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Maine Privateers during the Revolutionary War

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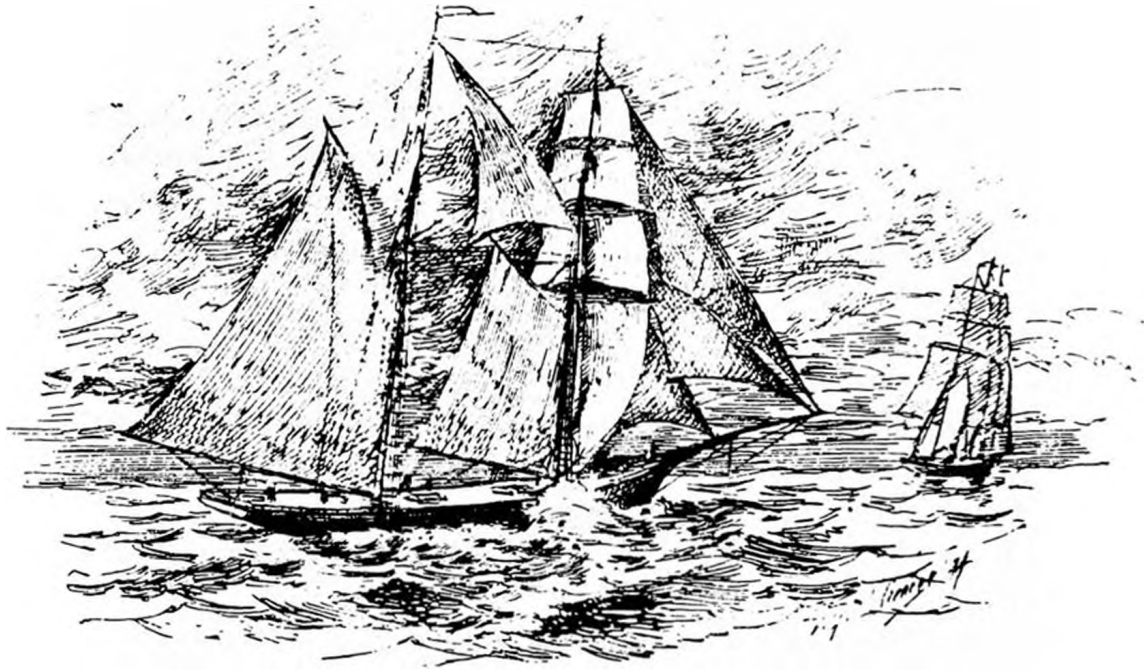
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MAINE PRIVATEERS DURING THE REVOLUTIONARY WAR

Historians have neglected the history of naval exploits during the American Revolution. Unimpeded by the American privateer vessels and the Continental and state navies, Britain would have achieved a strangle-hold on the colonies and the Americans would not have obtained their independence. There are no records in the Maine State Archives at Augusta regarding the privateersmen of the American Revolution; the researcher must examine those at the Massachusetts Archives at Columbia Point, Boston. This author, after researching several books, has been able to locate fifty-two privateer vessels and/or naval officers from Maine. The following list is offered as a possible starting point for more intensive research on Maine privateers.

The Massachusetts Navy began in Machias, Maine, in 1775. (At this time Maine was a part of Massachusetts.) On June 2, 1775, the Boston sloops UNITY and POLLY, escorted by the British 4-gun schooner MARGARETTA, entered Machias Harbor. The MARGARETTA was under the command of 3d Lieutenant James Moore (or Moor) of the Royal Navy. The sloops, commanded by Captain Ichabod Jones, were to take on a cargo of lumber destined for use by the British forces. On June 11, 1775, Benjamin Foster, owner of a sawmill on the East River (now East Machias), organized a group of men determined to capture Captain Jones and his sloops. Jeremiah O'Brien and his five brothers, Gideon, Joseph, Dennis, John, and William, decided to join Foster in his plan.

After spotting a number of armed men, Moore fled to the MARGARETTA and moved down the Machias River. The rebels captured Ichabod Jones and sent him to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress for imprisonment. Jeremiah O'Brien, aided by some forty men armed with axes, pitchforks, guns, and swords, boarded and seized the sloop UNITY. (see below)



Maine has contributed heavily to our nation's maritime tradition, yet the most exciting elements in this seafaring legacy remain obscure. In this research note, Charles Claghorn offers some building blocks to a better understanding of Maine's Revolutionary War privateers.

