

Strong to Save

By Benjamin Pomerance

YOU COULD BLINK and miss the historical marker standing in the antique shop's front yard. The road from Dover, Del., through New Castle County toward the community of Odessa, is a heavily traveled one.

Cars race past as if their drivers were training for a race at the nearby Dover International Speedway. Pulling off to the side of the road and walking back to see the metal plaque on a morning during rush hour in 2019 can admittedly feel like a life-risking experience.

Yet it was on this land where an Irish immigrant named James McDonough settled in 1725, raising a farm and, after marrying a local woman, Lydia Laroux, raising a family of seven children, as well. It was on this land where their oldest child, Thomas, declared that he was going to become a physician. It was next door to this land where the Vance family lived, the family whose daughter, Mary, became Thomas' bride in 1770 — six years before the American Revolution called Thomas away to serve in a Delaware battalion.

It was to this land where Thomas returned after commanding forces at the Battle of Long Island, winning praise from George Washington himself for his gallantry. It was from this land where the doctor and decorated veteran carried on activities as a civic leader: member of the Privy Council, warden of St. Ann's Episcopal Church and justice of the Court of Common Pleas.

It was on this land where, on New Year's Eve in 1783, Mary gave birth to their sixth child and second son, Thomas Jr. It was in this very house where young Thomas Jr. was raised, enjoying a childhood among such household items of affluence as silver utensils, six Windsor chairs, a clock that needed to be wound only once every week, a "pleasure sleigh" to be used for blissful hours during the Delaware winter and a coffin — yes, a coffin.

Perhaps this macabre object seems incongruous next to these other items of luxury, but the family treasured the story that it represented. An insatiable jokester, Thomas Jr.'s brother, James, went to the local coffin maker one day and ordered a casket, insisting that it was for a woman in town who was on the brink of death. The coffin maker worked through the night to build it and was horrified to leave his home the next morning and notice the woman for whom James had ordered the coffin walking out her front door, the picture of perfect health.

Shock turned to rage, and the artisan ordered the McDonough family to purchase the coffin that James had ordered. They did so, and James and his brothers laughingly carried the empty casket through the streets to their home. They propped it up in a corner of their largest room for all to see, leaving it there for several years.

It's hard to know where such a devilish child may end up — perhaps the penitentiary, perhaps the poorhouse, perhaps the gambling den or perhaps the United States Navy, into which James enlisted as one of the nation's earliest midshipmen. The United States Department of the Navy was created on April 30, 1798, and James was one of the 368 sailors assigned to one of the fleet's first ships: the *Constellation*, a 36-gun vessel that American leaders believed could emerge victorious in battle with any other warship in the world.

The new vessel would soon be forced to prove its worth. The fledgling U.S. was embroiled in a bizarre standoff with France, sparked by America's refusal to pay debts owed to France stemming from France's invaluable military assistance during the Revolutionary War. In retaliation, France hired privateers to seize American ships and capture their cargo. America armed itself heavily and struck back.

This conflict would cost James dearly. In the West Indies, the *Constellation* engaged with the French ship *Insurgente* on Feb. 18, 1799. Ultimately, the Americans captured the *Insurgente* while sustaining only minimal losses to their own forces. Yet during that fight, a musket ball shattered one of James' legs. Doctors had no choice but to amputate. The so-called "quasi-war" with France had caused a premature end to the eager sailor's career.

So, James came back home again, back to the town where he had pulled the coffin prank, another life forever changed by combat. Nearby, in the Delaware community of Middletown, the 17-year-old Thomas Jr. was working as a clerk. History has lost the exact words that the brothers exchanged following this homecoming. Yet the record is bluntly clear that on Feb. 5, 1800, Thomas Jr. received his warrant as a midshipman in the U.S. Navy. The American fleet had a McDonough in its ranks again.

And as fate would have it, Thomas Jr.'s first assignment was aboard a warship bound for the West Indies, returning to the region where his brother had lost his leg. There, he participated unscathed in the capture of three French vessels. Yet a different enemy ravaged the ship's crew: yellow fever. Thomas Jr. quickly contracted the disease, forcing him to receive care at a place that he described as a "dirty Spanish hospital" in Havana.

