Objects of Scorn: Remembering African Americans and the War of 1812
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George Roberts experienced the War of 1812 very differently. When the war began, the then forty-six-year-old African American Roberts, from the waterfront Canton neighborhood of Baltimore, Maryland, signed aboard Captain Richard Moon's privateer *Sarah Ann.* The ship departed Baltimore in late July, only a month after the beginning of the war. While cruising off the Bahamas in late August, the *Sarah Ann* encountered a British ship from Kingston bound for London, laden with coffee and sugar. Since the British ship outgunned the privateer and the Americans did not want to get too close, they engaged the vessel for hours in a long-range artillery duel. Then suddenly the American privateer descended on the British vessel, and Roberts and his fellow sailors swept aboard, taking the ship as a prize within minutes. After convoying the prize to Savannah, the *Sarah Ann* quickly left to seek other victims.

On September 13, 1812, while cruising again off the coast of the Bahamas, the *Sarah Ann* encountered the British frigate *Statira,* which quickly subdued the privateer. Forcing the Americans to muster on deck, British officers singled out six sailors and accused them of being British. George Roberts was one of the six taken to Jamaica in irons. The privateer captain reported to the ship's owners in Charleston that he feared the men would be tried as deserters, which could mean execution. Moon insisted that Roberts, "a coloured man and seaman," had been born in the United States. While the American captain had not questioned Roberts personally, the sailor apparently "had every sufficient document together with his free papers"; nevertheless, the British had taken him. Furthermore, the American captain swore that Roberts had enlisted "on board the *Sarah Anna* [*sic*] at Baltimore where he is married." The Charleston owners responded to the British actions by seizing twelve British sailors and holding them hostage in confinement. The threat worked: The British eventually released Roberts and his fellow prisoners.

Securing his freedom, Roberts eventually signed aboard other vessels before finding his way back to the United States. In late July 1814 he signed on as a gunner aboard the Baltimore-built privateer *Chasseur,* later hailed by Hezekiah Niles as the "Pride of Baltimore." The privateer slipped by the British blockading squadron and then unexpectedly sailed east, directly toward the British Isles. There Captain Thomas Boyle preyed on merchant shipping, and in late August he boldly proclaimed the entire British Isles to be under the blockade of the *Chasseur.* Boyle demanded that his proclamation be posted on the door of the offices of the shipping underwriter Lloyd's of London, driving up insurance rates and forcing the Admiralty to transfer vessels to guard merchant ship convoys. *Chasseur* captured or sank seventeen vessels...

Roberts and the *Chasseur* returned to Baltimore on the evening of April 8, 1815, and as the privateer passed Fort McHenry she fired her guns in a salute. Granted, the privateer had not contributed to the American victory at Baltimore, but the city nonetheless embraced the *Chasseur* and her crew as true heroes of the battle…

George Roberts' maritime career had taken him to a multitude of foreign ports, brought him thrills and excitement, and made him an acknowledged contributor to the city of Baltimore's privateering heritage. Yet he never assumed a central role in the city's postwar celebrations.

Later in life, Baltimore's racial composition changed, and this undoubtedly affected Roberts. Between 1850 and 1860 the city's free black population found their rights greatly circumscribed, revealing an increased racial prejudice towards black residents. Because George Roberts had gained recognition as a War of 1812 hero, he could transcend that racism and prejudice for at least one day a year -- September 12, when he put on his uniform and marched with other veterans during the Defenders' Day celebrations. In helping their country maintain its independence, men like Roberts had disregarded the fear and danger of war, fighting for a greater cause, social and economic equality and freedom for slaves. During the conflict Roberts may have been equal and free, but afterward armed and proud black men simply threatened the white status quo and undermined the established racial hierarchy of American society. As time passed and black combatants like Roberts died, the stories of their contributions quickly faded and were forgotten.