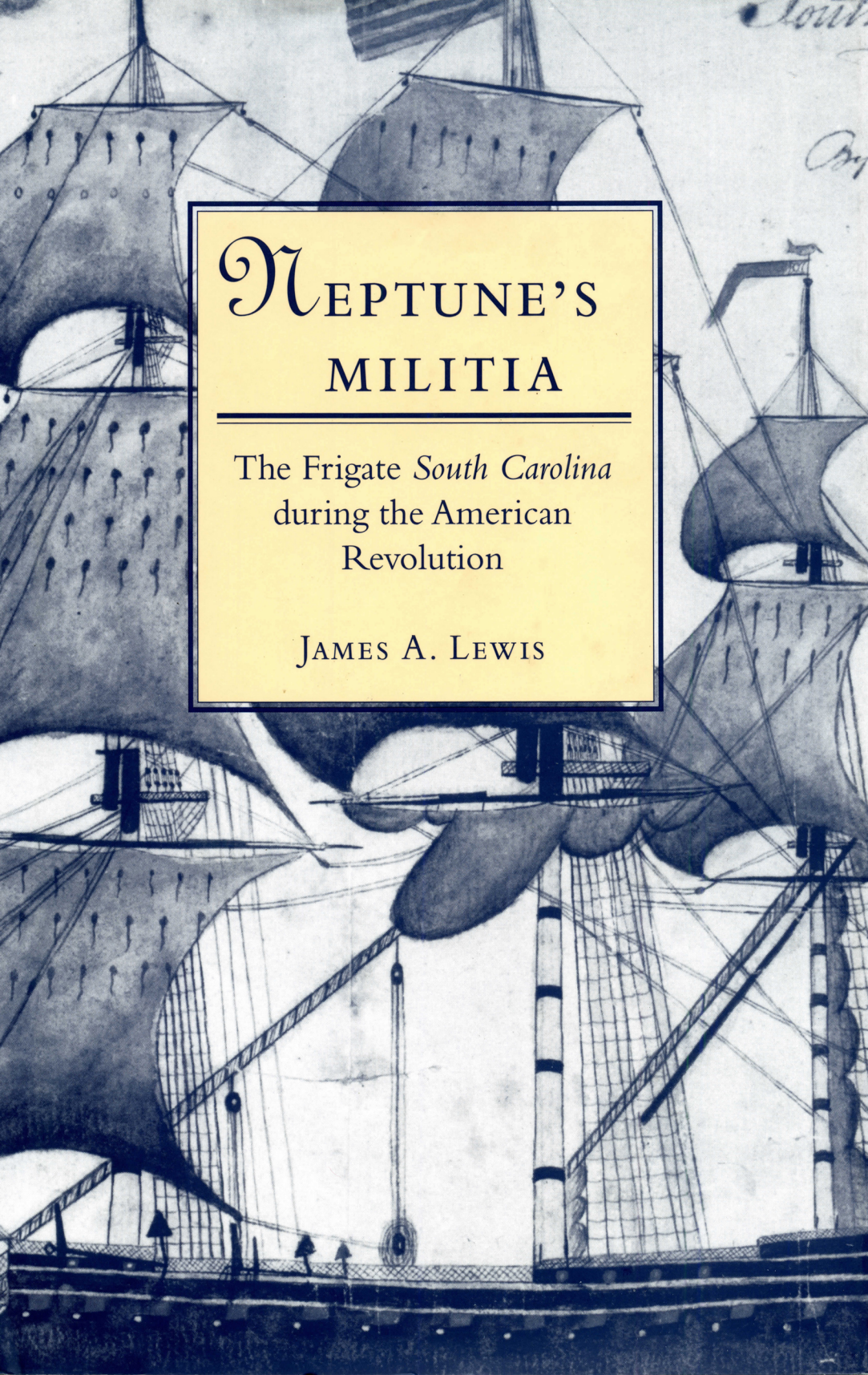


Neptune's Militia

The Frigate *South Carolina* during the American Revolution

James A. Lewis

NEPTUNE'S MILITIA

NEPTUNE'S MILITIA

The Frigate *South Carolina* during the American Revolution

JAMES A. LEWIS

THE KENT STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Kent, Ohio, and London

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 99-20255
ISBN 0-87338-632-9
Manufactured in the United States of America

05 04 03 02 01 00 99 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Lewis, James A., 1942–
Neptune's militia : the frigate South Carolina during the American Revolution / James A. Lewis.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-87338-632-9 (cloth : alk. paper) ∞
1. South Carolina (Frigate) 2. United States—History—Revolution, 1775–1783—Naval operations. 3. South Carolina—History—Revolution, 1775–1783—Naval operations. I. Title.
E273.S68L49 1999
973.3'5—dc21 99-20255

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication data are available.

