

FROM PAINTER TO SHIP CAPTAIN: THE UNUSUAL JOURNEY OF CAPTAIN BENJAMIN RUE OF BUCKS COUNTY PENNSYLVANIA

In the fall of 1776, Benjamin Rue of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, was acting in the capacity of the captain of the *Philadelphia* gondola, a vessel in the fleet on Lake Champlain commanded by Brigadier General Benedict Arnold.¹ The *Philadelphia* and other gondolas and galleys in the fleet went on to face the advancing British fleet in an historic three day battle known as the Battle of Valcour Island. In this battle, the superior British fleet with more vessels, more manpower and more firepower ultimately prevailed over the American fleet for control of the lake. However, the Americans were able to delay the British long enough so that at the end of the battle, the British fleet returned to its base in Canada due to the onset of winter. Had the British succeeded in 1776 in its advance south from Canada on the Richalieu River, then on to Lake Champlain and down the Hudson River, the budding revolution in the American colonies would have most likely soon ended because the colonies would have been split in two.

The *Philadelphia* today is the most famous of the seventeen vessels that were in the Champlain fleet because its remains were raised from the lake in 1935 by Lorenzo J. Hagglund and subsequently ended up in the Smithsonian Institution Museum of American History in 1960.² It is the only one of those vessels that has been preserved in its original state and is now on permanent display. While the *Philadelphia* is known to many, its captain is not, having endured many years of being identified by an incorrect name of Rice.³ It is fair to say that today the name of Benjamin Rue is relatively unknown and his participation in the Valcour battle is unrecognized.

What is surprising about Rue's involvement in a critical nautical operation early in the war is that the extant record offers no satisfactory explanation as to how he was able to obtain the captaincy of a gondola while with the American army in Canada, and then subsequently to be selected by Benedict Arnold to command the *Philadelphia* on Lake Champlain. There is no contemporary record that reveals any previous nautical experience for Benjamin Rue of Bucks County, Pennsylvania.

According to Rue's pension application, he was born in Bucks County in 1752.⁴ Subsequent genealogical research has revealed that his father was Matthew Rue who lived in Bucks County. Nothing is known of Rue's early life except that by 1770 his father had died and his grandfather made a will leaving property in Bucks County to Benjamin and his younger brother Lewis. In 1774 and 1775, Benjamin Rue was listed in Bucks County documents as a "painter and glazier." Also in 1774, his younger brother Lewis petitioned the Orphans Court to appoint Benjamin his guardian for the land left to him by his grandfather.

As of 1775, Benjamin Rue was a twenty-three year old painter and glazier. This was a respectable occupation at that time which was in the same category as a mechanic. It seems that the typical activity of a painter and glazier would have been house painting, and possibly boat painting. This is not an occupation that one would associate with the type of nautical activities that would provide the experience for commanding a water-based vessel in war time.

Benjamin Rue's military experience up until the Battle of Valcour Island consisted of his joining the Bristol Borough company of Captain William McIlvain of the Bucks County Associators as a private in August of 1775. In November of 1775, he was serving as a sergeant in Captain Augustin Willet's Company, Colonel John Philip DeHaas' Regiment of the 1st Pennsylvania Battalion. In late November or early December, Rue was again promoted, this time to Ensign. Willet's Company was from Bucks County and the 1st Battalion was ordered to go to Canada in January of 1776 as reinforcements for the Canadian invasion that was still underway, but not going well. Already the American assault on Quebec had been defeated and the American Army had lost many men who were either killed, wounded or taken prisoner during the December 31, 1776 action. By March 1st, the DeHaas battalion was at Three Rivers and by March 30th they reached the American Army around Quebec.

The next appearance of Benjamin Rue is on April 15, 1776, when he was a captain of a "large New England Schooner" operating in the St Lawrence River. The name of Rue's schooner is not known. In a letter dated May 8, 1776, Benedict Arnold refers to a schooner operating on the St Lawrence River with ten guns. This must be the schooner commanded by Benjamin Rue as Arnold only mentions one such vessel. The primary job of the schooner was to move men and supplies to various points on the St Lawrence River. In early June of 1776, the Americans decided to abandon their siege of Quebec and began to retreat down the Richalieu River to Ilse Aux Noix and then to Crown Point on Lake Champlain. The DeHaas battalion reached it on July 1st and then went on to Fort Ticonderoga, which they reached on July 10.

On _____, Benedict Arnold was appointed by Major General Horatio Gates to lead the effort to respond to the planned retaliatory British invasion of the colonies by constructing a fleet of vessels and then commanding those vessels in the American response. Around the first of August, Benjamin Rue, at the age of twenty-three, was appointed as the Captain of the *Philadelphia* gondola, which had just been constructed. Rue and his new vessel then joined up with Arnold's fleet. Rue served as the captain of the *Philadelphia* until it was sunk by the British on October 11th the first day of the battle for control of the lake. The details of the actual battle is beyond the scope of this article, but has been described in many books and articles. After the battle, Rue requested to be released from his position because he no longer had a vessel to command, and on October 27th, he was allowed to return home.

