

Edward Preble



Edward Preble was born in Falmouth (now Portland), Maine on 15 August, 1761. He was the fourth child of seven born to Brigadier-General Jedidiah Preble and Mehitable Bangs. He is best known as the Captain of the U. S. frigate *Constitution* and Commodore of a small fleet sent to the Mediterranean to deal with Tripoli who had declared war on the young United States of America. Upon return to America he became a national celebrity. Equally important he and his subordinates established traditions that to this day guide officers of the U. S. Navy. He is individual #376 in our data.

Jedidiah Preble (Edward's father) was born in York, Maine in 1707 and married Martha Junkins in 1733. He gave up being a sailor in 1746 to become a captain in a provincial regiment and settled in Falmouth, Maine. After the death of wife Martha, Jedidiah married his second wife Mehitable Bangs, daughter of Capt. Joshua Bangs, in 1754. Jedidiah served as lieutenant-colonel under General John Winslow in Acadia (now New Brunswick, Canada) in 1755, early in the French and Indian War (or Seven Years War). In 1759 Jedidiah served under General Wolfe at Quebec and was promoted to Brigadier-General. After the war he refused the rank of Major-General due to age and served as a judge of the court and member of the state (Massachusetts) senate representing his home district (now the state of Maine). Jedidiah died in 1784 in Falmouth.

The son, Edward Preble was a hot-tempered child and became a terrible-tempered man. But, as a man he bred loyalty in all who served with him.

Edward was sent to Dummer Academy in Byfield, Massachusetts. The American Revolution started while he was there. When Edward was 14, his home and half of Falmouth was burned to the ground by the British to punish New Englanders. His father purchased a house and farm about three miles from Falmouth, called Capisic, he was now a potato farmer – a life that held no attraction for young Edward. When Edward was 17, he signed on a privateer, the brig *Hope*, 12 guns. In the spring of 1780 his father arranged for Edward to receive an appointment as an acting midshipman aboard the frigate *Protector*, 26 guns of the Massachusetts navy. Maine was then a district of Massachusetts. The first cruise was from Nantasket to Falmouth where they landed Brigadier-General Peleg Wadsworth (our individual 1039), the newly appointed commander for that section of Maine. After two actions against the British Navy (*Admiral Duff*, 32 guns and *Thames*, 32 guns) the *Protector* was captured and Edward was consigned to the prison ship hulk *Jersey* off Brooklyn. Edward was most fortunate for after a month he was exchanged for a British officer. Most prisoners on the *Jersey* did not survive the filth, starvation and typhus.

Lieutenant Edward Preble served out the remainder of the Revolution about the *Winthrop*, 12 guns sailing off the coast of Maine; successfully capturing several British privateers.

After the Revolution the new nation had not the ways and means to maintain neither an army nor navy and thus the soldiers and sailors entered retirement. For two decades Edward was in the merchant trade becoming master and even owner of his own ship. He earned a reputation as a severe disciplinarian, but fair-minded man and excellent mariner.

By 1789 the new U. S. Constitution authorized Congress to create a navy, but nothing was done until 1794 when Congress approved the naval Act of 1794 which authorized the construction of six frigates. Edward joined the young navy and as captain of the frigate *Essex* in 1800 was the first to fly the American flag in the Indian Ocean. But, in 1802 he offered his resignation due to ill health which was not accepted and instead placed on sick leave by the secretary of the navy, Robert Smith.



Trouble with Pasha of Tripoli and the Dey of Algiers who were demanding annual payments to permit safe passage through the Mediterranean Sea for American merchant vessels resulted in a small fleet of U. S. Navy ships to be sent to the Mediterranean. Tripoli declared war on the United States. In June of 1801 a fleet sailed from the Virginia Capes to the Barbary Coast commanded by Captain Richard Dale, who had served under John Paul Jones during the Revolution. Captain Dale ran an effective blockade of Tripoli harbor but returned to America affecting no change in relations. A second fleet was sent under the command of Captain Richard Morris. That effort was a disaster and Morris was ordered home where upon his return President Thomas Jefferson striped him of his commission. In 1803 Thomas Jefferson ordered Captain Edward Preble take command of the frigate *Constitution* at Boston and sail to the Shores of Tripoli.

Preble joined with the other six ships in the Mediterranean and set out training the crews into an effective fighting machine. Preble established 106 rules for conduct of his officers and crew. Preble believed *loyalty down begets loyalty up*. Most of his commanders were under 30 years of age and he commented that they were just boys. Later those commanders referred to themselves as “Preble’s Boys” as a title of high honor; for these boys were to be the naval leaders of the war with the British a decade later.

While chasing two Tripolitan ships off Tripoli harbor the frigate *Philadelphia*, 36 guns, under the command of William Bainbridge ran aground on an uncharted reef. Bainbridge had no choice but to surrender. When high-tide came the Tripolitans were able to haul the *Philadelphia* off the reef and moored her in the harbor. So they had additional defense of the *Philadelphia*’s guns and over 300 prisoners to hold for hostage.

Edward Preble selected Lt. Stephen Decatur to sneak into Tripoli harbor and destroy the *Philadelphia*. On Feb 16, 1804 Decatur and 75 volunteers did just that; setting the *Philadelphia* ablaze and the frigate blew up under the nose of the fort in Tripoli. Lt. Decatur was awarded a sword by Congress and promoted to Captain; becoming, at 25, the youngest man in the navy to hold that rank.