Back in the U.S., Thomas Jr.'s friends and relatives learned of the yellow fever outbreak and presumed that he had died. Yet the young sailor eventually recovered and returned home — "took passage on board the ferry boat," he wrote of the last leg of his trip, "crossed the Chesapeake Bay and, traveling up through the country, got out of the

stage at the Trap [the name given to the land where his family had their farm], my native place, after an absence of nearly a year, with straw hat, canvas shoes and in other respects poor enough.”

On Oct. 20, 1801, however, he was back in his uniform again, ordered to join the crew of the *Constellation* — the same ship on which James had served — for a tour of duty on the Mediterranean Sea. This time, the enemy was the Barbary States, four North African nations whose ruthless pirates were capturing American vessels and kidnapping their crew members, extorting exorbitant ransom payments from the U.S. government.

For the next few years, Thomas Jr. — who had inexplicably changed the spelling of his last name from “McDonough” to “MacDonough” when he entered the Navy — took part in the fighting against the Barbary pirates aboard various American ships. His most notable action occurred after the American frigate *Philadelphia* ran aground on a reef in a harbor in the North African kingdom of Tripoli. Concerned that the *Philadelphia* would be taken and salvaged by the enemy, squadron commander Commodore Edward Preble unfurled a daring plan.

The scheme called for Lieutenant Stephen Decatur, leader of the American sloop *Intrepid*, to slip into the Tripoli harbor, storm the *Philadelphia* and set the ship on fire so the enemy could not use it. Just one year earlier, MacDonough had served aboard the *Philadelphia* and remained quite familiar with the vessel’s layout. Armed with this knowledge, he went to Decatur and volunteered his services.

In the early evening on Feb. 16, 1804, Decatur and his forces made their move. Under the cover of gathering darkness, they snuck past the heavily armed forts that guarded the harbor and drew close to the *Philadelphia* when the leader of one of the enemy’s ships hailed the *Intrepid*. Sticking to the script, the *Intrepid*’s captain answered that he was a trader from Malta, that his ship had lost its anchors in a storm and that they wished to anchor in the harbor for the night. The enemy granted permission.

While these discussions were ongoing, crew members from the *Intrepid* attached a line to the anchor of the *Philadelphia*. Pulling on that line, they brought the *Intrepid* next to the *Philadelphia* until the ship was close enough to board. Suddenly, shouts of “Americanos!” rang through the harbor. Yet the Tripoli defenders were too late in sniffing out the American ploy. The *Intrepid*’s crew members, including MacDonough, boarded the *Philadelphia*, set it ablaze and escaped through the harbor with only one man wounded.

British Vice Admiral Lord Horatio Nelson later declared that this raid was “the most bold and daring act of the Age.” It was enough to earn MacDonough a promotion to the rank of lieutenant and a new assignment to the waters off the coast of Great Britain, where he would have one of the most dramatic experiences of his military career. While on shore leave in Liverpool, England, he was kidnapped in the streets by men employed to acquire new sailors for the British Navy by any means necessary, a practice commonly known as “impressment.”

Despite loudly protesting that he was an American officer, MacDonough was hauled aboard a British ship and thrown into quarters with a corporal of the British guard. That night, he waited until the corporal fell asleep. Then he stole the man’s clothing and dashed toward the ship’s deck. The suddenly-awakened corporal pursued him, but MacDonough knocked down the man, jumped aboard a rowboat and rowed himself to shore. “If I live,” he allegedly vowed to himself that night, “I will make England remember the day she impressed an American sailor.”

It would be a few years before he would have that chance. First, the Navy would send him stateside, working under Captain Isaac Hull to supervise the construction of a new fleet of American gunboats in Middletown, Conn. There, the 23-year-old lieutenant became friends with local merchant Norman Shaler and even closer friends with Shaler’s 16-year-old daughter, Lucy Ann. After a six-year courtship, MacDonough and Lucy Ann were married in the Middletown Episcopal Church on Dec. 12, 1812.

They were wed into a world that was dramatically different than it had been on the day of their first meeting. Great Britain had continued to seize American ships and capture American sailors, escalating to the point that Congress declared war on the powerful monarchy in June 1812. MacDonough had been ordered north to Lake Champlain three months after that declaration, assigned to take control of the American fleet on that strategically vital body of water. His greatest challenge — and his finest hour — stood in his immediate future.

