our graveyard is yielding a great deal of information. Tours of the graveyard continue, thanks to the work of board members and volunteer-docents. Scanning and securing Ronn’s extensive research files has been aided by the work of university student interns who have a passion for history and research. Their stipends are fully paid for by the Conservancy.

To continue this work and keep Ronn Shaffer’s legacy alive, we need your help and support. **There are no paid staff members at the Old Pine Conservancy.** Every dollar donated goes directly to our mission of preserving the graveyard, funding the student interns, and disseminating information via our website, social media and direct mail.

We hope this publication demonstrates the value of our research and gives you the impetus to make a donation. Please visit our website (www.oldpineconservancy.org) to find out how you can support our efforts.

Sincerely,
Old Pine Conservancy



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Who We Are

Old Pine Conservancy is a 501(c)(3) non-profit charitable organization registered in Pennsylvania. We actively seek funding from foundations and government resources – as well as from individuals and private historical organizations – as part of our long- and short-term planning.

There are no paid staff members at Old Pine Conservancy. Every dollar donated goes directly to our mission of preserving the graveyard, funding the student interns, and disseminating information via our website, social media and direct mail.

Our Mission and Goals

The Board of Trustees of the Old Pine Conservancy invites you to participate with us in our journey into the past – to help us understand our present and reshape our future.



We support the preservation of the historic Old Pine Street Church graveyard, a nationally recognized site, that contains the graves of 285 veterans of the American Revolution.



We conduct research into the lives of those buried here and publish biographical sketches we make available to the community on our website.



We conduct tours and invite our audience to not only interpret the significance of this site, but also share their own experience.



We develop educational programs that engage all citizens in exploring and understanding our collective past and its impact on us today.



We conduct lectures and programs that promote our educational program and explore our past.

About this Publication

Heritage Magazine, Vol. 1, No. 2, is published quarterly by Old Pine Conservancy, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization (Federal ID# 23-6269064). *All contributions are tax-deductible to the extent allowed by law.*

Correction to *Heritage Magazine*, Vol. 1, No 1: Archibald, John, and James Steele were Lydia Bailey's uncles, not brothers.