The following is a chronological list of vessels on which Maine naval officers served, or vessels which were privateers owned by Maine residents.

#1 The *FALMOUTH PACKET*

On June 12, 1775, Captain Benjamin Foster, on the *FALMOUTH PACKET*, with carriage guns, small arms, and 20 men, and Captain Jeremiah O'Brien, on the *UNITY*, set sail to capture the *MARGARETTA* which was a slow-moving schooner. After a battle lasting about an hour, Lieutenant Moore was struck in the chest by two cannon balls and he surrendered his vessel. Moore died the next morning. The Americans lost one man killed and six wounded. Later one of the wounded Americans died. On July 15, 1775, Foster, working with Jeremiah O'Brien, seized the British armed cutter *TATMAGUSH* in Machias Harbor (1, 2, 3).*

#2 - the *UNITY* renamed the *MACHIAS LIBERTY*

*Numbers in parentheses refer to numbered bibliography below.

As mentioned above, on June 12, 1775, Captain Jeremiah O'Brien on the UNITY and Captain Foster captured the British schooner MARGARETTA. This was the first naval engagement of the Revolution and has been called the "Lexington of the Seas."

The UNITY was properly outfitted and armed with guns. On June 26, 1775, the Massachusetts General Court commended O'Brien and his cohorts for their good conduct and courage. The UNITY was renamed the MACHIAS LIBERTY and O'Brien was given command of this sloop. O'Brien set sail on June 30, 1775, from Machias Harbor. On July 15 O'Brien, working with Captain Foster, seized the British armed schooner DILIGENT in Machias Harbor (1, 4, 5, 6, 12).

#3 - The *DILIGENT*

Under the Resolves of the Massachusetts General Court on August 21, 1775, the MACHIAS LIBERTY and the DILIGENT became the first two vessels of the Massachusetts Navy, with O'Brien placed in command. O'Brien thus became the first captain in the Massachusetts Navy.

O'Brien cruised on his two vessels and took a few prizes. On July 25, 1776, he was again commissioned to command the sloop MACHIAS LIBERTY, but it was decommissioned in the fall of 1776. Subsequently O'Brien commanded the RESOLUTION, HANNIBAL, HIBERNIA, and the TIGER.

Jeremiah O'Brien was the son of Mary (Hutchins) Cain and Morris O'Brien, a lumberman. Jeremiah was born in Kittery in 1744. During his youth and early childhood he worked in Machias in the lumber business with his father. O'Brien was married to Elizabeth Fitzpatrick, but left no known descendants. In 1811 President James Madison appointed O'Brien collector of customs at Machias. He died on September 5, 1818, while still in office. (1, 2, 4, 5, 6). A torpedo boat was named after him in 1900.

John Lambert was born in 1752 and died in 1794. He served as a soldier in the Revolution. O'Brien gave Lambert the command of the DILIGENT on February 24, 1776. This

schooner, with 5 carriage guns, 20 swivel guns, and 50 men, sailed out of Machias (1).

#4 The *HANNAH AND MOLLY*

Agreen Crabtree of Frenchman's Bay was born in 1735 and died in 1808. Early in 1776 he commanded the privateer schooner *HANNAH AND MOLLY* without a commission or license. John Allan of Cumberland, Nova Scotia, an American patriot, desired to interrupt British supplies into Nova Scotia and commissioned Crabtree and Captain Joshua Wing of Boston on the *MARISHEETE* to annoy enemy vessels. They sailed in June 1776 and at the mouth of the St. John River looted the truckhouse operated by Simonds, Hazen and White. On July 31, 1776, Crabtree was commissioned to command the 13-man *HANNAH AND MOLLY*. The owners were Crabtree, Timothy McDaniel of Scarborough, and Francis Shaw, Jr. of Gouldsborough. Crabtree captured a vessel of 4 carriage guns and 8 swivel guns, one brig, two schooners, and a sloop in the harbor of Liverpool, Nova Scotia. Later Crabtree commanded the *HARLEQUIN* (1, 2, 5, 7).