Of course, MacDonough knew nothing of these impending glory days. He knew only that the vessels now under his command on Lake Champlain were a fleet in name only. Two leaky gunboats and six creaky sloops could hardly fend off the most powerful naval force on the planet. Indeed, when the British showed up on the lake in June 1813, one of MacDonough’s sloops was quickly sunk by British cannonballs and another was rapidly forced to surrender. The British superiority on the lake seemed to be guaranteed.

Yet MacDonough had one more card to play. In Vermont, he met with two brothers, Noah and Adam Brown, who promised that they could achieve the greatest shipbuilding feat in the young nation’s history. In just 40 days, they constructed the *USS Saratoga*, a 143-foot vessel armed with 26 cannons. In only 19 days, Adam built and

launched another staunchly armed brig, the *Eagle*. Noah supervised the construction of nine gunboats, each of them 75 feet in length. Suddenly, MacDonough had a fleet that could stand a fighting chance.

The fighting came on Sept. 11, 1814. MacDonough had positioned his ships in Plattsburgh Bay in a strategically sound position: open to the south, closed to the north. As a result, any approaching enemy ships would face two options: sail within range of his cannon or run themselves aground on the bay's treacherous shoals. Knowing that the British would skirt around the shoals, he was effectively goading them directly into the American line of fire.

In addition, MacDonough had knowingly taken a page from Horatio's playbook: placing anchors at the sterns and bows of each of his larger ships, allowing them to be easily rotated by pulling on the ships' "spring lines" and permitting the cannon on both sides of the ships to be used when firing upon the British vessels, just as Lord Nelson had done when commanding ships against the French on the Nile River. When his scouts reported that the British were coming their way, he ordered his men to prepare to make full use of this strategy.

First, though, the devout Episcopalian had a final task to complete. On the deck of the hastily built *Saratoga*, he removed his hat and knelt upon the wooden boards, inviting all of the sailors to kneel with him. "Stir up thy strength, O Lord, and come and help us," he prayed aloud, "for thou givest not always the battle to the strong, but canst save by many or by few — hear us, thy poor servants, imploring thy help that thou would be a defense unto us against the face of the enemy." Then he rose and placed his hat back on his head.

The community of Plattsburgh still celebrates what happened next: the tide-turning underdog victory in which MacDonough's strategy, borrowed from one of the military heroes of the British, worked to near-perfection in driving that nation off Lake Champlain. Twice, the *Saratoga* was set ablaze by heated British cannonballs. Twice, MacDonough himself was knocked unconscious. Yet the ability to quickly rotate the large ships from side-to-side enabled the Americans to keep up a steady barrage that ultimately proved fatal to the British hopes.

Accolades flowed like water upon the victorious commander. Congress minted a gold medal in his honor. The Navy promoted him to the rank of captain. New York and Vermont granted him huge tracts of land. But MacDonough did not remain in either location. Instead, he returned home to Middletown, back to Lucy Ann — who, in six weeks, would give birth to the first of their 10 children — and back to what could have become a life of victorious comfort.

There was only one problem; MacDonough was still young and restless, and the alluring call of the sea carried him away. Remaining in the Navy, his assignments took him to back to the Mediterranean, where he was serving when Lucy Ann passed away in 1825. When MacDonough received this news, he vowed to return home to his children. Yet he never got there. Tuberculosis knocked him on his back, never to recover. On Nov. 10, 1825, aboard his ship near Gibraltar, the 37-year-old commander breathed his last breath.

It is this life that began in this now-nondescript location adjoining that Delaware roadway, this life that this easily-bypassed plaque seeks to commemorate. History tends to varnish its victors, but from seemingly all accounts, MacDonough genuinely embodied the words sung in the Navy Hymn: "Strong to save." If it was indeed James' injury-shortened Navy career that he was inspired to complete, he did so in the most honorable manner conceivable.

The nation that he defended is now far larger, far busier, far more technologically advanced than the land that he knew. The world that he saw from ships' decks is entirely transformed. Time has marched past, and even the war in which he won that pivotal battle on Lake Champlain is often relegated to the footnotes. Such is the way of progress: that the people speeding by an antique shop on a high-speed Delaware road generally will never know that here was raised a man whose courageous acts preserved the life of liberty that they enjoy today.

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