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FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND
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The Making of Stephen Decatur: A Study of Heroism and Myth Building in America

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The Making of Stephen Decatur:
A Study of Heroism and Myth Building in America

By Henry Trim

Submitted to the Faculty of History
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts at the University of Ottawa

University of Ottawa

2008

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Your file Votre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-48514-9

Our file Notre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-48514-9

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to show how heroes are created, the role hero-making plays in the creation of national identity and how the mythology constructed around heroes affects historical memory, by examining the heroic narrative constructed around Commodore Stephen Decatur, United States Navy.

Stephen Decatur became a hero during the first Barbary War in 1805, his abrupt rise to heroism was occasioned by a mix of luck, drama, partisan politics and nationalism. After his death, Decatur received very complimentary attention from nineteenth century biographers anxious to present Americans with national heroes. In the twentieth and twenty-first century Decatur remained popular, especially with American reengagement in the Middle East and the “War on Terror.” Recent biographies of Decatur are of interest as they reveal the continuities and changes in the American heroic ideal over time, and how the momentum of a narrative can deeply shape our understanding of the past.

Acknowledgments

Writing this thesis has been both an education and a pleasure. It would not have been possible, or as educating without the assistance and direction provided Dr Lotfi Ben Rejeb. I would like to take this opportunity to thank him for all his help. I would like to thank the staff at the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. for their assistance. The Inter-Library Loan Department at the University of Ottawa, whose hard work made researching my thesis possible, also deserve thanks for their efforts. Thanks to all of my peers at the University of Ottawa, whose enjoyable company made writing more difficult, but far more rewarding. Finally, I need to thank Christina Adam for her moral support and for listening to me talk about my thesis topic for over a year; I know it must have been difficult.

The Making of Stephen Decatur:
A Study of Heroism and Myth Building in America

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Introduction	2
Chapter 1: Concepts: Heroism, Nationalism, and Biography.....	9
Chapter 2: The Historical Context of Decatur's Rise to Heroic Status, 1798 to 1815...	20
Chapter 3: Decatur from Average to Extraordinary, 1779 to 1820.....	30
Chapter 4: Decatur's Early Biographies and Myth Making in the Nineteenth Century...	49
Chapter 5: Iconography of a National Hero in the Nineteenth Century	69
Chapter 6: Continuation of the Decatur Narrative to the Present.....	89
Conclusion: Heroic Mythology and History.....	111
Appendix 1: Chronology.....	117
Appendix 2: Naval Reports of the Burning of the <i>Philadelphia</i> by Commodore Preble, Lieutenant Stewart and Lieutenant Decatur.....	124
Bibliography.....	128

Introduction

On March 26, 2003 Jessica Lynch, a private first class in the 507th Maintenance Company, was captured by Iraqi forces. Reports of her capture and subsequent detainment in an Iraqi hospital in Nasiriya fascinated the nation and grabbed inordinate press coverage across America.¹ Then, on April 3, the *Washington Post* printed a story that would make her a national celebrity. Susan Schmidt and Vernon Loeb reported that despite being wounded during her unit's capture, Ms Lynch had fought on, killing a number of her attackers before finally being overpowered and cruelly stabbed by Iraqi soldiers.² Lynch, hailed as a real life "Rambo," became a national hero. Anxious to keep the story alive, members of the George W. Bush administration pressured the military to award her a Medal of Honor.³ Although it later proved to be a fabrication, the story of Jessica Lynch's heroic resistance was very useful to the George W. Bush administration at the time. In the spring of 2003 the American public was beginning to question the adequacy of the invasion force. Ms Lynch's reported heroism and the "daring raid" mounted by Special Operations to rescue her distracted Americans from the larger picture of the war and demonstrated the ability and heroism of US forces in Iraq.⁴

The actions of March and April 2003 bear an eerie resemblance to a series of events that occurred two centuries earlier. At that time the United States was involved in the first Barbary War against the regency of Tripoli and the war was not going well. In late October 1803 American fortunes reached their nadir as one of the US Navy's most powerful warships, the *Philadelphia* and her crew of 308 men, were captured by the

¹ Jim Yardley, "Families of Missing Hold Nervous Vigils for Loved Ones," *New York Times*, (March 26, 2003).

² Susan Schmidt and Vernon Loeb, "She Was Fighting to the Death," *Washington Post*, (April 3, 2003).

³ Michael DeLong, "Politics During Wartime," *New York Times*, (April 27, 2007).

⁴ "War News Gets Better," *New York Times*, (April 3, 2003).

