



# MISSOURI BROADSIDE



COMMEMORATING THE 250<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF NOTABLE EVENTS OF THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

## Jeremiah O'Brien Naval Captain

### *Early Life*

Jeremiah O'Brien (1744-1818) was the eldest son of Irish immigrants Morris and Mary O'Brien. He was born in Kittery, Province of Massachusetts Bay in 1744. His family moved to Scarborough, Maine and settled in Machias, Maine in the 1760s to engage in lumbering. Maine had still been a part of Massachusetts at the time.

### *American Revolution*

Reports of the battles of Lexington and Concord reached Machias in early May 1775, leading Benjamin Foster to rally Machias residents at Job Burnham's tavern. Machias merchant captain Ichabod Jones sailed ships *Unity* and *Polly* to Boston with a cargo of lumber and purchased food for sale in Machias. British troops encouraged Jones to deliver another cargo of lumber for construction of their barracks in Boston. Admiral Samuel Graves ordered *HMS Margaretta*, under the command of James Moore, to accompany Jones' ships to discourage interference from Machias rebels.

When the ships reached Machias on June 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1775, James Moore ordered the liberty pole removed; and Machias townspeople refused to load the lumber. Foster plotted to capture the British officers when they attended church on June 11<sup>th</sup>, but the British avoided capture and retreated downriver aboard *Margaretta*. On June 12<sup>th</sup> Foster pursued *Margaretta* aboard the packet boat *Falmouth*. After *Falmouth* ran aground, O'Brien and his five brothers, Gideon, John, William, Dennis, and Joseph seized the *Unity*.



*Captain Jeremiah O'Brien (1744-1818)*

Under the command of Jeremiah O'Brien, thirty-one townsmen sailed aboard *Unity* armed with guns, swords, axes, and pitch forks and captured *Margaretta* in an hour-long battle after *Margaretta* had threatened to bombard the town. John O'Brien jumped aboard *Margaretta* as the two ships closed but was forced to jump overboard by the British crew. After rescuing John, *Unity* again closed *Margaretta* until their rigging became entangled. *Unity* was bombarded by grenades from the British ship, but *Margaretta* surrendered after James Moore was mortally wounded.

This battle is often considered the first time British colors were struck to those of the United States, even though the Continental Navy did not exist at the time. The United States Merchant Marine claims *Unity* as its member and this incident as their beginning.



USS Wasp, a schooner thought to closely resemble the *Margaretta*

O'Brien continued as the captain of *Unity*, renamed *Machias Liberty*, for two years, and received the first captain's commission in the Massachusetts State Navy in 1775. Despite this, his ships fell out of commission a year later in the fall of 1776.

After his ships had fallen out of commission, O'Brien engaged the Royal Navy as a privateer captaining the *Resolution* and eventually the *Scarborough*, a British vessel captured in 1777. O'Brien continued to harass the Royal Navy off the coast of Massachusetts until he was captured aboard the *Hannibal* in 1780. He was first transported to the *HMS Jersey*, a British vessel retrofitted to serve as a prison ship off the coast of New York. Despite being constructed to compliment 400 sailors, as many as 1,200 prisoners were held on the ship at a time. These overcrowded conditions led to an average of eight deaths per day, their bodies being taken ashore and buried in mass graves. By the end of the war, as many as 20,000 were alleged to have died in captivity off the coast of New York.

O'Brien managed to survive his time aboard the *HMS Jersey* before being transported to Mill Prison, a prison camp in British-controlled Plymouth. After suffering from considerable hardship, he managed to escape the prison and take up arms once more.

Till the end of the war Jeremiah O'Brien commanded the *Hibernia* and the *Tiger*. His commitment to the establishment and preservation of the United States of America warranted regional attention. This commitment was recognized nationally, as in 1811 he was appointed by James Madison as the federal customs collector for the port of Machias. He held this position until his death in 1818.

### ***Continued Recognition and Legacy***

Despite not being a household name, Jeremiah O'Brien is remembered as a representative of patriotism and mettle in the United States Navy. Since 1900, five ships have been named in his honor as well as the *O'Brien* class of destroyer prominent in World War I. The most recent of these ships, USS *O'Brien* (DD-975), was launched in 1976 and served until its decommissioning in 2004.

Additionally, the SS *Jeremiah O'Brien*, a World War II Liberty ship, is one of the only surviving vessels to have participated in the invasion of Normandy Beach during D-Day, a fleet that originally consisted of almost 7,000 ships. It was restored throughout the 1970s is now based in San Francisco as a seagoing museum ship.



SS Jeremiah O'Brien circa 2015