

Commodore Jacob Jones' Gallant Fight

by Terry A. Bryan

The 1812 War with Great Britain was not going well for the United States. The Canadian frontier was the scene of defeats on land in poorly planned American campaigns against tough professional soldiers. The British Navy was blockading our coasts and our commerce was halting. Even though the American theater was a lesser priority in the larger war, the British had all the advantages.

The British reputation for utter naval dominance was shaken by the bitter ship engagement on October 18, 1812 wherein an American warship completely demolished a larger British opponent. The disheartened American public was uplifted by the news. The British military establishment was chastened. The War of 1812 went on for two more years, but this one short battle stiffened the resolve of the underdogs. The United States Navy achieved new respect internationally.

The *Wasp* under Master Commandant Jacob Jones (1768-1850), was a Ship-Sloop of War. This class of ship had a single gun deck and three masts.



Thomas Sully was commissioned to paint Jones' portrait for the Delaware Legislature in 1814.

She carried 18 guns, two long-range and sixteen guns for close broadsides. Under wartime conditions Jones sailed out of the Delaware Bay in search of British ships. Jones was familiar with the waters. He grew up in Delaware and served in fleets based in Philadelphia. The sheltered fleet anchorage was off the little port town of Lewes, Delaware where Jones had spent several years as a child.

Jones' father was a physician and farmer in the settlement of Duck Creek, now Smyrna, Delaware. By the time he was six he was in the care of his step-mother. Her family was in Lewes, and it is thought that young Jones witnessed Revolutionary War fleets and knew sailors from the anchored warships. It is possible that this early contact influenced the direction of his life. His education took a different course when he became a physician in the family tradition.

Jones married Anna Sykes, the daughter of a prominent family, and she died while Jones was Clerk

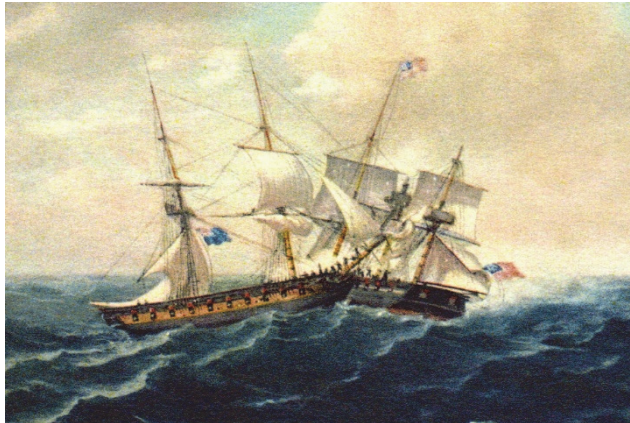
of the Supreme Court of Delaware. [Anna's father, James Sykes (II), signed Delaware Colonial Notes. He was a patriot, taking over the signing after a Tory absconded with the financial records. Anna's brother, Dr. James Sykes, became Governor of Delaware.] Jacob Jones joined the Navy in 1799 as an unusually old midshipman. Whether in grief or dissatisfied with medicine, or from childhood memory, the decision is unexplained.

Only two years passed until Jones was a 2nd Lieutenant. Naval war with Tripoli resulted in two years' imprisonment with William Bainbridge and James Biddle after being captured from the frigate *Philadelphia*. He served for five years in various posts until promotion to Master Commandant and assignment to the *Wasp* just as Madison was declaring war on Britain. His maturity and education clearly helped his advance in the Navy. *Wasp's* first war cruise started in October, 1812. About a week out of port he captured a small British warship. His next encounter off the Delaware Bay was with a Caribbean convoy headed for Canada. Storms had damaged and separated the convoy, but the escort was catching up. Jones and the *Wasp* challenged the slightly larger *Frolic*, a Brig-Sloop of War, the most common British warship type.

Naval ranks and ship designations are confusing. Lieutenants could command smaller warships, and they were "Captain" in that capacity. Master Commandant was a rank that implied suitability for advancement. Commodore was an honorific, not an official rank. Sloop of War usually described a single gun deck warship, smaller than a frigate. Categories were based on number of guns, rather than displacement or rigging. While a civilian sloop has one mast with fore-and-aft rigging, a Sloop of War had two (Brig-Sloop) or three masts (Ship-Sloop) usually square-rigged. The Americans favored three masts, more stable, maneuverable, but needing more sailors aboard. The British mostly built faster, slimmer two-mast ships, because they were always in need of crew; their Navy was huge. Sorting out the action in the many paintings of this battle depends on the knowledge that the American ship had three masts and the British had two.

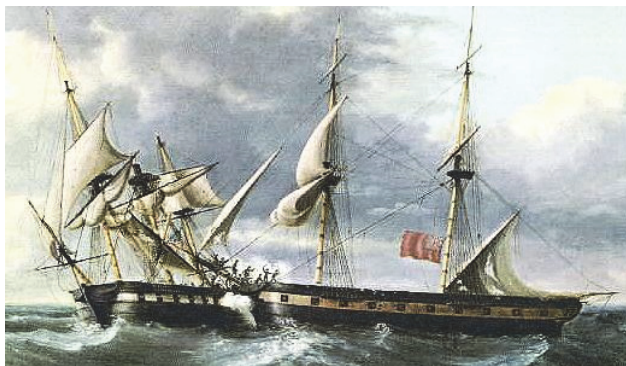
The battle between the *Wasp* and the *Frolic* was described in detail by both Captains; the court martial testimony is available on Google Books

website. There was not a great deal of time spent in pursuit and maneuver. As the *Wasp* came up close, the *Frolic* displayed Spanish flags, a common strategy. The *Frolic* raised the British colors as it fired. Jones' aimed more for deck-level damage and the *Frolic* tried to disable upper rigging. Both ships were severely damaged in the close-up action, but the British ship lost maneuverability. Jones' took a position that allowed bearing his guns effectively, and the wrecked *Frolic* drifted into *Wasp* and the ships became entangled. The bowsprit of the *Frolic* crossed over the