Tripolitans. Then, just four months later, in February 1804, a young Lieutenant named Stephen Decatur led a daring raid into Tripoli's harbour, burned the *Philadelphia* under the very guns of the harbour defences and escaped without losing a single man.⁵ Thomas Jefferson's administration immediately seized on Decatur's heroic act to justify its handling of the war and defend its beleaguered naval policy against the attacks of Federalist critics. In support of Jefferson, and to raise flagging morale across America, newspapers published all they could about Decatur's raid, making the young man a national hero.⁶

Since 1804 Decatur has been immortalized in the names of numerous ships and twenty-five towns and counties across America.⁷ Songs, plays, biographical novels and the no less than thirteen full length biographies, four of them published since the year 2000, have been written about Decatur, and many paintings depicting him and his heroic actions have also been produced. This attention places him well within the American pantheon. Born during the American War of Independence, Decatur was a member of the second generation of Americans upon whom rested the hopes of their infant country.⁸ Involved in the Quasi War with France, the first and second Barbary Wars and the War of 1812, Decatur was part of many of the defining moments in early American diplomatic and military history. More importantly, Decatur's emergence as a hero and his continued

⁵ *National Intelligencer*, (Washington DC, May 23, 1804).

⁶ *National Intelligencer*, (Washington DC, May 28, 1804).

⁷ For a record of places named after Stephen Decatur, see Frank M. Abate, ed., *American Place Dictionary: A Guide to 45,000 Populated Places, Natural Features and Other Places in the United States* (Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, 1994), Vol.1-4, espically Vol.3. The greatest concentration of places named after Decatur is in the Midwest, and the number of places named for him seems to have peaked during the late 1830s. Ben Birindelli in *The 200 Year Legacy of Stephen Decatur, 1798-1998* (Gloucester Point ,VA: Hallmark, 1998), 75 and 141, records eight warships that have been named after Decatur, from a schooner launched in 1814 to a missile destroyer launched in 1996.

⁸ Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2-3; Paul C. Nagel, *This Sacred Trust: American Nationality, 1798-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 7.

popularity offers insight into the socio-cultural history of America from the nineteenth century up to the present.

What makes Decatur of particular interest is the process by which he became a national hero. The intriguing process of hero-making reveals not only how journalists, politicians, and later biographers, historians and artists shape our understanding of the past and present, but also how their work is shaped by the desires of the public. As an individual is transformed into a hero, he or she comes to embody the desired virtues of a specific segment of society or even an entire nation, becoming an idealized communal identity in the process.⁹ Surprisingly, few in-depth studies of how the development of heroes actually takes place have been carried out and no studies of Decatur's narrative have been undertaken.¹⁰ While this thesis will make use of military and diplomatic histories of the early years of the United States, in particular of the Barbary Wars, it is not a work of diplomatic or military history. Rather, it is a work of social and cultural history that will at times make use of diplomatic and military history to provide context for the cultural construction and transformation of American concepts of heroism in the narrative built around Stephen Decatur. This thesis will further show how hero-making played a role in the construction of American national identity, how mythology and biography contributed to hero-making and nation-making, and how the narratives built around Decatur has gained momentum over the course of two centuries and deeply affected history.

⁹ Douglas V. Porpora, "Personal Heroes, Religion and Transcendental Metanarratives," *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 11, No. 2, (June, 1996), 211.

¹⁰ Dixon Wecter's *The Hero in America: a Chronicle of Hero-Worship* (New York: Scribner, 1972), is one of the few examinations of American heroes; but while Wecter's work is foundational to any study of American heroes, he only provides a cursory examination of how a hero is constructed and the changes a hero undergoes to remain culturally relevant.

This thesis will begin by discussing the basic concepts and materials connected to the Decatur narrative. We will look at the cultural role of heroes in general and also with specific reference to the United States during its formative period. The first chapter will also discuss the importance of biography as the primary “historical” medium through which people connect with, and transmit, their cultural heroes. Biographies are an integral part of hero-making and will be the most important primary source for this thesis. Examining biography is particularly important as the different stylistic approaches and goals of American biographers and historians in the nineteenth and twentieth century have influenced how Decatur was perceived and how he has been remembered.

The second chapter, essentially a historical background, will briefly outline the events which Decatur participated in as a naval officer: namely the Barbary Wars and the War of 1812. The third chapter will show a portrait of Decatur as accurately as the surviving documents permit, in order to provide a reference point for the later biographical transformations and embellishments. It will also examine Decatur’s progress from an average naval officer to a full-fledged national hero, and the role of luck, drama, partisan politics and nationalism in the process. We will do so by reviewing the materials that initiated his heroic stature during his lifetime. These sources include naval reports, newspaper articles, songs, plays, speeches and short “histories” of military actions Decatur was involved in.

In the later years of Decatur’s life and after his death his narrative entered its most constructive phase as it became the subject of biography. Chapter four will discuss the early full-length biographies of Decatur published in the first half of the nineteenth century, concentrating on the works of three biographers, R. Patterson, Waldo S. Putnam

and Alexander S. Mackenzie.¹¹ The works of these biographers assembled what has become the accepted narrative of Decatur's life and heroism. We will apply discourse analysis to these three important biographies of Decatur paying particular attention to the objectives and styles of the authors, the literary and historical fashions of early and middle nineteenth century, the difficulties of retrospective analysis, and finally the momentum the narrative amassed as it transferred from one biography to another to meet the evolving needs of the American public. The scarcity of sources has given Decatur's biographers a great deal of creative licence as they have been able to mould his life to suit their ideas of what a hero should be.