JOHANNA O. LEWIS

Wife, Companion, Editor, and Amor de Mi Vida

CONTENTS

Preface ix

Introduction xi

1. *L'Indien:* Birth of a Frigate 1

2. The Red-Ribboned Commodore 13

3. The Luxembourg Connection 20

4. On to Texel 24

5. De Groate Schip 34

6. After the Flood 41

7. The Worst of Hells 50

8. Common Purpose 58

9. Infamias y Vendidos 65

10. Choir of Conspirators 77

11. Knock'd o' the Head 85

12. Foul Air and *Old Jersey* 96

13. "Fully Satisfied with My Conduct" 105

14. The Luxembourg Claims and More 112

15. Investors in America 120

16. The Measure of a Frigate and a Commodore 126

Appendix: Crew and Marines of the *South Carolina* 135

Abbreviations 171

Notes 173

Bibliography 216

Index 226

PREFACE

I need to blame this book on my computer. Little did I imagine when I finished my graduate work in colonial Latin American history several decades ago that I would attempt a book essentially in American history. Yet, here I am, guilty as can be. And it was that devil computer that made me do it.

I had just started using a computer during my last book, *The Final Campaign of the American Revolution: Rise and Fall of the Spanish Bahamas,* which, in spite of its title, really is a book about colonial Latin American history. My editor insisted that the title emphasize the American history aspect in order to sell more copies. At any rate, in order to keep track of the hundreds of individuals who had something to do with the Spanish occupation of the Bahamas from 1782 through 1783, I began to create a reference bank of names on my Macintosh. Since the *South Carolina* played a role in my Bahamian story, I soon realized that I had a portion of the crew in my computer. At first, only a couple of hundred entries, then more than five hundred, then a thousand, and finally nearly thirteen hundred.

I was not sure what to do with this collection. It was fun just to find new members of the crew, and I had no intention of ever writing about them. I toyed with the idea of just printing up the list and sending it to the South Carolina State Archives and the South Carolina Historical Society for their use. In collecting the names, however, I had also dug up all sorts of collateral information, particularly that from state and national pension records. These were so rich and so informative that I just became hooked on the story.

The saga of the *South Carolina* has been an enjoyable yet frustrating journey for me. It has allowed me to meander through the historiography of the American Revolution and puzzle over the question of Commodore Alexander Gillon's reputation. How could a man so successful, commanding the largest warship under any American during the war and conqueror of an entire British colony (New Providence), have such modest, even unsavory, fame in the scholarly literature of the Revolution?

In addition to the Spanish sources so important in *The Final Campaign* part of the story, I have also had the leisure to poke around in the French and

Dutch works relating to the great frigate. While I had no training and very limited linguistic skills in the Dutch and French materials, they were absolutely crucial. It became more and more apparent to me that the actions of Commodore Gillon could not be understood without appreciating the fact that he was Dutch-born and raised and that his warship was French-designed and owned.

It is unlikely that any other ship under American command produced more written commentary than the *South Carolina*. This was partly because of the size of her crew, with well over a thousand individuals serving aboard in some capacity. Also responsible for the mountains of information about the ship on both sides of the Atlantic were the controversies that swirled around the ship for nearly seventy years after she stopped sailing. Greed played a further role in putting pen and ink to paper. Individuals serving on the frigate felt themselves eligible for both state and national pensions after the war. Finally, there was just something special about the *South Carolina* that encouraged those who sailed on her to write about life at sea, often not fondly, at some point. An amazing number of individuals who trod across the deck of the great ship were literate.

Any scholar owes a debt to those who have assisted him during his research, and mine are legion. In addition to those whom I mentioned in the preface to *The Final Campaign,* I would like to thank Bryan F. McKown (South Carolina State Archives), Dotsy L. Boineau (Confederate War Museum, Columbia, South Carolina), Lion G. Miles (Stockbridge, Massachusetts), Alain Burchett (graduate student, Western Carolina University), Dennis Conrad (Nathaniel Greene Papers), Anita Oser (map librarian), and colleagues Lewis Sutton and Curtis Wood. Max R. Williams took precious time from his own work to read my manuscript several times. Thurman T. Morgan of Charleston has provided me with numerous leads concerning the *South Carolina,* and I always appreciated his enthusiastic and informative phone calls. A special thanks to Brenda Moore, interloan librarian at Hunter Library, Western Carolina University, who never tired of my numerous requests for exotic books in numerous languages. The University of South Carolina Press has graciously granted me permission to use portions of *The Final Campaign* in chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 of this book.