In his pension application, Benjamin Rue includes two letters that attest to his service in the Valcour battle. The first is written by Benedict Arnold and is dated October 27th, 1776. It states that Rue "has behaved himself as an Officer and a Gentleman, and deserves the esteem and applause of his Country for his good conduct and bravery..." The second letter is also dated October 27th and states that Rue "has leave from the Honorable Major General Gates, commanding the Northern Army, in these parts, to depart this Camp and return to his residence, &c. This letter was signed by Gates' Aide de Camp, P. Hughes. Both refer to Rue's service as the commander of a gondola on Lake Champlain.

Upon returning to Pennsylvania, Rue joined with Captain Wingate Newman to form a Pennsylvania artillery company and served in that company as 1st Lieutenant under Captain Newman. This company participated in the Battles of Trenton and Princeton but there is no indication of the role that Rue or the company played in those battles.

On February 8, 1777, Rue was commissioned to the Pennsylvania Navy Armed Boat *Fire Brand* where he served as its captain. The boat primarily operated on the Delaware River. Prior to November 21, 1777,

the *Fire Brand* was sunk by the British and Rue once again found himself with no vessel to command. Not being offered any other command, Rue resigned from the Pennsylvania Navy on February 1, 1778. By that time, Rue had married Mary Taylor in Philadelphia on May 29, 1777.

According to Rue's pension application, he commanded a Public Vessel in the Delaware River from April of 1778 until the end of the war. His pension does not provide a name for the vessel and no other document regarding this service has been uncovered. It is possible that Rue confused the time of his command of the public vessel and could have been referring to his command of the *Fire Brand*, and not to a command of a separate vessel which he says was from 1778 to 1782. Given his previous involvement with vessels during the war, however, it is not a stretch to find Rue's statement in his pension application regarding this particular service as being credible. In reviewing Rue's Revolutionary War service, it seems like he had more success in making war on the water than he did making it on land.

After the war, Rue was involved in land schemes with various partners, including his father-in-law, John Taylor. He also served for two years starting in 1782 as County Coroner of Chester County, Pennsylvania, which was a position appointed by the Pennsylvania Assembly. His post-war efforts all ended badly and, desperate for a position with the newly formed national government, in 1791 he was finally able to obtain a federal appointment as a 2nd Mate on a Coast Guard Cutter, *General Green*, where he served under James Montgomery. Unfortunately, this position only lasted a couple of years and Rue was again left to find a way to support himself and a family.

In 1800, Rue tried a new and different occupation as an operator of a Public House, or tavern. His first tavern was in Tincum, Delaware County, Pennsylvania, and then by 1806 he had migrated to Lebanon, Warren County, Ohio, where over time he operated two different public houses, Crossed Keys and The Golden Lamb. In 1818, Rue applied for a pension and was approved. He was struck off the pension rolls two years later for having excessive income, and then reapplied again in 1822. Benjamin Rue died in Lebanon, Ohio on September 6, 1823.

It is clear from the path of his career, both during and after the war, that Benjamin Rue favored being in a nautical situation, rather than a land based one, whenever possible. It is inconceivable that he could have attained so many positions that required direct involvement at the helm of a water-going vessel without some previous experience. Given Arnold's extensive sea-going experience and his lack of toleration for inexperienced men in his command, it is equally inconceivable that Rue would have served as a captain under Arnold without some type of previous experience. It also stretches credulity to believe that Rue would have been able to assume command of any vessel without experience, particularly in wartime.

Based on available evidence, there is no basis upon which to suggest that his family members were experienced in nautical affairs, so one cannot claim that Rue might have obtained his experience in a family related enterprise. William Utermohlen, the knowledgeable genealogist of the Rue family, could not answer how Benjamin Rue might have attained his nautical skill. He pointed out to this author that "prior generations of Rues don't seem to have been a sea-going lot."

How then does one explain the ability of a twenty-two year old Pennsylvanian to secure an appointment to captain a sea-going vessel in a hostile war zone as Rue did in Canada in 1776. Utermohlen's statement leads to an obvious conclusion that Benjamin Rue did not rely on his family, but rather made his own way in learning the seafaring trade at some point in time prior to the outbreak of war.

One fact to support that Rue could have had previous experience is that Bucks County's eastern border is the Delaware River, which is 330 miles long, stretching from its headwaters in upstate New York to the Chesapeake Bay. There were many varieties and sizes of small vessels on the Delaware River prior to the Revolutionary War, including bateaux and Durham boats. The Durham boats attained fame when they were used to transport Washington and his army across the Delaware River on Christmas Eve of 1776 to attack the British post at Trenton, New Jersey.

However, the most prominent vessel present on that waterway prior to the Revolution was the sloop, which was mentioned by the Swedish traveler Kalm in 1748, and by 1746, it was claimed, "Trenton was at the head of sloop navigation." Prior to the Revolution, Philadelphia was the largest city with the largest seaport in the colonies and was a favored location for the landing of trade goods from foreign ports. The British navy was utilizing its vessels on the Delaware River and had its Royal Navy anchorage at Chester, Pennsylvania on the Delaware. The prominent presence of the Delaware River in Bucks County offers a realistic possibility that Rue had a nautical type job in his youth, probably on a Delaware River sloop, which would not be the case if he had lived in a land-locked county in Pennsylvania.

¹Stephen Darley *The Battle of Valcour Island: The Participants and vessels of Benedict Arnold's 1776 Defense of Lake Champlain*. CreateSpace, 2013, 87-88.

² Darley, 88.

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⁴ Benjamin Rue Pension Application. S40370, *NARA Revolutionary War Pension Files*.