Preble successfully blockaded Tripoli until August 1804 when he decided stronger action was necessary. So he moved in to bombard the harbor and city. After the first attack on August 3rd, Preble returned twice more in August and again on September 3rd with the hope that the Pasha

would capitulate under the bombardment. On September 4th Preble sent the ketch *Intrepid* decked out as a floating bomb into Tripoli harbor crewed by volunteers. The volunteers included Richard Somers, Lt. Joseph Israel and Midshipman Henry Wadsworth (our individual 1041). The *Intrepid* blew up after coming under attack by the shore guns in Tripoli and all hands lost.

Five days later reinforcements (four frigates) arrived from America to assist the Mediterranean squadron. With them was Commodore Samuel Barron, senior to Preble, who took over as squadron commander. The secretary of the navy hoped Preble would remain and serve under the new commander, but Preble elected to return to America. Decatur presented to Preble a scroll signed by all officers of the squadron declaring their admiration.

On his return, in the *John Adams*, he stopped in Malta, Syracuse, and Naples where he received a hero's welcome. In Rome the Pope declared that Preble's small force "has done more for the cause of Christianity than the most powerful nations in ages." When he finally reached Washington on March 4, 1805, the United States Congress voted him a sword and gold medal. On his trip home to Maine he could not escape being the center of attention at function after function.



Figure 1 Gold Medal Presented by US Congress

Back in Tripoli, Commodore Barron was not as aggressive as Preble, a strong blockade was sufficient for his taste. As the city could not get foodstuffs the Pasha gave in and decided to try for the best offer he could get; \$60,000 for Bainbridge and the 300 crewmen of the *Philadelphia*. Peace was signed June 3, 1805.

Edward was offered the post of secretary of the navy but refused due to ill health. In 1806 the number of officers and seaman in the navy was reduced. There were now only fourteen Captains and Preble was number five on the list.

When it became known in Washington that Edward's health was failing many of his supporters urged him to return to that city but with the birth of his son and other reasons he remained in New England. He was offered a navy post at Boston, but that too he refused. The secretary of the navy asked that he go to New York to witness and report on sub-marine tests of Mr. Fulton. He did accept the task to oversee the designing and building coastal defense gunboats in Portland. Plans were made for a sea voyage to Madera to improve his health, but that never happened.

On August 25, 1807 Edward Preble died at home in Portland, ME after a painful bout with tuberculosis and ulcers. Ever since his days on the prison ship *Jersey* he had suffered ill health. His funeral was an imposing pageant and as word spread to other cities solemn tributes were paid to the fallen hero. He died at age 46, who knows what additional impact he would have had on history if he had lived to old age. One of Preble's biographers – James Fennimore Cooper – expressed: "One cannot but regret that Preble did not survive, with all his powers, until after the occurrence of the war of 1812. Preble's influence on the discipline of the service was of a valuable and lasting nature ..."

When news of his death reached Washington at 12 noon on September 1st –

"Immediately the flags of the frigates in ordinary and at the marine garrison, were struck half mast; at half past noon one gun was fired at the Navy Yard, which repeated every five minutes till seventeen minutes before sunset, at which commenced a discharge of seventeen minute guns, when with the departing sun, the colors were struck amidst the sincere regrets of brother officers." – reported by the National Intelligencer newspaper.

At the time of his death he was just completing construction of an elegant mansion house; but he never got to live in it. His widow lived there until her death. The house eventually became a hotel known as the Preble House.

His remains were first placed in the family vault of his wife's ancestors, the Deering's. After forty years they were moved to another tomb which had been prepared by his son in the same burial ground on Munjoy Hill known as the Eastern Cemetery, Portland.

His Legacy

Edward Preble did not win the decisive victory at Tripoli he desired. His squadron did not win any major sea battles and was only successful for the capture of a couple of Tripolitan gunboats. But when the nation needed a fighter Edward Preble was just what the nation needed – his two predecessors were ineffectual. He took the fight to the enemies' shores and set the stage for the eventual capitulation of the Pasha. More importantly, it was his leadership and the establishment of the corps of officers of the U.S. Navy for which this nation is indebted to the Commodore.

Six U. S. Navy ships have been named for Edward Preble. A county in Ohio is named after Commodore Edward Preble as well as towns in Minnesota, Wisconsin and New York.

Source Material

This biography has been pulled from a number of sources; specifically those listed here. To learn more of Edward, his family relations, or history of the period I refer you to these publications.

1972, revised 1996 - **Edward Preble, a Naval Biography 1761-1807**, by Christopher McKee. Published by United States Naval Institute, Annapolis, MD; ISBN: 1-55750-583-7

Excerpts available on Google Books, This is wonderfully detailed biography

1979 - **The Frigates** – Seafarers Series – Time Life Books

2006 – **Six Frigates** – The Epic History of the Founding of the U. S. Navy - by Ian W. Toll; ISBN: 978-0-393-33032-8

1950 - **Preble's Boys** - Commodore Edward Preble and the Birth of American Sea Power. by Fletcher Pratt; ISBN: 1-60105-119-0

1919 – **Naval Officers Their Heredity and Development**; by Charles B. Davenport and Mary Scudder

1823 – Biographical Sketches of Distinguished American Naval Heroes in the War of the Revolution Between the American Republic and the Kingdom of Great Britain. By Samuel Putnam Waldo

1869 – Genealogical Sketch of the First Three Generations of Prebles in America; By Geo Henry Preble, Capt U.S.N.