Lastly, I want to acknowledge the help of my wife, Johanna O. Lewis, to whom this book is dedicated.

INTRODUCTION

Those who saw her, particularly those who had sailor's eyes, knew that the *South Carolina* was a special ship. Those who just heard about her had exactly the same impression. She was the largest man-of-war under American command during the American Revolution, carrying 550 men when fully manned. Her mainmast rose a majestic 103 feet, her keel and beam stretched 168 and 47 feet respectively, and her draught plunged 22 feet beneath the surface of the water. The frigate sported forty cannons, twenty-eight of them 36-pounders on the main deck and the rest long twelves on the quarterdeck and forecastle. She could throw over five hundred pounds of shot in a single broadside.[1]

John Paul Jones, who spent part of his naval career during the Revolution pleading for and demanding control over this ship, described the *South Carolina* as one of the "finest frigates ever built."[2] Many years later, Commodore Joshua Barney told his family that he would have given his life to have commanded the frigate for just one cruise.[3] Juan Manuel de Cagigal (captain-general of Cuba during the war and member of a family with long service in the Spanish navy), José de Solano (commander in chief of the Spanish fleet at Havana), and Bernardo de Gálvez (hero of the Spanish victory over the British at Pensacola) boarded the frigate at Havana and thought her "beautiful."[4] After taking tea on board, young John Quincy Adams, future president of the United States, characterized the vessel as "a very fine ship."[5] French officials also had chances to observe the *South Carolina* during the war and expressed their admiration for her physical appearance.[6] As impressive and famous as the *South Carolina* was during her day, it is remarkable how little historical attention she received once the war was over. Her story is worth telling, for that and a number of other reasons.

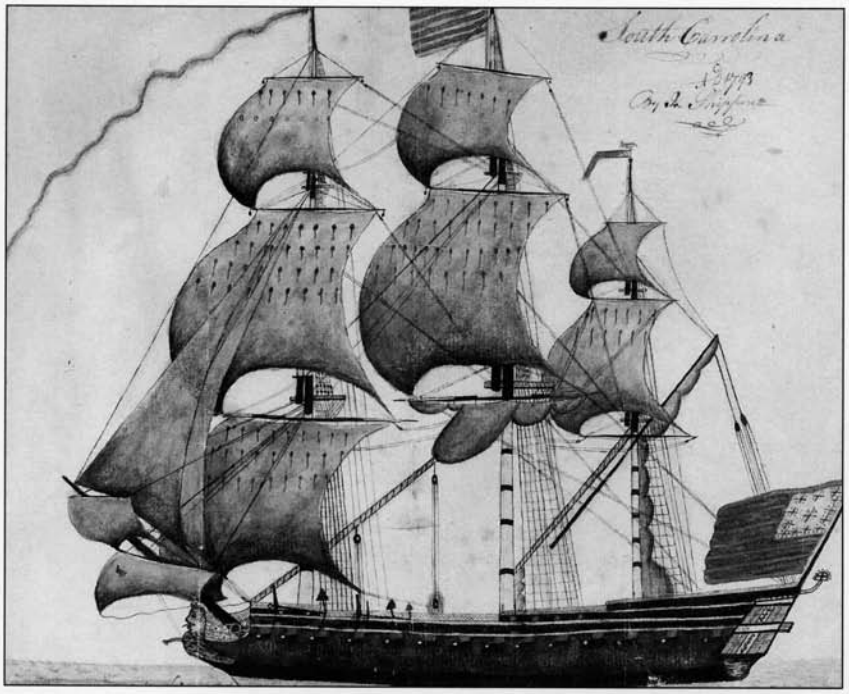
Built in Holland during the early years of the war, the *South Carolina* passed through the hands of a series of owners, none of whom could get her out of the dockyards, let alone to sea, until 1781. In that year Commodore Alexander Gillon of Charleston finally sailed her out of Texel. Gillon had the grit, imagination, connections, talent, and resolve to get her to deep water. Although historians have given considerable attention to how various American leaders

patched together armies to fight the British, almost no studies have been done on how the same was done with naval vessels. With no state organization whatsoever to draw upon for help, only a man of Gillon's unique skills could have found a way to finance, arm, man, and sail a frigate as large as the *South Carolina*. The distinction between what Alexander Gillon did with his frigate and what other American sea captains accomplished with their vessels is like the difference between Washington's army and the small guerrilla bands that popped up frequently during the war. The scale of operation was enormous, but it has been little noted or appreciated.