#5 - The *MARISHEETE*

In June 1776 John Allan commissioned Agreen Crabtree and Joshua Wing on the armed schooner *MARISHEETE* to interrupt British shipping in Nova Scotia. They sailed from Machias without formal commissions from the Continental Congress. On April 7, 1777, Wing was commissioned to command this schooner with 4 carriage guns, 8 swivel guns, and 12 men. On November 23, 1778, William Ray, out of Boston, was commissioned to command this schooner with 6 guns and 15 men (1, 2).

#6 - The *PUTNAM*

John Harmon of York was commissioned on August 26, 1776, to command the New Hampshire sloop *PUTNAM* with 4 carriage guns, 10 swivel guns, and 45 men. This sloop was owned by William Allen, Thomas McDonnell, Joseph Morrill, Ebenezer Norwood, and James Scannon, all of Biddeford. On one cruise Harmon captured a ship and four schooners. Later

Harmon commanded the GENERAL PUTNAM and the HAZARD (1, 5).

Joseph Bayley, Jr. of Falmouth (now Portland) was commissioned on September 27, 1776, to command the PUTNAM with 2 carriage guns, 16 swivel guns, and 45 men. At this time the owner is shown as the Town of Falmouth (1). Seth Hinckley on January 7, 1777, took command of the PTNAM with 4 guns and 30 men. The owner was Enoch Ilsley of Falmouth (1).
#7 The *RETRIEVE*

Joshua Stone of Falmouth was commissioned on August 29, 1776, to command the sloop RETRIEVE with 10 guns and 80 men. The owners were Enoch Ilsley and Benjamin Titcomb of Falmouth and the vessel was outfitted by Falmouth residents. On September 30, 1776, Stone was captured by the HMS MILFORD (1, 6).

#8 - The *RATTLESNAKE*

After Joshua Stone was exchanged by the British on April 17, 1777, he was commissioned to command the SPEEDWELL, but took the sloop RATTLESNAKE instead, with 6 guns and 25 men. The owner was Joseph Noyes & Co. of Falmouth. Later Stone commanded the FOX (1, 6).

#9 - The *REPRISAL* (brigantine)

On July 16, 1776, a state bond was issued to Paul Reed, Jr. of Boothbay to command the brigantine REPRISAL with 10 guns and 35 men. The owners were Paul Reed of Townsend, County of Lincoln, and two Boston men. Bonders included George Gains of Falmouth. Later Reed commanded the GENERAL WASHINGTON and the SPRING BIRD (1, 6).

#10 - The *RESOLUTION*

On August 13, 1777, Jeremiah O'Brien was commissioned to command the schooner RESOLUTION with 10 swivel guns and 25 men. He captured the British ship SCARBOROUGH off Cape Negro. Later he commanded the HANNIBAL, HIBERNIA and the TIGER (1, 4, 6). On April 20, 1781, John Savage of Massachusetts commanded the RESOLUTION with 4 guns and 30 men. This vessel was owned by George Stillman and others of Machias. Bonders were Stillman and James Avery of Machias (1).

#11 The *HARLEQUIN*

Agreen Crabtree was commissioned on August 22, 1777, to command the schooner *HARLEQUIN* with 10 carriage guns, 16 swivel guns, and 55 men. This vessel was owned by Crabtree, Daniel Ilsley of Falmouth, and a Boston man (1).

#12 - The *AMERICA*

Isaac Snow was born in Turo in 1714 and died at St. Georges in 1799. He resided in Harpswell when given command of the schooner *AMERICA* with 10 guns and 80 men. On April 17, 1777, he served as 1st Lieutenant on the *AMERICA*, commanded by Daniel McNeill of Boston (1, 8).

Nathaniel Purinton of Brunswick was born in 1731 and died in 1788. He served as a colonel in the army and then in 1781 as captain of the *AMERICA* with guns, small arms, and 18 men (7, 13).

#13 - The *ADVENTURE*

On January 5, 1779, John O'Brien of Machias was commissioned to command the brigantine *ADVENTURE* with 6 guns and 15 men. Later he commanded the *HIBERNIA*, *HANNIBAL*, *SALAMANDER*, and the *CYRUS* (1).

