

Captain John Macpherson of Philadelphia (1726 - 1792)

[English version. Translated by Google, with a little help from Nancy and Johnny]

John MacPherson was a privateer of Scottish origin who fought for the crown of England. He also contributed, politically and financially, to the founding of the emerging America.

His youth

He was born in 1726 in Edinburgh. He belongs to the MacPherson of Cluny clan. His uncle, Ewen MacPherson (nicknamed "Cluny"), became chief of Clan Chattan (confederation of Highland clans, to which Clan MacPherson belongs), in 1726, the year of John's birth.

John's early childhood was marked by tragedy: in 1730, his father, who was charged with collecting taxes, was attacked by three highway robbers while he was transporting the collected funds to King George II. He defended himself valiantly and managed to kill one of them, but he succumbed to his wounds. Little John was then 4 years old.

After his schooling in Edinburgh, he spent a year with his uncle "Cluny", who taught him some military basics, notably the handling of weapons. Returning to Edinburgh, his numerous escapades with scoundrels of his own age got him into trouble. At the age of 12, he ran away from his family and school, and boarded a merchant ship. He rose in rank quickly and became captain of a Philadelphia merchant ship.

According to family tradition, during Prince Charlie's revolt (to take back the throne from his grandfather James of England), John MacPherson returned to Scotland to join Cluny MacPherson and their Prince Charlie. After the failure of the rebellion, they hid with them at Cluny's Cage and returned to America after the Prince fled to France.

The corsair

In 1754, at the start of the war against France, he took command of the "Britannia", a Philadelphia privateer in the service of England, armed with 20 cannons. He was 25 years old.



John MacPherson



Ewen "Cluny" Macpherson

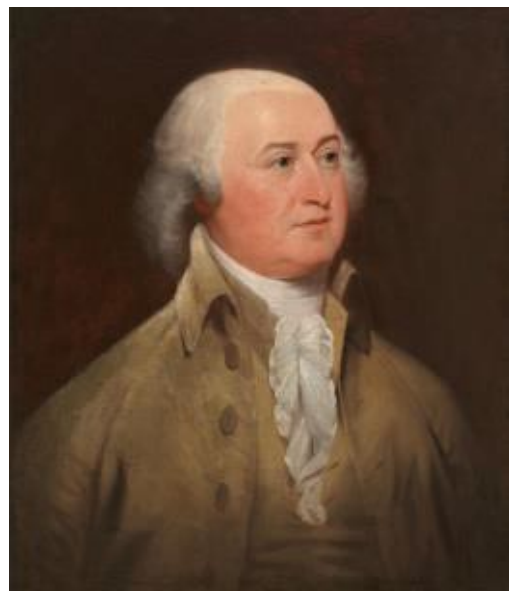
He captured many French and Dutch ships. With the prizes from these catches, he quickly acquired a large fortune. But he suffered too: in 1758, during a naval battle with a French privateer in the West Indies, he lost his right arm which was carried away by a cannon ball. The ship was captured by the French, the masts and sails destroyed, the crew partly decimated. John nevertheless managed to reach the port of Kingston where he had his ship repaired before heading to Philadelphia.

In the years that followed, he carried out numerous operations in Antigua and Martinique in the Caribbean. But soon operations against France became less lucrative. When war against Spain was declared, he changed targets and made some valuable captures.

At only 35 years old, he was rich, and as peace was signed between France, Spain and England, he abandoned his career as a privateer and settled in Philadelphia where he built his new residence "Mount Pleasant" (now a museum). In 1775, he received a visit from John Adams, the future 2nd president of the USA (1797-1801), who declared in his memoirs that Mount Pleasant was "the most beautiful residence in Pennsylvania". He also affirmed that John MacPherson had had his right arm "twice shot off" during a naval confrontation: a fine tribute to his bravery.



Mount Pleasant



John Adams

The politician

MacPherson was a man of influence, and very involved in the fight for American independence. His close friends included several personalities from Philadelphia and New York, notably John Dickinson, one of the founding fathers of the USA, and future president of the State of Delaware (1781), then of the State of Pennsylvania. John MacPherson had complete confidence in him, to the point of appointing him as his executor. But these excellent relations deteriorated.

In 1768 the "Farmer's Letters" were published, a series of 12 essays, signed by an imaginary farmer, modest but cultivated. This text became a reference in the colonial thinking of the American states and their freedom from the supervision of the British Parliament. The author is almost certainly John Dickinson, but Capt.



John Dickinson

John took very badly the fact that Dickinson took full credit for the letters, without mentioning their years of collaboration and political discussions. This was the beginning of John's estrangement with Dickinson and his other friends.

The same year, another event precipitated the quarrel: Capt. John, who had lost none of his enthusiasm or his qualities as a sailor, launched a challenge reminiscent of the America's Cup: he offers £10,000 to anyone who can beat him in a schooner race on the Delaware. He is rich enough for this little fantasy, and he has no doubt about the outcome of the race. However, those around him are worried. His son John, his wife Margaret and her brother John Rodgers, who is heavily indebted to Capt. John, contact Dickinson to ask him to reason with John and avoid the squandering of his fortune.