The *South Carolina* did far more during the war than just float. In her two years as a fighting vessel she crossed the Atlantic, captured nearly a dozen prizes, took New Providence (in partnership with the Spanish) from the British, refitted in Philadelphia, fought off numerous efforts by envious bureaucrats to give her to someone else, and ended her career in battle with three British cruisers off Long Island. While she had a short life by modern standards, the ship's career was eventful and significant.

Although the *South Carolina*'s hurled no more shots in anger after her capture, other battles swirled around her memory for almost a century afterward. Over a thousand individuals had served on the frigate, and many of them petitioned for pay, prize money, and pensions in subsequent years. If the veterans themselves did not seek compensation, often their widows and children did so much later. The most difficult of these claims, those of the first body of marines on board—the so-called Volunteers or Legion of Luxembourg—were not settled until 1855, presumably long after any veteran could have benefited directly. The *South Carolina* spawned other types of claims as well. The state of South Carolina pressed the Spanish government for years to grant promised recompense for the American effort in capturing New Providence. At the same time, several foreign groups pressed the state at the end of the war for separate awards dealing with the loss of the frigate. The state of South Carolina had only leased the ship during the war, and the original owners, a disputatious group, fought for a lucrative settlement of their own.

Perhaps the best reason to tell the *South Carolina*'s story is that it has an intrinsic value for those interested in the American Revolution. The ship crossed paths with such American worthies as Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Robert Morris; with French luminaries like Louis XVI, the Chevalier de Luzerne, and Fernand Grand; with such Spanish dandies as Francisco de Miranda, Bernardo de Gálvez, and Juan Manuel de Cagigal; and with English adversaries like diplomat Sir Joseph Yorke, Vice-Admiral Hyde Parker, and Gen-



Frigate *South Carolina,* by John Pippen
(Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts)

eral Sir Guy Carleton. At the same time, for months during the war the ship was home to a polyglot crew recruited in some of the most cosmopolitan ports of the Atlantic. With nothing more than timber and a multilingual commodore to hold them together, the frigate's officers and crew generally performed admirably. The *South Carolina,* then, was a presence at the end of the war, but her story really begins in the early years of the Revolution.

I

L'INDIEN: BIRTH OF A FRIGATE

WHILE ALWAYS ASSOCIATED with the state of South Carolina, the beginnings of the *South Carolina* had little or nothing to do with this southern province. Instead, the frigate's origins were to be found in the maritime and wartime desires of the Continental Congress, France, and the Netherlands. It took little discernment for the initial leaders of the revolution in the Thirteen Colonies to realize that they faced an almost insurmountable challenge at sea. Every colony fronted the Atlantic, and the vast majority of settlers lived within easy travel of the sea. Not one of the colonies was self-sufficient, and all depended upon trade for prosperity and necessities. A war with England meant that their economic lifeline would be threatened by the world's greatest sea power. Whatever fantasies suggested that the colonial militia could handle military problems on land, no such delusions existed concerning the sea.

Short of persuading someone else to fight their sea battles for them—an objective achieved ultimately with the entrance of France and Spain into the war—leaders of the Continental Congress gave high priority to acquiring some instrument of naval power abroad. While warships could be built in the colonies, there was great difficulty in rigging and arming them there. Moreover, the very act of constructing a dry dock presented the enemy with a tempting target for sea or land raids. Patriot leaders soon decided that they needed some frigates under their control. Men-of-war of that class were powerful enough to divert the attention of the largest warships afloat yet fast enough to outsail all ships except those of their own type. Most importantly, they were the cheapest of the large warships to own and maintain. While a few frigates would hardly tip the balance of naval power in favor of the rebels, they would

allow the Continental Congress to control critical sea lanes temporarily and even threaten escorted shipping of the enemy. In theory and past practice, such ships paid for themselves through what they could capture at sea, which was almost anything save the largest British men-of-war. One of the responsibilities of the first American envoys to Europe, hence, was to acquire several frigates for the rebels.[1]

While frigates were certainly not the top priority of the these American representatives on the continent—diplomatic recognition and financial assistance being far more crucial—they were not so unimportant as to be lost in the shuffle either. In France, where the first major diplomatic efforts by the rebels had to be made, Arthur Lee, Benjamin Franklin, and Silas Deane worked together to secure warships for the new country. The French government was certainly sympathetic to the requests for frigates and saw the obvious advantages to France and the insurgent colonies if England had to deal with significant naval problems in this rebellion. However, the two easiest ways of providing frigates for the Americans, turning over warships currently under the fleur-de-lis or building such ships in French dockyards, were unacceptable.