#14 - The *PROTECTOR*

Edward Preble was born in Falmouth on August 15, 1761, the son of Methitable (Bangs) Roberts, the second wife of General Jedidiah Preble, an officer in the Revolution. After his education at the Dummer Academy in Massachusetts in 1776, Preble shipped out of Newburyport on a privateer. He was appointed a midshipman in the Massachusetts Navy in 1779 and served on the frigate *PROTECTOR* with 26 guns and 200 men. This frigate was commanded by John Foster Williams of Boston. On June 8, 1780, the *PROTECTOR* fought and defeated the 32-gun British ship *ADMIRAL DUFF* when an explosion blew off the stern of the British ship.

While on a second cruise, the *PROTECTOR* took five British vessels, but in May 1781, it was taken by the British. Preble, the other officers, and crew were confined on the prison ship *JERSEY* lying in New York Harbor ridden with small-pox. After his exchange, Preble commanded the *WINTHROP* (1).

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#15 The *BLACKBIRD*

On April 2, 1779, James Norton of Bristol was commissioned to command the schooner *BLACKBIRD* with 8 swivel guns and 22 men (1).

#16 - The *NEASHQUOWOITE*

Ephriam Chase was commissioned on May 7, 1779, to command the schooner *NEASHQUOWOITE* with 10 guns and 30 men. Owner was the United States. In June 1779 James Avery of Machias reported Chase and his schooner among the ill-fated expedition against Nova Scotia. (2).

#17 The *HIBERNIA* (schooner)

John O'Brien of Machias was born in 1750. He was commissioned on May 17, 1779 to command the schooner *HIBERNIA* with 10 guns and 50 men. Fearing an attack on Machias, O'Brien sailed out of Newburyport, Massachusetts, on June 9, 1779. On June 21 he captured an English brig. But four days later he encountered the British cruiser *GENERAL PATTISON* carrying 6 and 9 pounders. After two hours of engagement, O'Brien withdrew, fearing the power of a superior force. On July 7 the *HIBERNIA* captured a British schooner, which was sent into Newburyport. On July 10 Captain O'Brien fell in with the American sloop *POLLY* with 12 carriage guns, 8 swivel guns and a crew of 100 men, commanded by Captain James Leach. Captains O'Brien and Leach captured a 13-gun ship, a brig, and a schooner laden with molasses. O'Brien next captured a brig loaded with prisoners. Later he commanded the *HANNIBAL*, *SALAMANDER* and the *CYRUS* (1).

#18 - The *BLACKFISH*

On September 7, 1779, James Dilworth of Falmouth, Casco Bay, was commissioned to command the sloop *BLACKFISH* with 4 guns and 12 men. This sloop was owned by Ebenezer Preble of Falmouth (1).

#19 - The *GENERAL PUTNAM*

John Harmon of York in 1779 commanded the *GENERAL PUTNAM* with 20 guns and 150 men. In October 1779 he captured a schooner which he sent into Saco. He took another prize vessel laden with fish and oil, a British ship from

Antigua with sugar, and other prize vessels. Later he commanded the HAZARD (1).

#20 - The *VENUS*

On April 18, 1780, Nathaniel Harmon of Berwick was commissioned to command the brigantine VENUS with 6 guns and 20 men. Later he commanded the NEPTUNE (1, 6).

#21 The *HANNIBAL*

On April 22, 1780, John O'Brien of Machias obtained a New Hampshire letter of marque and reprisal to command the ship HANNIBAL with 16 guns and 50 men. Later he commanded the SALAMANDER and the CYRUS (1).

When the British occupied Machias, Jeremiah O'Brien sailed out of Newburyport, Massachusetts, on September 8, 1780, in command of the HANNIBAL with 24 guns and 130 men. O'Brien was chased by two British frigates for 48 hours, captured, and confined on the prison ship JERSEY in New York Harbor. Later he was transferred to the Mill Prison near Plymouth, England. He escaped, crossed the English Channel to France, and found passage to America. Later he commanded the brigantine HIBERNIA and the schooner TIGER (1, 5).

#22 - The *AURORA*

Mark Fernald (or Firnaid or Furnell) of Kittery, a Lieutenant on the AURORA, was captured by the British. In July 1780 he was committed to the Mill Prison near Plymouth, England (9).