Shortly after this, Capt. John suffered from a severe bout of fever. Dickinson judged that it was unreasonable to leave him the weapons he had on hand at Mount Pleasant and he had them taken to his home without warning him. When he learned of this, Capt. John flew into a rage, believing that his family and Dickinson were trying to get their hands on his fortune by making it appear that he was no longer responsible for his actions.

A few days later, while supervising gardening work in his park, MacPherson was attacked by four armed men who quickly overpowered him and, despite his protests, chained him and locked him in a cottage in his park, claiming that he no longer had all his reason. He managed to free himself from his chains in the first days of his incarceration and rushed to his residence to question his wife. From the discussions he had with her, he became convinced that those close to him were trying to seize his fortune. But again he was chained and imprisoned. His captors tried to negotiate his release, on the condition that he publicly acknowledge that he was no longer in his right mind. Which, of course, he refused to do.

After being held captive again for 100 days, he managed, thanks to the help of people in his service, to contact his many relations, following which he was released. He then declared that he no longer wanted to live where he is not respected as a sensible man. He separated from his wife and demanded that his son John stay with her for 102 days, the time his own captivity had lasted. He also demanded that he cut all contact with John Dickinson with whom he was in contact. He placed his second son William as a cadet in the British army and entrusted his two daughters to friendly relations in Philadelphia. The family was broken up.

His wife died in 1770. He never forgave her, despite her repeated prayers, and this undoubtedly precipitated her sad end. She left four children: John, William, Margaret and Mary.

Capt. MacPherson left his Mount Pleasant residence with a caretaker, with the intention of renting it out later. But he could not accept the fact that he had been made to appear insane, and published several letters on this subject. He also published a collection of political reflections on young America entitled "Pennsylvania Sailor's Letters".

John decided to resume his activity in maritime traffic (which suggests that his fortune was decreasing) and acquired a 70-ton sloop in Norfolk, the "Damask Rose".

But his mind was too busy defending his sanity, and he finally gave it up at the insistence of his friends.

His second life

Capt. MacPherson greatly needed to turn over a new leaf, and the year 1772 saw him return to his roots: accompanied by his son John, he set sail for England. He left John at the Temple in London for his training as a lawyer.

In Edinburgh, reunited with his brother Roger and other members of his family, he met his 2nd wife Mary Ann MacNeal, whom he married that same year. They quickly returned to Philadelphia, where Mary Ann went to great lengths to reconcile the members of her family. The falling out with John Dickinson was ended.

In 1775, his son John participated as aide-de-camp to General Montgomery in the Battle of Quebec. During an English assault on December 31, Montgomery and young John were killed.

That same year, Capt. John applied for Congress as Commodore of the Fleet, which was rejected. He then proposed a plan for the destruction of the British fleet, but this plan did not receive the approval of George Washington, who found it too expensive and conditioned its approval on MacPherson covering the expenses. John accepted this, then built his fleet, consisting of a ship, "Perseverance", a sloop, "Tyger", two schooners, "Cat" and "Jackal" and a gunboat, "Anti-Traitor". These expenses marked the end of his fortune (without any recognition from the Nation), and he was forced, in 1779, to sell Mount Pleasant.



Benedict Arnold

He sold it to Benedict Arnold, a brigadier general, who had a brilliant career in the American army, notably in the same battle of Quebec in which John MacPherson Jr. was killed.

But in 1780, Benedict Arnold reversed his position: when he was appointed commander of the West Point fort, which occupies a strategic position, he offered to deliver the fort to the British for £20,000. His treason was discovered and he took refuge with the British. He never occupied the house Mount Pleasant. Capt. John tried to take back his property, but failed.

Despite all these setbacks, Capt. John pulled out all the stops: in 1791 he wrote his autobiography (of which unfortunately only 45 pages remain, preserved in the Library of Congress, Washington D.C.). He gave lectures on astronomy and philosophy, which were published in 1791. He was well-versed in mysticism (former sailors in Capt. John's service claimed that when he was a privateer, he was nicknamed "Mad MacPherson" and that he made a point of gathering them together to sing psalms on watch). He became interested in naval techniques and had a

model made of his own invention for a camp bed. He also published the first city directory of Philadelphia.

He died on September 6, 1792. He is buried in the cemetery of St. Paul's Church in Philadelphia, alongside his daughter Eliza Gates, who had died 5 years earlier.

His descendants

The descendants of John MacPherson are very numerous, but in the context of the ADCC (Association of Descendants of Privateer Captains), let us limit ourselves to those who put down their roots in Brittany:

From his second marriage (1772) to Mary Ann MacNeal (1748 - 1827), John MacPherson had 6 children, including Amelia Sophia (1776 -1831). She married Edward Hamlin Adams (1777-1842) in Philadelphia in 1796. The couple settled in Wales at Middleton Hall. They had 5 children.



Middleton Hall

Edward Hamlin Adams Jr. (1809-1875) inherited the Middleton Hall estate, and decided to change his surname to the Welsh form of "Abadam".

William Adams / Abadam (1814-1851) and his wife Agnès Shakespeare Jump lived in France, in Pau Bizanos and Dinard. They had 3 daughters. The eldest, Alice, married Alfred Le Restif de la Motte Collas, who had issue. And his youngest, Pauline, who successively married Charles de Cargouët, then, as a second marriage, Théophile de Cargouët, who had issue.

Yves Le Restif de la Motte Collas, 2 May 2021