The French Bourbons had long anticipated a new war with England ever since the previous one, the Seven Years War (1756–1763), had ended so disastrously for them and their Spanish cousins. When that time came—and it likely would come soon, in light of the opportunity that the rebellion in the Thirteen Colonies gave Versailles—every available warship would be needed. There were no frigates to spare for the Americans no matter how useful they might be in the hands of the rebels. Furthermore, ships the size of a frigate were not transferred secretly from one owner to another. Every French frigate was well known to the British; should one suddenly appear in the hands of the rebels, it would be impossible to hide its source or the hostile intent behind the transfer. Such a provocative act could precipitate war with England before the French were fully prepared. Exactly the same motives prevented the French from constructing a frigate for the Americans in their own docks. By the mid-1770s, all available space was devoted to building ships for the French navy. France would pick a better way to enter the next war than giving the British the choice of dates to begin it.

French thoughts about proper maritime assistance to the rebels in fact paralleled their ideas about all aid to the Americans: the more indirect, the harder it was to trace, the better. However, if the Americans really wanted frigates, Versailles would help their new friends acquire them. The French government had

granted the Americans a considerable amount of capital and credit. If Franklin, Deane, and Lee wished to spend it on ships, France could expedite such purchases beyond her borders.

It was Silas Deane who took the initiative on this issue.[2] In France before Franklin arrived, Deane had met Jacques Boux, a prominent French naval officer, through the good offices of Jacques-Donatien Le Ray de Chaumont and the Grand brothers, Georges and Ferdinand.[3] Boux was an interesting military figure. Born into the French artisan class, he had carved out a distinguished career in the most aristocratic of the French services, the navy, on merit alone. By the Seven Years War he had attained a rank that allowed him to command frigates; afterward he began to concentrate on engineering and technical problems facing the French navy. In particular, he became interested in hull forms and ship construction. Designing and supervising the building of several successful and innovative men-of-war, Boux served as technical advisor to a reorganized French navy in the early 1770s. Although money, medals, and rank came Boux's way, his modest social origins always blocked advancement to the highest echelons. Moreover, by 1776 the French navy was beginning to retreat from some of Boux's reform proposals. Boux foresaw a frustrating end to his career; what he wanted was nothing less than to command a navy of his own, even if he had to make it from scratch, and even if it was not French. Boux was willing to build warships for the Americans if they would agree to reward him properly.[4] Silas Deane and his fellow American envoys, Franklin and Lee, were happy to accommodate. In January 1777 Boux signed a contract with the American commissioners to construct frigates for them in Amsterdam.[5]

Boux's contract with the rebel envoys was the first of many legal agreements that was to swirl around the *South Carolina*. Along with supporting documents, it revealed much about this Frenchman's ambitions. Boux would build a fighting navy—that is, several frigates—for the Continental Congress in return for being given general command with the rank of commodore. He would have the power to appoint most of the captains and other senior officers, including specific permission to name a nephew as lieutenant.[6] Boux no longer wanted fleet command on board ship, much preferring to direct from shore; if necessary, however, he would go to sea. He specifically asked, if circumstances required his presence aboard, to be relieved of the obligation of dining with other officers. Providing a mess for junior officers was a traditional courtesy extended by those of senior rank in the French navy, but it was a heavy expense. Boux's wish to avoid this did not suggest a retiring personality but rather a man of modest means.[7]

The Frenchman's real interest was to develop a naval establishment that was simple, inexpensive, and manned with persons of talent.[8] No time was to be wasted designing new ships; Boux intended to build the American frigates following plans he had drawn up for the French navy earlier. In fact, it was understood that he had built at least one prototype for the French already. These ships were to be a new type of frigate, one with much greater firepower than usual in warships their size, rivaling the broadside thrown by a sixty-four-gun man-of-war, while not sacrificing the speed and maneuverability of a smaller vessel. What American diplomat of the day would not have been interested in what Boux promised—a cheap, fast, and tremendously powerful cruiser!

