

THE WARSHIP & THE WATERMILL THE STORY OF USS CHESAPEAKE

Ref. 12 13 14



USS Chesapeake was built by The United States of America, (15 states at that time), in 1799.

In June 1812, The United States of America, (15 states at that time), did declared war on Great Britain for commercial reasons, thinking that they had a good chance of success because Britain was busy fighting Napoleon.

The USA had built a fleet of six “super frigates”, one of which was *USS Chesapeake*. They were larger and better armed than many of their British counterparts. The Royal Navy was naturally keen to neutralise these ships.

One of the British commanders engaged with the Americans was the well experienced Captain Sir Phillip Bowes Vere Broke commanding the 38 gun frigate, *HMS Shannon*. He was a gunnery expert and had trained his crew to a high degree of gunnery efficiency. As with all Royal Navy captains of the time, he was keen to engage the enemy in a ship-to-ship action.

In the Spring of 1813, Captain James Lawrence was appointed to command the “super frigate”, *USS Chesapeake*.

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The 31 year old Lawrence had already been successful, capturing the British sloop, *HMS Peacock*, while in command of *USS Hornet*. He joined *Chesapeake* in Boston, where she was undergoing refit.

On 31st May 1813, Broke had a squadron of ships off Boston harbour where he observed *USS Chesapeake* lying at anchor. For Broke, time was short because he had limited supplies of food and water aboard, so he sent a message to Lawrence inviting him out to sea for a ship-to-ship duel. Lawrence observed what he considered to be an inferior war ship lying off the coast and immediately sailed to meet *HMS Shannon* near Cape Ann.

The engagement occurred on 1st June 1813 and was the fiercest and bloodiest engagement of its kind that the Royal Navy ever undertook, even though the action lasted a mere 12 minutes. By deft manoeuvre and highly effective gunnery, Broke was able to bring *HMS Shannon* along side *USS*



Chesapeake and effect a boarding, during which both sides suffered heavy casualties.

Captain Lawrence of *USS Chesapeake* received a mortal wound during the action, and Captain Broke suffered a wound that all but cost him his life.

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The First Lieutenants of both ships were killed in the fight. Despite the shortness of the engagement, the battle resulted in more casualties than in any other single-ship action in the history of both navies. The total number of casualties on the two frigates was:

HMS Shannon complement 345
Killed in action & of wounds 34
Wounded and recovered 50

USS Chesapeake complement 395
Killed in action & of wounds 69
Wounded and recovered 77

USS Chesapeake was taken as prize by *HMS Shannon* and sailed to Halifax where she undertook repairs sufficient to enable her to be sailed to England. Here she was taken into service so that her qualities could be assessed and her construction details be deduced. She was briefly used for convoy escort duties and then relegated to harbour service as a stores ship.

In 1819 the ship was broken up and the



***Captain Sir Philip B Vere
Broke, KCB of HMS Shannon.***



***Captain James Lawrence
of USS Chesapeake***

timbers were advertised in the Hampshire Chronicle for £3670, many being bought by Mr Prior, miller of Wickham, to build a new mill. The mill was to some extent designed around the ship, the overall dimensions of the building being limited by the maximum length of the available deck beams from the frigate.

The timbers are of American white oak, rather than the English oak used by the Royal



Navy of the time. Great deck beams support each floor of the mill. Ship's timbers were also employed to frame the windows and doors. The planks that covered the ship's frames and ribs, and the ceiling planks were also employed in the building of the mill.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

A HISTORY OF WICKHAM BY BRUCE TAPPENDEN

1812: THE WAR THAT FORGED A NATION BY WALTER R BOWMAN

THE WAR OF 1812 - MAHON

THE NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, GREENWICH

NEW YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

So much of the old ship's timber is present that the shape and dimensions of those which are not can be deduced from the information provided by those that are present. This makes Chesapeake Mill an important place for the study of warship construction of that age, the timbers being preserved by their position inside a warm, dry building.

At the time it was built, Prior's mill was "state of the art". It had two water wheels driving five mill stones and employed around eight men at its peak of production. It remained in service for some 150 years, the water wheels being replaced by water turbines in the twentieth century. The mill finally ceased milling in 1986.

For opening times, click [HERE](#).

For a detailed description of the battle between the two ships, click [HERE](#)

To read Captain Broke's letter to Captain Lawrence, click [HERE](#)

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