#23 The *FANCY*

On December 28, 1780, Samuel Coffin of Newburyport took command of the ship FANCY with 10 guns and 25 men out of Kittery. This vessel was owned by Jonathan Hamilton of Berwick and Robert Stevenson of Kittery (6).

#24 - The *FOX*

On January 15, 1781, Joshua Stone of Falmouth was commissioned to command the ship FOX with 8 guns and 20 men. This ship was owned by Ebenezer Preble and others of Falmouth (1, 6).

On August 22, 1782, Nathaniel Pote of Falmouth commanded the FOX with 12 guns and 30 men. The ship was then

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owned by John Fox and others of Falmouth (1, 6).

#25 - The *GENERAL WASHINGTON*

A Continental bond was issued on February 5, 1781, for Paul Reed, Jr. of Boothbay to command the sloop *GENERAL WASHINGTON* with 12 guns and 80 men (1, 6).

#26 - The *SPRING BIRD*

Paul Reed, Jr. was commissioned again on April 28, 1781, to command the schooner *SPRING BIRD* with 4 guns and 25 men. The owners were Reed and a Newburyport man (1, 6).

#27 The *WILLIAM*

Solomon Coit of Saco, commanding the schooner *WILLIAM*, captured the schooner *HALIFAX BOB* and on May 3, 1776, brought the schooner into Pepperelborough (1).

#28 - The *SACO BOB*

After Solomon Coit captured the *HALIFAX BOB* he renamed it the *SACO BOB*. It was then owned by Joseph Morrill of Saco under the terms of the letter of marque and reprisal. Coit was commissioned on May 22, 1781, to command this schooner with 3 guns and 35 men (1).

#29 - The *HIBERNIA* (brigantine)

On May 28, 1781, Jeremiah O'Brien was commissioned to command the brigantine *HIBERNIA* with 10 guns and 60 men. Later he commanded the *TIGER* (1, 6).

#30 - The *SALAMANDER*

John O'Brien was commissioned on May 28, 1781, to command the cutter *SALAMANDER* with 8 guns and 50 men (1).

#31 The *NEPTUNE*

On June 1, 1781, Nathaniel Harmon of Berwick commanded the brigantine *NEPTUNE* with 4 guns and 12 men. Later he commanded the *HAZARD* (1, 6).

#32 The *ROEBUCK*

On June 1, 1781, Philip Crandall of Falmouth took command of the *ROEBUCK* with guns, small arms, and 16 men. This vessel was owned by Joseph Barnard, Joseph McLellan, and Peter Warren, all of Falmouth. This vessel should not be

confused with His Majesty's frigate ROEBUCK, terror of the high seas (1, 6).

#33 The *REPRISAL* (galley)

On July 31, 1781, Benjamin Frizal took command of the galley REPRISAL with 4 guns and 25 men from Pownalborough (1).

#34 - The *SALLY*

George Rendall of York on August 6, 1781, took command of the SALLY with guns and 15 men. Later he commanded the BLACK PRINCE (1, 6).

#35 The *FANCY*

On August 13, 1781, Samuel Rice of Kittery commanded the ship FANCY with 8 guns and 25 men. This vessel was owned by Jonathan Hamilton of Berwick and Robert Stevenson of Kittery and previously commanded by Samuel Coffin. Later Rice commanded the RETALIATION (1, 6).

#36 - The *UNION*

Henry Butler Elwell of Falmouth on August 13, 1781, took command of the BRIGANTINE union with 10 guns and 18 men. This vessel was owned by Ebenezer Preble and others of Falmouth. Bonders included Nathaniel Deering of Falmouth (1, 6).

On July 11, 1782 Reuben Gage of Falmouth took command of the brigantine UNION with 6 guns and 20 men (1, 6).

#37 The *FLY*

John Perry of St. Georges was born in 1750 and died in 1833. On August 22, 1781 he commanded the boat FLY with small arms and 9 men and on June 29, 1782, the FLY again with one gun and 14 men out of Boston (1).

#38 - The *FAIR AMERICAN*

On September 1, 1781, a Continental bond was issued to Hugh Chichester of Kittery to command the New Hampshire brig FAIR AMERICAN with 8 guns and 15 men (6).