Holland was a thoroughly satisfactory place to construct such a ship. It had a rich maritime tradition of its own and numerous dry docks. French aid to the rebels was already passing through Holland, and the construction of a man-of-war there would be part of a larger effort and network. Boux had built ships in Holland before and was familiar with the business negotiations required for naval construction there. Most importantly, because Holland was still neutral, it should be possible to slip ships out to sea fairly easily.

The French engineer wasted little time getting started. Boux arrived in Amsterdam by late February 1777 and selected a shipyard belonging to a Mr. Staats.[9] The plan of the American commissioners called for the construction of two frigates; in May, however, Boux's estimates of the costs involved, his request for a considerable advance, and a myriad of demands for money to be spent elsewhere caused the commissioners to scale back their naval ambitions to one frigate. This reduction in scope caused Boux to return momentarily to Paris in May, but it did not dampen his determination. Somewhere along the way Boux received a second commission, from the Spanish government, to fashion a warship in Holland, apparently following a similar but somewhat reduced design.[10] Far from raising questions among the American commissioners about split loyalties, the Spanish contract seemed to confirm the wisdom of choosing Boux. Like many military retirees, Boux had turned his martial talents into a new and lucrative civilian career.

By August 1777 the keel of the American hull had been laid. By September the frigate was half built.[11] It took about a year to finish a warship the size of *L'Indien,* as the French originally called what would become the *South Carolina,* and Boux was close to schedule. Unfortunately, time had run out for the American commissioners, now clearly led by Franklin. They had finally realized that building a navy, even a one-ship version, was only part of the expense—to rig, man, and provision such a force was an enormous burden,

one that they could not carry. By the fall of 1777 Benjamin Franklin was trying to unload this endless source of expense. Luckily, the French government, whose money was really building the ship anyway, was willing to take over the frigate and complete it. By the end of 1777, hence, ownership of *L'Indien* was in the hands of Versailles.[12] In time, ironically, what had seemed too expensive to representatives of Thirteen Colonies would appear acceptable to representatives of just one, South Carolina.

While the American motives in getting rid of the ship were understandable, France's willingness to take over the frigate were not so clear. Obviously, the French wanted to assist the Americans and realized that *L'Indien* would take more resources than Franklin could afford to divert from other needs to get her to sea. Equally significant, however, was France's desire, though she was not yet at war with England, to acquire every possible warship. Boux knew how to build ships of high quality, and *L'Indien* promised to be something special. If he finished her rapidly, *L'Indien* could be launched with a skeleton crew and dropped down the coast to a nearby French port to arm and recruit. Speed of completion was the critical element here. Once war with England began, only the most fortuitous of circumstances would allow the new frigate to be added to the French navy.

The record of *L'Indien* for the next two and a half years is very fragmentary. Yet much can be deduced from several vital sources, the most important of which are British foreign office papers and the correspondence of John Paul Jones. Because the frigate was so large, indeed reportedly the largest ship ever built in Amsterdam up to that point, she immediately attracted the attention of British agents in that Dutch city. As early as March 1777 the British foreign office and admiralty were receiving on-the-site reports about the new frigate.[13] Since the entourages of Franklin, Deane, and Lee were riddled with British informers—the most famous of them Dr. Edward Bancroft, secretary to Deane and Franklin—London's interest had already been piqued. Bancroft's tie to the *L'Indien* would continue even after the war. After Arthur Lee's papers were stolen in mid-1777 by British agents, the court of St. James probably had a copy of the contract with Boux.[14] Further information about the rebel connection with this new ship came from spies within the French court who had picked up news about this ship being built in Holland. Probably no man-of-war in embryo on the continent in those years received more attention from the British diplomatic service than did *L'Indien*.

Boux succeeded in getting at least one, maybe even two, new ships to sea from Amsterdam—but not *L'Indien*.[15] Because of her enormous draft, she could not be sailed directly from the dockyard in Amsterdam to open water.

