



*The Battle of Valcour Island*  
*A Burst Cannon Reflects a Moment in Time*



*Reenactors fire off cannons on board LCMM's replica 1776 gunboat Philadelphia II.*  
LCMM Collection

# *The Battle of Valcour Island*

## *A Burst Cannon Reflects a Moment in Time*

The Lake Champlain Maritime Museum has been engaged in research on the Battle of Valcour Island for more than two decades and in 1991 launched a full-sized replica of the gunboat *Philadelphia*. In 1997 LCMM located the last unaccounted for vessel from Benedict Arnold's Valcour Island fleet. When the gunboat was first located, its identity was not known and a new research effort was launched. We now believe the gunboat located in 1997 is the *Spitfire*.

LCMM historians began re-examining all known accounts of the Battle of Valcour Island and searching the archives and libraries for new information. Historian George Quintal began compiling information about the men who fought at Valcour Island on October 11–13, 1776. The list of Valcour Island participants is currently over 400 names. During this research effort a new pension record for one of the American participants, Sergeant Jonas Holden was located. Sergeant Holden was born in 1751 in Groton, Mass., and was a staunch patriot from the earliest days of the American Revolution. In 1775, he was a minuteman and participated in the battles of Concord and Bunker Hill.

In early 1776, Jonas volunteered to join the Northern Army and was sent to Lake Champlain. Along with his brother Sartell and his fellow townsman Lieutenant Thomas Rogers, he was assigned to the gunboat *New York*, one of the eight gunboats in the American fleet and the sister ship to both the *Philadelphia* and the *Spitfire*. Through his pension record, we learned that during the battle on October 11, one of the *New York's* cannon burst while attempting to be fired, injuring Sergeant Holden in the right arm and side. Holden recovered from these wounds and continued to fight for the American cause until the British surrender at Yorktown on October 19, 1781. He died at the age of 83 in Wallingford, Vermont. He and his wife Sarah were the parents of twelve children and have over 200 surviving descendants.

Jonas Holden's pension record also reveals that when the *New York's* cannon burst causing his own wounds, the explosion killed Lieutenant Thomas Rogers. Although Arnold reported "*the New York lost all her Officers except her Captain,*" the *New York* was the only gunboat to survive the battle. Sometime after his death, Lieutenant Rogers' wife, Molly, who was pregnant at the time of her husband's death, erected a marker in his memory at the Fairview cemetery in Westford, Massachusetts. The marker reads:

### *Memento Mori*

*This Monument is Erected to the  
Memory of Lieut: Thomas Rogers by  
Mrs. Molly his Sorowfull widow  
He was Killed by the Splitting of a  
Cannon on the Lake Champlain  
On the 11<sup>th</sup> day of Oct' 1776 in the  
Continental Army in the Serves of his  
Country and in the caus of  
Liberty Aged 26 years and 9 months.*



*Lieutenant Thomas Rogers' gravestone at the Fairview cemetery in Westford, Massachusetts.*  
LCMM Collection

*A Return of the Fleet belonging to the United States of America on Lake Champlain under the Command of Brigadier General Arnold, together with the names of the Capt. Vessels of Ticonderoga Octob: 22: 1776*

Vessels	Names	by Whom Commanded	Cannons							The Fate of the Fleet		
			48 lb	24 lb	18 lb	6 lb	4 lb	1 lb	1 lb			
Schooner	Royal Savage	Capt. Winschop				6	4	12	22	60	Went ashore & blown up by the crew	
d <sup>o</sup>	Revenge	Capt. Sionens					8	10	18	35	Arrived safe into Port	
d <sup>o</sup>	Liberty	Tumer					2	6	6	14	ditto	
Shoop	Enterprise	Dixon					10	12	22	60	ditto	
Row Gallies	Sea	Davis	1	1		4		6	6	45	Went up Onion River and burnt by the crew	
d <sup>o</sup>	Compass	Arnold	2	2		4		10	18	70	Went ashore & blown up by her crew	
d <sup>o</sup>	Walrus	Thatcher	1	3		4		10	18	70	Taken by the Enemy	
d <sup>o</sup>	Warrior	Wemy	1	1	2	2		10	18	70	Arrived safe into Port	
d <sup>o</sup>	Gates	Chapple	2	2		4		10	18	70	not shelled	
d <sup>o</sup>	Providence	Simmons				3		70	10	45	Blown up by her crew	
d <sup>o</sup>	Spitfire	Umore				3		4	7	45	Sunk at her anchor by the Enemy	
d <sup>o</sup>	Constant	Grant				2		8	11	45	Went ashore & blown up by her crew	
d <sup>o</sup>	Seize	Quines	1	2				3	3	45	Taken by the Enemy	
d <sup>o</sup>	Keokuk	Hanfield	1	2				8	11	45	Went ashore and blown up by the crew	
d <sup>o</sup>	Beaumont	Juners	1	3				8	11	45	ditto	
d <sup>o</sup>	Palmer	Stee		1				8	11	45	Sunk at her anchor	
d <sup>o</sup>	Sachs	Reutz	1	1	2			3	3	45	Arrived safe in port	
Total of Men and Guns			6	15	21	14	38	6	123	221	660	
A Vessels lost 11												
A Guns lost 128												

The "Townsend Document." October 22, 1776.  
 Courtesy, John Townsend

The discovery of the pension record, coupled with the discovery of the burst cannon raises the question of whether this cannon is the one that exploded aboard the gunboat *New York*. A recently discovered document should help determine the likelihood of the connection.

In the summer of 2000, the so-called "Townsend Document" came to light. This manuscript document, dated at Ticonderoga on October 22, 1776, is titled "A Return of the Fleet belonging to the United States of America on Lake Champlain under the Command of Brigadier General Arnold...." It has allowed us to conclusively identify the gunboat located in 1997 as the *Spitfire*. In addition, the Townsend Document gives the specific number and size of cannon on each vessel and confirms records that the gunboat *New York* mounted two six-pound cannon. In fact, according to the Townsend

Document, the *New York* was the *only* gunboat on the fleet to have six-pound cannon. The Townsend Document will be on exhibit at the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum this summer.

If the cannon recovered today is a six-pound gun, it is probable that it is the same cannon that burst aboard the gunboat *New York* during the heat of battle and killed Lieutenant Rogers and left poor Molly a "Sorrowfull widow." The cannon, in any case, is a powerful and tangible connection to the Battle of Valcour Island and those who fought 225 years ago for the cause of liberty.

Historical research leading to the identification of the gunboat and adding to this narrative was provided by an LCMM research team that included Peter Barranco, Russell Bellico, Art Cohn, Robert Maguire and George Quintal.





*Memento mori*

THIS Monomment is Erected  
to the memory of Lieu<sup>t</sup> Thoma<sup>s</sup>  
Rogers by M<sup>rs</sup> Molly his  
Sorowfull widow He was  
Killed by the splitting of  
a Cannon on the Lake  
Champlain on the 11<sup>th</sup> day  
of Oct<sup>r</sup> 1776 in the Continenta<sup>l</sup>  
Army in the serves of his  
Country and in the  
caus of Liberty  
Aged 26 years and  
9 months

Adam Loven '02