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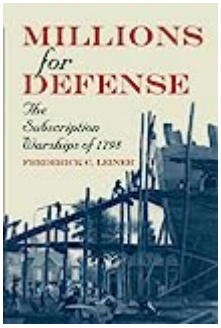

Frederick C. Leiner. *Millions for Defense: The Subscription Warships of 1798.* Annapolis, Md: Naval Institute Press, 1999. viii + 262 pp. $36.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55750-508-8.

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Published on H-SHEAR (November, 2000)

The Subscription Warships of 1798

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As the summer of 1798 approached, the United States seemed on the verge of open war with France. "Egged on" by the exposure of the XYZ Affair and "by galling seizures of merchant ships," writes Frederick C. Leiner, the citizens of Newburyport, Massachusetts, (or at least the merchants and shipmasters among them) "met to discuss what action they could take to help the country." On May 23, 1798 they "opened a subscription to fund a 20-gun warship for the United States Navy" (p. 1). Up and down the coast, the Newburyport plan created "a navy frenzy in which ten port towns pledged subscriptions for, and actually began to build warships" (p. 1). This book, says Mr. Leiner, is about "the idea of subscribing for warships, the men who did so, and the ships they built" (p. 1). Leiner succeeds rather well in describing the men and the ships. He writes cogently and weaves his story with care and skill. He is, however, less successful in speaking to the motives and events that defined the subscription process.

Frederick C. Leiner is a partner in a Baltimore law firm who has published a dozen articles on maritime and legal history. This is his first book. In it, individual chapters describe the activity at each of the eight port cities where subscription ships were built: Newburyport, Massachusetts (*Merrimack*, twenty guns, Moses Brown, captain); Philadelphia (*Philadelphia*, 44, Stephen Decatur); Baltimore (*Maryland*, eighteen, John Rogers, and *Patapsco*, eighteen, Henry Geddes); Boston (*Boston*, 24, George Little); Norfolk, Virginia (*Richmond*, sixteen, Samuel Barron); New York (*New York*, 36, Richard V. Morris); Salem, Massachusetts (*Essex*, 32, Edward Preble); and Charleston (*John Adams*, twenty, George Cross).

Congress reacted immediately. A bill to purchase these ships from the subscribers with six percent certificates was introduced in the Senate, passed by both houses, and signed into law by the end of June – before even the first keel was laid. In addition to the eight subscription ships, one existing ship (*George Washington*, 24, Patrick Fletcher) was sold to the navy by John Brown of Providence in exchange for the same six percent certificates. (Earlier legislation had already provided for the purchase of up to twelve ships, but the *George Washington* was purchased with subscription ship certificates.)

The first ships delivered were the *Merrimack* (from Newburyport) in October 1798 and the *Philadelphia* a month later. Most of the rest were finished in 1799, but one, the *New York*, was not readied until April 1800. For the most part these ships hunted French privateers and convoyed American merchant ships along the Atlantic coast and into the Caribbean. By the end of 1799, writes Leiner, "The United States Navy commanded the Atlantic coast, and the Caribbean, if not an American 'lake,' was no longer the privateer haven of the summer of 1798" (160).

Leiner's chapters provide brief biographical sketches of the men who led the various subscription drives and built the ships and the captains selected to sail them. They also provide thumbnail sketches of the operational activities of these ships. Although half of the subscription ships had been sold out of the navy by the end of 1800, a few saw service in the war with Tripoli before being cast aside, and a couple remained in active service much longer. The *Philadelphia* was sent to the Mediterranean in 1801 and again in 1803. On the last voyage the ship was run onto some submerged rocks just off Tripoli, where it was captured by Tripolitan gunboats. (The next year Stephen Decatur, Jr. led a picked force of volunteers into Tripoli harbor and boarded and burned the *Philadelphia*.) The *New York*, in 1803, after a tour in the Mediterranean, was anchored off the Washington Navy Yard and simply allowed to deteriorate. In 1812 it was towed to Baltimore, but was so rotted that it never again saw service. The *Boston* also saw duty in the Mediterranean, but by 1806 was so rotted that it too was simply tied up at the Washington Navy Yard and forgotten. It was burned in place in 1814 as the British approached Washington.

The *Essex* was one of those that continued in service. In 1800 she was sent into the Indian Ocean to protect American shipping there –demonstrating that (when the United States was not contesting with the British or the French, at least) "American naval power could reach around the world" (175). As if to reconfirm this, the *Essex* in 1812 was the first U.S. Navy ship to sail around Cape Horn and into the Pacific. The next year, however, the ship was captured by the British with heavy losses to the American crew.

