“Now fitting out for a cruize…against the Enemies of America:”

Terms of Agreement for the Privateer Ship *Revolution*

By Neal T. Hurst

On December 21, 1948, Mr. Harry Shaw Newman of The Old Print Shop in New York City sent to H. F. du Pont at Winterthur, Delaware a unique “large folio broadside” on approval.[[1]](#footnote-1) Newman described the broadside as “Articles of Agreement between Captain and crew of the privateer Revolution. March 23, 1780, Philadelphia, John Dunlap.”[[2]](#footnote-2) On December 30, Mr. du Pont’s secretary wrote back to Newman and exclaimed, “The Broadside has arrived, and Mr. du Pont is keeping it.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Captain John McNachtane, his forty-five crewmembers, and the ship *Revolution* remained completely anonymous until the discovery of the ships logbook and financial papers. These documents tell the harrowing short-lived story of the ship *Revolution* and her life at sea during the American War for Independence.

Born in 1742, John McNachtane probably took to the sea at a very young age.[[4]](#footnote-4) On January 17, 1772, McNachtane listed himself for the first time as the master of the *Neptune,* traveling between New York City, Edenton, North Carolina, and the West Indies.[[5]](#footnote-5) McNachtane’s logbook recorded eleven years and roughly fifteen voyages throughout the Atlantic and Mediterranean.

At the outbreak of the American Revolution, McNachtane sided with the Americans and befriended brothers Mathew and Thomas Irwin, ship owners and merchants from Philadelphia. In the late summer of 1778 McNachtane took command of the Irwin’s eighty-ton brig *Lady Gates* and successfully made a trip to the West Indies back to Philadelphia with a precious cargo of dry goods. [[6]](#footnote-6)

When McNachtane and the *Lady Gates* arrived back in Philadelphia in November 1778, he changed vessels and took command of a new ship under construction.[[7]](#footnote-7) The Irwin brothers, through Samuel Morris, Jr., a merchant and staunch supporter of American liberty, financed the construction and fitting out of a brand new a vessel built specifically for privateering and for transporting cargo to the Caribbean for trade.[[8]](#footnote-8) Construction of the ship began in February 1779.[[9]](#footnote-9) Rated as a ship, she could carry up to one hundred tons of cargo, with a full compliment of one hundred and thirty men and mount an impressive twenty-six guns.[[10]](#footnote-10) The Irwins gave command of the new vessel to John McNachtane perhaps due to his earlier successful voyage. McNachtane wrote in his logbook on Saint Michael’s day, September 29, 1779, that the men launched the vessel into the Delaware River, commissioned with the heroic name of the *Revolution.[[11]](#footnote-11)*

The ship *Revolution* remained in the Delaware River through December of 1779, completing its final fitting out. On December 8, Samuel Morris and Robert Paisley bonded the vessel for ten thousand dollars and received a letter of marque.[[12]](#footnote-12) The following day, the ship with pilots at the helm, guided the vessel down the river to Camden, New Jersey. The vessel laden with fifty-two hogsheads of dried fish, barrel staves, pickled herring, onions, and tar, sailed down the Delaware River.

The first leg of the journey, to Reedy Island, was perilous for McNachtane and the crew of the *Revolution.* During the night, while sitting off Marcus Hook, Pennsylvania, the wind changed to the north and brought snow, heavy gales, and ice flows down the Delaware River.[[13]](#footnote-13) This forced McNachtane to take evasive actions and to “force the ship” to open water.[[14]](#footnote-14) Several days later, McNactane distressingly wrote “half past 6 o’clock have up the main sail not long under way before we found it difficult to pass the ship through the ice.”[[15]](#footnote-15) He claimed the ice grew rapidly at nearly an inch per hour and at 10am the ship no longer moved. The ice pushed the ship towards the New Jersey coastline and a noon the ship ran aground.

1. Invoice 21 December 1948, The Old Print Shop, Antique Dealer Files, Box AD46, Winterthur Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. December 30, 1948, H.F. du Pont to The Old Print Shop, Antique Dealer Files, Box AD46, Winterthur Archives. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Port of Philadelphia Naval Office Papers captured August 9, 1781 from the Ship *Revolution*, The National Archives, HCA 32/441/17. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McNachtane’s Logbook, January 17, 1772 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Independent Ledger and the American Advertiser,* 21 December 1778. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. McNachtane’s Logbook, “St. Michael’s Day.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Pennsylvania Archives,* 618. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Owner of Ship Revolution for Disbursements to January 1780 for Building, Box 202, William Henry Russell collection of Morris family papers (Accession 0721), Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE 19807. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Pennsylvania Archives,* 634. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. McNachtane’s Logbook, “St. Michael’s Day.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Charles Henry Lincoln, ed., *Naval Records of the American Revolution, 1775-1788* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1906), 442, http://books.google.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., December 17, 1779. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., December 18, 1779. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., January 1, 1780. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)