Between this Dutch port and the North Sea stretched the Pampus, an expanse of water whose depth was only fifteen feet, plenty for most ships but not enough for *L'Indien,* which drew more than twenty-two feet of water. As a result she would have to be pulled on her side, with her keel parallel to the water, for nearly sixty miles before she could be righted. Not only was this a daunting effort in itself, but it meant that the ship could only be partially built in Amsterdam. Finishing touches, including setting up rigging and topmasts and loading armaments, would have to be done along the coast of Holland or elsewhere. Considering Holland's long and distinguished maritime tradition, Boux might have been wise to ponder earlier why no ship the size of *L'Indien* had ever built in Amsterdam. It is highly unlikely that Dutch craftsmen did not warn the Frenchman about this problem. This was a frigate trapped by her place of birth.

How long Boux stayed with the ship after the Americans withdrew is not clear.[16] In February 1778 *L'Indien* slid off the stocks to float free near the Staats yard. At some point in that year, most likely before hostilities broke out between Versailles and the Court of St. James, the French made a halfhearted effort to get *L'Indien* out of Amsterdam to the Texel, from where they presumably wanted to make a run for a French port. Unfortunately, the ship never left Amsterdam, where the frigate rested, nearly deserted, save for a token work and watch crew. However, she was not forgotten.

War with England, as foreseen, presented the French with an almost insurmountable hurdle in getting a warship like the *L'Indien* to sea. The British could and would stop any overt effort to sail her out under French colors. To do it surreptitiously was also nearly impossible. For a while the frigate was ostensibly owned by a French firm in Amsterdam (Horneca, Fizeaux & Company), which claimed that it was an East Indiaman intended for the Far East. London never accepted this explanation, because of the plethora of evidence that the vessel was no such thing, but found it nonetheless convenient for diplomatic purposes to pretend satisfaction with this claim. Indeed, British agents and diplomats on the ground in Holland may have even believed the East Indiaman description because a warship as big as *L'Indien* almost always had two decks of cannons, but Boux's ship had only one, an experimental aspect of his design. Nevertheless, Sir Joseph Yorke, Britain's able ambassador to The Hague, demanded strict assurances from the Dutch that the vessel's purpose was commercial.[17]

In no mood to provoke the English unnecessarily, the Dutch in turn required guarantees from the French company that no military intention was associated with the ship. Dutch goodwill was more important to Versailles from

1778 through 1780 than the sailing of one frigate. As a result *L'Indien* went nowhere but instead rotted at anchor, and the French government faced the unpleasant prospect of seeing a considerable investment in capital and manpower wasted in Holland. It was at this juncture in 1778 that John Paul Jones crossed paths with the future *South Carolina*.

If he was not yet the titan of *Serapis–Bon Homme Richard* fame, Jones's naval career in the service of the Americans had begun to prosper, and by late 1777 he was constantly looking for a ship worthy of his self-proclaimed talents. Jones's style of command at sea produced publicity and casualties. He used and abused ships and men with equal rapidity. Few individuals who served under the famous sailor stayed with him very long, and fewer still recalled Jones with much fondness. Jones apparently heard about *L'Indien* in December 1777 and began to lobby hard to obtain command of the frigate. After pulling all the strings that he could think of in French society and courting Benjamin Franklin's support, Jones received word in June 1778 that he would be given command of *L'Indien* as soon as she reached a French port.[18]

It was Franklin who informed Jones of his good luck, and it was Franklin who told Jones about some of the conditions attached to this new command. French sailors would man the frigate, but Jones could supplement them by exchanging British captives that he had taken on earlier voyages for American prisoners held in English gaols. In addition, the Prince of Nassau, a noted French adventurer and commander of a private regiment, would sail with him.[19] Nassau would presumably provide the marines needed and, while it was not stated explicitly, quite possibly keep an eye on the temperamental foreigner. The overwhelming French presence that would have distinguished the frigate had she gone to sea under Jones foreshadowed the composition of the crew when *L'Indien* became the *South Carolina* several years later.

Jones's fortune with *L'Indien* soured faster than it had sweetened. Notoriously impatient, Jones assumed appointment to command was tantamount to having command. Yet no one had found a way to get the frigate out of Amsterdam to sea, let alone move her to France. Moreover, Jones's irascibility resulted in several ill-tempered letters to French officials, who soon rethought their decision to turn over such a valuable ship to the rude and inexperienced Jones.[20] Other ambitious mariners found out about the frigate and attempted to secure her command also.[21] Even the Prince of Nassau turned against Jones, after traveling to Holland to see how soon the frigate could be brought to sea. By the end of 1778 the transplanted Scotchman's appointment had faded away, never officially revoked but never confirmed either. *L'Indien* remained afloat but trapped in Amsterdam.