Longest in service was the *John Adams*, which was constructed of Carolina live oak, low-country cedar, and Carolina pine. She battled West Indies pirates in 1816 and 1817, was deployed to the Mediterranean in the 1830s, saw action in the Mexican War in the '40s, and, during the Civil War was part of the Union's South Atlantic Blockading Squadron. The *John Adams* was decommissioned in October 1867 and sent to the breakers yard.

Although the substantive chapters do a splendid job of introducing us to the men and ships of the subscription navy, Leiner's efforts to come to grips with the broader meaning of the subscription effort are less successful. The first chapter, "On the Verge of War," briefly discusses: the new government under the Constitution; the importance of the merchant class; the agrarian nature of the young nation; the Jay Treaty; the lack of a navy; the efforts of commissioners sent by President John Adams to negotiate with the French; and the resulting XYZ affair that stirred American sentiment for war.

What is missing is any serious attention to the French attacks on American shipping that were the real root of the crisis. He notes the French response to the Jay Treaty and the decree of July 1796 –they "declared open season on America's carrying trade to Europe, the Mediterranean, and the West Indies" (p. 9), he writes – but makes no effort to examine the impact that this had on the merchants and ship owners who are so central to his story. He says nothing, moreover, about the French decrees of March 1797 and January 1798, and the even more aggressive attacks which they sponsored. "By the beginning of 1798, the merchants' entrepreneurial world faced ruin at the hands of the French privateers" (73) he notes, but makes no effort to determine the actual impact of these attacks on the merchants and ship owners. How many ships were seized by the French? Pickering claims that in 1795 alone the French captured 316 American ships.[1] How much worse was the toll in subsequent years? How much had the cost of insuring cargos increased as a result? In other words, what was the cost of these attacks for the merchants and ship owners who subscribed?

Having failed to set the subscription effort in the real-world context in which it developed, he is in his "Conclusion" unable to decipher the motive that prompted it. "Why the merchants of the various cities acted so vigorously to promote and subscribe to subscription ships is not readily apparent," Leiner asserts (177). Still, he does identify, in passing, a credible and obvious explanation. "The merchants had great incentive to see that warships were built," he writes. "Even with insurance, captures were so commonplace and the cost of insurance so high that some vessels were just left in port.... Their entire livelihood was dependent on the revival of trade" (pp. 178-79). The six percent certificates may not have been sufficient incentive to cause them to invest in the navy, but revival of trade was. But for Leiner the profit motive was not enough – possibly because he never seems to

understand that the profit the subscribers hoped to make would come from reopened trade and not from the interest off of the six percent certificates alone.

There are a few troubling factual errors. The opening paragraph has more than its share. "Ten port cities pledged subscriptions for, and actually began to build warships" we are told (pp. 1). In fact only eight port cities built ships (Richmond also provided subscriptions to the ship built at Norfolk), and only nine ships were constructed. (Baltimore built two). The tenth ship, the *George Washington*, was five years old when sold to the Navy by John Brown in 1798. In the same sentence, Leiner tells us that when the subscriptions began the country had no Secretary of the Navy. In fact, Benjamin Stoddert was appointed to that post on May 21, 1798, two days before the first meeting of the Newburyport subscribers. The Newburyport men likely did not know about Stoddert, but Leiner should have.

There are a few other small problems. The index is far from comprehensive. For example, many ships named in the text are not listed, and the rationale for listing some and ignoring others is not at all clear. Leiner includes, as an appendix, the extant lists of subscribers, including those from Boston, Philadelphia, Norfolk (and Richmond), and Salem. It would have also been useful to have included in the appendix the text of the Act of June 30, 1798 – *An Act supplementary to the act intituled [sic] "An Act to provide an additional Armament for the further protection of the trade of the United States, and for other purposes"*.

Naval historians and other historians of the early republic will learn a great deal about the little-know subscription ship episode of the Quasi-War era. The narrative account of subscription efforts is engaging and readable. Readers, however, will have to supply their own conclusions about cause and effect.

Note

[1]. Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi-War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France 1797-1801* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 9.

Citation: Theodore J. Crackel. Review of Leiner, Frederick C., *Millions for Defense: The Subscription Warships of 1798*. H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. November, 2000.

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