Thomas Birch painted a number of versions of the battle scene, with variable accuracy.

deck of the *Wasp* right above Jones' head. Excited Americans began boarding by running down the crossed spars, and Jones had to stop firing. Both decks



This Birch painting shows Jones' crew boarding the *Frolic* over the entangled spars.

were littered with bodies, blood and broken masts. The *Frolic* did not capitulate by lowering its flag, because there was nobody left to do so. *Wasp* crew were unopposed on the British deck. Three or four men, all injured were still in place, including the British Captain and a Lieutenant. Casualties were 63 British versus 16 Americans, with almost 50% casualties from the *Frolic*, including every British officer. An American ship had soundly defeated a stronger enemy from the largest navy in the world.

[*Syngraphic trivia*: The leader of the boarding party was Lt. James Biddle. He had a distinguished

naval career. His brother, Nicholas Biddle was the President of the (2nd) Bank of the United States. The feud with President Jackson defined an era of economic chaos in the country, which influenced banks, currency and scrip. Thomas Macdonough, naval hero at the end of the War of 1812, had captained the *Wasp* during peacetime, and he also had Obsolete Currency connections. Numismatists learn a lot of history and see cross-connections among the famous and influential in the developing country.]

Within two hours Jones' crew was frantically clearing wreckage to separate the two ships when the large escort frigate from the convoy approached. The *Wasp* could not turn guns toward the enemy, and Jones was in the process of aiming *Frolic* cannon when he realized the futility of continuing to fight. Jones' possession of the enemy lasted only two hours. His gracious behavior toward the British resulted in his crew being treated civilly. Jones, Biddle and the other officers were held in Bermuda and exchanged with honor. Later the British evaluation of the action concluded that both ships fought to virtual wrecks, and that "no men in any navy ever showed more courage (*Frolic*)", and that "coolness and skill of the Americans, and the great superiority of judgment and accuracy" gave them the battle.

Jones' victory heartened the public in a war that was going poorly. Even the British were impressed. Anti-war sentiment in England was strong, and word of the battle spread among that faction. British naval histories detailed the battle, and illustrations were published there. The United States Navy gained in stature. The British porcelain industry produced tableware depicting *Wasp* and *Frolic*.



The British pottery industry capitalized on the heroic battle; products were not limited to British victories

Philadelphia artist Thomas Birch (1779-1851) painted several versions of the battle scene, reproduced widely. The episode stimulated the popular imagination for many years. In the 1970s *American Heritage* periodical sponsored a Bicentennial Jigsaw Puzzle of the battle.

After the early death of Anna, Jones married twice more. Three of his five children lived to adulthood. His naval career extended until his death

in 1850. He held important posts at sea and on land, and he obtained professional and monetary honors as a result of his 1812 victory. Three Navy ships and an island have been named for him.

Along with cash, Jones was awarded a Congressional Gold Medal produced by the Mint. Artwork was by Spencer, dies by Moritz Furst; the 1820 medal has a profile of Jones from a portrait by Rembrandt Peale. Mottoes are "virtue in difficult circumstances" and "seized quick victory against a larger enemy". The reverse shows the damaged ships in close combat.



The Congressional Jacob Jones medal was struck by the Mint with a distinguished profile on the obverse and a depiction of the *Wasp & Frolic* joined in fierce battle on the reverse.

Wilmington, Delaware is the largest city in the state. Its history goes back to the Swedish settlement in 1638. British occupation during the Revolution was still in memory during the War of 1812. In the Federal Period, Wilmington was a town incorporated as a "borough" with a council composed of burgesses. Rapid growth later permitted a city title. By 1812 there were three banks and many mill operations feeding the busy Delaware River port.

During the suspension of specie payments caused by the War, the town issued scrip. William Kneass of Philadelphia prepared copper plates for 7 denominations. Vignettes included a blacksmith, a primitive steamboat, a loom, a ram and a beehive. Dates from late 1814 to August, 1815 are written in or



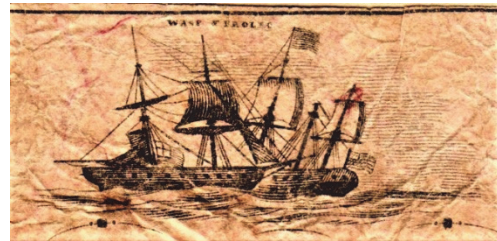
Emergency scrip of Wilmington, Delaware was produced in 1814-15, engraved by William Kneass, signed by the town treasurer and the Chairman of the Burgesses.

printed. Clearly the vignettes symbolized local business, pride, and industriousness. The sheep

represents the woolen textile industry, fueled by E. I. Du Pont's import of merino ram, Don Pedro. A painting of this famous sheep may have been the inspiration of this vignette. Presumably, few money vignettes show an animal with a known name. This improvement in the breed was widely publicized, and even Thomas Jefferson received wool samples from the resulting strain of American lambs.



Most famous sheep of his era. E. I. Du Pont's Merino ram Don Pedro?



The Wilmington 12 1/2 Cent scrip shows a tiny vignette of the *Wasp & Frolic* battle.

The Wilmington twelve-and-a-half-cent scrip note displays a vignette of the *Wasp* and the *Frolic* battle. Kneass (1781-1840) was later Chief Engraver of the Mint after success with his private business. Some of the tiny images on the Wilmington scrip appear to be unique usages. Choosing to portray the event on money speaks of the popular pride in the naval victory and the Delaware naval hero, Jacob Jones.

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