#39 - The *EXCHANGE*

Henry Tibbetts of Damariscotta was commissioned on October 12, 1781, to command the schooner EXCHANGE with 2 guns and 15 men (1).

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#40 - The *ROVER*

On December 1, 1781, Elijah Ayer of Machias was commissioned to command the schooner *ROVER* with 6 guns and 20 men. Later he commanded the schooner *HAWK* (1, 6, 10).

#41 The *TIGER*

Jeremiah O'Brien on December 8, 1781, took command of the schooner *TIGER* with 6 guns and 15 men (1, 6).

#42 - The *TRYAL*

On April 13, 1782, Thomas Oster of Kennebec commanded the schooner *TRYAL* with 4 guns and 15 men (1).

#43 The *CYRUS*

John O'Brien was commissioned on May 19, 1782, to command the ship *CYRUS* with 12 guns and 45 men (1).

#44 - The *RANGER*

On May 27, 1782, Joseph Christophers (or Cristophers) of Kennebec commanded the schooner *RANGER* with 4 guns and 20 men (1, 6). This schooner should not be confused with the 18-gun Continental sloop *RANGER* commanded by John Paul Jones.

#45 The *HAZARD*

John Harmon of York was commissioned on June 21, 1782, to command the schooner *HAZARD* with 4 guns and 15 men (1).

#46 - The *WINTHROP*

Edward Preble of Falmouth served as a midshipman on the *PROTECTOR* but was captured by the British in May 1781. After his exchange in 1782 he served as a lieutenant on the cruiser *WINTHROP*, commanded by George Little of the Massachusetts State Navy. They captured five vessels.

After the Revolution, Preble served on merchant ships and was captured by pirates on one occasion. In 1798 he was commissioned in the U. S. Navy as a lieutenant and commanded the brig *PICKERING* in the squadron of Commodore John Barry. After his commission as a captain on May 13, 1799, Preble commanded the frigate *ESSEX*. Then in 1803 Preble was commissioned as a commodore and commanded a squadron of six

vessels against Tripoli. His flagship was the frigate *CONSTITUTION*. Preble blockaded the port there, but was unable to capture the city. In 1804 Preble was relieved by Commodore Samuel Barron and returned home. On March 17, 1801, Preble married Mary Deering, the daughter of Nathaniel Deering of Falmouth, and they had one son. Preble died at Portland, Maine, on August 25, 1807 (1, 4).

#47 The *RETALIATION*

On July 3, 1782, Samuel Rice of Kittery commanded the ship *RETALIATION* with 10 guns and 25 men out of Newburyport. About October 1782 Rice was captured by the *INTREPID* and imprisoned (1, 6, 9).

#48 The *BLACK PRINCE*

George Rendall of York was commissioned on August 15, 1782, to command the *BLACK PRINCE* with 6 guns and 16 men (1, 6). During the war there were other vessels named the *BLACK PRINCE*; they should not be confused with this one.

#49 The *VULTURE*

On October 19, 1782, William Chaloner (or Chalmer) of Machias took command of the schooner *VULTURE* with 4 guns and 18 men. This schooner was owned by Chaloner (1, 6).

#50 - The *ARGO*

Richard Trevett (or Trevet) on December 26, 1776, was appointed naval officer for York. In 1782 he commanded the ship *ARGO* with 18 guns. This ship was stranded near Old York Harbor on November 21, 1782 (1, 6, 11).

#51 The *HAWK*

On December 3, 1782, Elijah Ayer of Machias commanded the schooner *HAWK* with 4 guns and 20 men (1, 6, 10).

#52 - The *JEFFERSON*

Richard O'Brien was born in Maine about 1758, the son of Rebecca Crane and William O'Bryen. Around 1763 the family moved to Ireland with their four children. Richard went to sea in order to visit relatives in America and became a lieutenant on the brig *JEFFERSON* during the Revolution. After the war he commanded the brig *DAUPHIN* and on July 10, 1783, he was captured by Algerian pirates near Lisbon. O'Brien was held in

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prison for ten years, until peace was established between the Americans and the Algerians in 1795. In 1796 O'Brien concluded a peace treaty with Tripoli and served as U. S. counsel-general in Algiers until 1803. O'Brien died on February 14, 1824 (4).

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