Few reports survive about *L'Indien* in 1779. Jones did appear in Holland during that year, and there were rumors that he intended to take the ship out. Jones's reason for visiting the Netherlands, however, was in fact to relieve himself of captured prizes, including the famous *Serapis* taken in September.[22] The Dutch government, moreover, could hardly let a visitor as provocative as Jones now was leave in command of *L'Indien*. European diplomacy allowed privateers to bring prizes into neutral ports. It did not permit, however, privateers the privilege of sailing out ships the quality of *L'Indien,* unless the reaction of warring factions did not matter. The Dutch still wanted English friendship at this point in the conflict. Not till early 1780 did the fate of *L'Indien* begin to change.

2

THE RED-RIBBONED COMMODORE

WHILE JOHN PAUL JONES never could pull the right strings to secure command over *L'Indien,* a fellow countryman, Alexander Gillon—whom Jones once derisively dismissed as "the red ribboned commodore"—did.[1] Jones's disparaging reference to his rival has led many later hero-worshippers to adopt the same attitude. This phrase certainly reflected Jones's resentment and jealousy toward Gillon, who always bested the Scotchman-turned-patriot whenever they competed head to head. Doors tended to open for Gillon even as they shut for Jones. Moreover, Gillon did not quit after momentary frustrations. Gillon's background is critical in understanding how he gained control of *L'Indien,* soon to be renamed the *South Carolina.*

Gillon was born in Rotterdam, Holland, on August 13, 1741. His father was a Scotchman, and his mother seems to have been a Scot as well. His father immigrated to Holland in 1726.[2] Although Gillon family genealogists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries tried to claim aristocratic French ancestry for the Commodore, the language of his Rotterdam home was English, judging from extant letters of the Commodore to his sister Susannah Hooderpyl (variously also Hodenpyl, Holdenpyl, or Holderpy).[3] As a teenager Gillon worked for four years in a Dutch countinghouse in London, after which, in 1764, he commanded a ship in a voyage to Philadelphia. A year later he was master of a ship en route to Charleston. He returned to that city on a permanent basis the next year, 1766. On one of his voyages, probably that from Philadelphia to Charleston, Gillon encountered Mary Cripps, widow of a prominent Charlestonian merchant, William Cripps. He married her on July 13, 1766. Gillon was clearly a young man of substance when he left Europe, and

he added to his wealth through marriage. He was soon viewed as one of the wealthier men of Charleston, and among his many initial business activities was a store on Broad Street specializing in English and Dutch merchandise. Later in life he ran a plantation, owned a tavern, loaned and borrowed money, and traded in real estate—not untypical business ventures for many affluent Charlestonians.[4]

There are indications that Gillon intended early in his American residence to return permanently to Europe;[5] in fact, married life, stepchildren to establish in business, and his obvious success as an entrepreneur rooted him in the New World and turned him into a zealous South Carolina patriot. Yet Gillon was also different from fellow rebels in South Carolina. His European, more significantly Dutch, background left him with a gift for languages. Family history maintained that he spoke seven and wrote five European tongues. While this may have been a slight exagerration, he certainly spoke English, Dutch, French, and German and wrote in the first three.[6] Moreover, he had an affinity for fellow European immigrants who lived in Charleston. Gillon was a member of the German Friendly Society and a founder of the German fusiliers in his adopted city.[7] All these cultural and linguistic tools from his cosmopolitan background would play a role in acquiring the future *South Carolina.*

Although before the war he ran into trouble with the Committees of Correspondence over importing English goods, Gillon found a niche to occupy in South Carolina history when the American Revolution became an armed revolt.[8] In the heady summer days of 1775, when reform and revolution swept one mainland colony after another, the royal government collapsed in Charleston, and the expatriate Dutchman played an active role in politics. In the fall of 1775 Gillon served in the provincial congress and secured a contract from the Continental Congress to buy munitions and clothing in Europe for Washington's army. He was one of only three southerners to obtain such an arrangement.[9] In 1776 he apparently traveled to Cadiz and elsewhere on business, presumably in furtherance of his contract with the Philadelphia government.[10] In November of 1777 he garnered another lucrative arrangement with Congress to return to Europe for more military supplies.[11] For Gillon and for scores of merchants involved in the Revolution, partisanship never meant forgoing an opportunity to earn money privately while furthering the public weal. While such an attitude was typical of the eighteenth century, it created nightmarish situations when others attempted to audit private and public accounts later. Gillon's last contract with the Continental Congress never pros-