



Marine Capt. Samuel Nicholas leads a party of Continental Marines and sailors ashore on New Providence, Bahamas, on March 3, 1776. Painting by Colonel Charles H. Waterhouse, USMCR (Ret.)

A Revolutionary Leatherneck

Captain John Trevett played a leading role in the Continental Marines' first amphibious landing

By Kristen Webb and Bill Hudgins

His name may not be prominent in most American history books, but the daring exploits of Marine Captain John Trevett had a lasting impact not only on the Revolution, but also the history of the United States Marine Corps.

Beginning his military career as a midshipman on one of the first five ships commissioned in the Continental Navy, Trevett worked his way up the ranks and took part in two of the Navy's most famous expeditions in the

Bahamas—the captures of Fort Nassau in 1776 and Fort Montagu in 1778.

Early Years

Not much is known about Trevett's early life, except that he was born in Newport, R.I., in 1747 to Eleazar and Mary Church Trevett. Prior to his military service, Trevett most likely first went to sea on a merchant ship, but little record of him exists before November 1775, when Trevett arrived in Philadelphia from Providence, R.I., aboard the *Catea*, which was fittingly

renamed the *Providence* upon arrival in Pennsylvania.

From there, he transferred to the *Columbus*, aboard which he was commissioned as a midshipman. Captained by Abraham Whipple, *Columbus* was among the first five warships in the Continental Navy. It sailed for the first time on January 4, 1776, departing amid much celebration by onlookers.

Engaging the British

Though vastly outnumbered by the British Navy, *Columbus* and her sister ships were expected to harry British shipping and naval vessels. Congress' Naval Committee had ordered Commodore Esek Hopkins, the commander-in-chief of the Continental Navy, to engage the British so that "our unnatural enemies . . . meet with all possible distress on the sea."

Hopkins' orders directed the fleet to attack English ships off Virginia or the Carolinas if possible. If not, they were to sail to the Bahamas.



Continental sailors and Marines land on New Providence, Bahamas, on March 3, 1776.

But winter proved a tough foe for the American ships, as ice-clogged rivers kept most ships bottled up in port for several weeks waiting for a thaw. Once under way, Hopkins decided to sail to the island of New Providence in the Bahamas in order to seize large British stores of gunpowder, which the Colonies desperately needed.

En route to the Bahamas, Trevett was commissioned a first lieutenant in the Continental Marines, created by Congress on November 10, 1775, to provide a seaborne fighting force as well as to keep order aboard ships. (The Continental Marines were disbanded in April 1783 and reactivated in July 1798 as the United States Marine Corps, which traces its roots to 1775.)

The fleet approached Nassau on New Providence around March 1. On March 3, a force of more than 250 Marines and sailors went ashore to secure the town and its military stores. Led by Marine Captain Samuel Nicholas, the future first commandant of the Marines, the men assured the residents that they did not intend to harm them or their property; they only wanted the gunpowder stored in Fort Nassau.

But the Americans had been slow in getting into position and did not seal off the harbor. This gave the Bahamian governor, Montfort Browne, time to load much of the gunpowder onto two ships that slipped past the Continental fleet.

Although little powder was left on the island, the Americans found large stockpiles of cannon, artillery and other military supplies. Over the next two weeks they loaded their ships with the precious cargo before departing on March 17.

The raid ensured that “no longer would [the Revolution] be viewed as just a localized rebellion by a few radical dissidents,” effectively internationalizing the war, according to Charles R. Smith’s *Marines in the Revolution: A History of the Continental Marines in the American Revolution, 1775–1783* (University Press of the Pacific, 2005). Moreover, this was the first time the American flag flew over foreign soil and also the first in an as-yet-unbroken line of successful Marine amphibious landings.

Taking Prizes

Shortly after returning to the United States, Trevett transferred to the

Andrew Doria, commanded by Captain Nicholas Biddle, which soon captured two British ships, the *Oxford* and the *Crawford*. Trevett served as prize-master’s mate in the crew that took the *Oxford* to Providence, R.I.

In July 1776, after a brief stay in Virginia where Trevett heard the Declaration of Independence read, he set off on another cruise on the *Andrew Doria*, which captured several more British ships. Soon after, Trevett returned to Rhode Island for a leave of absence following a British attack on Newport that forced his family to leave their home.

In February 1777, Trevett joined the *Providence* and in June was commissioned as a Marine captain. It was shortly after his promotion that he executed one of his most impressive feats of leadership.

Triumphant Return to the Bahamas

In late January 1778, Trevett and a group of Marines again sailed for the Bahamas on *Providence*, this time under the command of Captain John Rathbun, to capture the HMS *Mary*. Once in New Providence, Trevett remembered that during his first trip to the Bahamas, he had pulled a slat from the fence surrounding the fort, and that it could be their means of entry.

He was pleasantly surprised to see the hole was still there. Through the gap in the fence he gained access to the fort, where he heard the sentinels call, “All is well.” Trevett gathered his men and led them to the wall. Discovering that the sentinels made their call every 30 minutes, the Marines stealthily scaled the wall and captured the two sentinels without firing a shot.

Throughout the night, the Marines worked to maneuver the fort’s cannon to defend their position, stopping every 30 minutes to cry out, “All is well.” At dawn, they ran up the American flag, signaling they had taken the fort.

Although Trevett's squad consisted of about only 30 men, he convinced the town's leaders that a much larger Marine detachment had taken the fort, allowing his men to remain relatively undisturbed. The Marines changed positions atop the fort at regular intervals, to maintain the illusion of a larger force.

Despite several tense moments over the next three days, Trevett and his men managed to leave New Providence with five prize ships in tow, including the *Mary*.

Fall From Grace

But after returning from New Providence, Trevett's good fortune began to run out. The Navy Prize Board ruled the captured *Mary* was a merchant ship, not a military vessel, meaning that the crew would receive only half of the prize money they had anticipated. Trevett unsuccessfully appealed the ruling. His insistence on its unfairness led to his falling out of favor with the Navy Board, which stripped him of command of *Providence's* Marines.

After staying in Rhode Island to conduct some personal business, in

May 1780 Trevett once again went to sea, this time aboard the *Trumbull*, captained by James Nicholson. On its voyage, the *Trumbull* was attacked by British ships. Trevett lost an eye and his foot was wounded in the fighting.

Later, aboard the *Deane*, Trevett was captured by British forces and held as a prisoner of war until late 1780, when he convinced a British officer to send him to the West Indies. Trevett's ship was intercepted by the French, who freed him.

Trevett participated in several more cruises aboard French ships until eventually making it back to the United States in May 1782. Trevett died at the age of 76 in November 1823. He was completely blind for the last four years of his life.

A Surprising Legal Legacy

As one of America's first Marine officers, Trevett's bravery, daring and initiative set a precedent for all future Marines, who study the actions of Continental Marines and honor their memory.

Trevett's name also has a surprising connection to constitutional law: He was the plaintiff in the landmark *Trevett v. Weeden* case of 1786, according to Smith's history.

In 1786, the Rhode Island General Assembly declared paper currency to be legal tender. Anyone who refused to accept it could be punished.

In September 1786, Trevett bought some meat from a butcher named John Weeden in Newport, R.I. Trevett paid Weeden in Rhode Island currency, but the butcher refused to accept it. The episode resulted in Weeden being tried by the local court for violating the state law.

Weeden's attorney argued that the court lacked jurisdiction and that the law was unconstitutional. The five-judge panel agreed and dismissed the charge. In doing so, the court established the precedent for the doctrine of judicial review—that courts may review the constitutionality of laws—that would be at the heart of the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Marbury v. Madison* (1803), a case that helped define the boundaries between the executive and judicial branches of U.S. government. 🏛️

John Trevett's Legacy Honored at the National Museum Of the Marine Corps

By David H. Hugel

The National Museum of the Marine Corps, located just outside the main gate of the Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., is dedicated to preserving the proud heritage of the United States Marine Corps and the contributions Marines have made toward gaining and preserving our nation's freedom since the Corps' founding in 1775.

While portraits of Captain John Trevett are rare, his exploits and those of the Continental Marines he led are depicted in numerous paintings created for the Bicentennial of the Marine Corps in 1975. The artwork is on display at the National Museum of the Marine Corps.

Just outside the museum is the Semper Fidelis Memorial Park Pathway, a walkway lined with commemorative bricks honoring individual Marines. Trevett's service during the Revolutionary War is recognized here with a brick donated by a seventh-generation descendant, Kyle Jennifer Shults Rodgers. The inscription simply reads "John Trevett A True Patriot 1747-1823."

Another connection to Trevett resides in the Newport Historical Society in Rhode Island. Beginning in November 1775, John Trevett recorded his first-hand observations of the Revolutionary War in a journal he maintained for the next eight years. The society owns that original diary.

David H. Hugel served in the United States Marine Corps from 1960-1964, including a nine-month tour in the Republic of Vietnam as a combat cameraman. His articles have appeared in the National Archives and Records Administrations' quarterly journal Prologue, as well as VFW, American Legion, Semper Fi, and Leatherneck magazines.