The fifth chapter will examine visual sources, primarily paintings, using semiotic analysis to illustrate how they assisted the formation of a heroic image and reflected American cultural values.¹² Semiotic analysis will be applied to the genres of portraiture and narrative painting to determine the cultural symbolism used to depict Decatur and the influence of the many pictures of Decatur on American memory of him and the events in which he was involved. Chapter six will examine the Decatur narrative as it continues in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In the twentieth century Decatur's heroic actions in defence of America have ensured the popularity of his narrative as he has been the

¹¹ R. Patterson, *Naval Biography, or the Lives of the Most Distinguished Naval Heroes of the Present Day* (Pittsburgh: Patterson and Engles, 1814); Waldo S. Putnam, *The Life and Character of Stephen Decatur* (Middletown, Conn: Clark & Lyman, 1821); Alexander S. Mackenzie, *Life of Stephen Decatur, a Commodore in the Navy of the United States* (Boston: C.C. Little and J. Brown, 1848).

¹² The paintings examined include: "Miniature Portrait of Commodore Stephen Decatur" by Unknown Italian Artist; "Stephen Decatur" by Orlando S. Lagman (after Gilbert Stuart); "Stephen Decatur" by Thomas Sully; "Commodore Stephen Decatur" by G.R. Hall (engraving after painting by Alonzo Chappel); "Commodore Stephen Decatur" by A.B. Durand (engraving after painting by Thomas Sully); Decatur Boarding the Tripolitan Gunboat" by Denis Malone Carter; "Decatur's Conflict with the Algerine at Tripoli" by Alonzo Chappel; "Burning of the Frigate *Philadelphia* in Harbour of Tripoli, 16th Feb 1804. by 70 Galliant Tars of Columbia Commanded by Lieut. Decatur" by F. Kearney. All these works were accessed through the Naval Historical Center web site, <http://www.history.navy.mil/index.html>, (February 4, 2008).

subject of biographies by Irwin Anthony, Charles Lewis and Helen Nicolay.¹³ The Decatur narrative has also received the attention of children's literature writers Iris Vinton, Bradford Smith and Wyatt Blassingame, and novelists Corrine Lowe, Brian Burland and Edwin Hoyt.¹⁴ Some of these writers added intriguing constructions of their own to Decatur's life story and further broadened his appeal. Finally, in the twenty-first century, Decatur has seen a rise in popularity occasioned by events in the Middle East and the "War on Terror." Decatur's heroic story has been used to reassure Americans of their nation's ability to shape the world and as a source of inspiration for how the "War on Terror" should be fought. As a result new biographies of Decatur have been authored by James T. de Kay, Spencer Tucker, Robert Allison and Leonard Guttridge.¹⁵ The work of orientalist and American cultural historians, such as John S. Lawrence, Robert Jewett, Richard Slotkin and Susan Faludi, will be used to analyze Decatur's popularity since 9/11 and how his heroic narrative affects American views of the Middle East.¹⁶ In the examination of recent biographies of Decatur particular attention will be paid to two things: first, how the Decatur of the nineteenth century has been adapted to the twentieth

¹³ Irwin Anthony, *Decatur* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931); Charles Lewis, *The Romantic Decatur* (New York: Book for Libraries Press, 1971); Helen Nicolay, *Decatur of the Old Navy*, illustrated by Norman Price (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1942).

¹⁴ Iris Vinton, *The Story of Stephen Decatur*, illustrated by Graham Kaye (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1954); Bradford Smith, *Stephen Decatur: Gallant Boy*, illustrated by Nathan Goldstein (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1962); Wyatt Blassingame, *Stephen Decatur: Fighting Sailor* (Champaign, IL: Garrard Publishing Co., 1964); Corinne Lowe, *Knight of the Sea: The Story of Stephen Decatur* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1941); Brian Burland, *Stephen Decatur, The Devil and Endymion* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1975); Edwin Hoyt, *Decatur's Revenge* (Thorndike, Maine: G.K. Hall & Co., 1975).

¹⁵ James T. de Kay, *A Rage for Glory: The Life of Stephen Decatur, USN* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Spencer Tucker, *Stephen Decatur: A Life most Bold and Daring* (Annapolis: Navel Institute, 2005); Robert Allison, *Stephen Decatur, American Naval Hero, 1779-1820* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005); Leonard Guttridge, *Our Country Right or Wrong: The Life of Stephen Decatur the U.S. Navy's Most Illustrious Commander* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2006).

¹⁶ John S. Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002); Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993); Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

and twenty-first centuries, revealing continuities and changes in the American heroic ideal over time; and second, how over time the momentum of a narrative can deeply shape our understanding of the past. The conclusion will attach further insights on how narrative momentum and mythmaking can, in some cases, dictate how historians approach a topic.

Chapter 1:

Concepts: Heroism, Nationalism, and Biography

This chapter will introduce the concept of heroism and how it relates to nationalism, and also the genre of biography as a medium of hero-making and transformation. *The Oxford English Dictionary* states that the word hero has its origins in the Greek word *heros* meaning “god-person.”¹ While few historians today ascribe to heroes the godlike power to shape the world, heroes and hero-making continue to play a powerful role in human society. As the recent study conducted by Douglass Porpora shows, heroes remain important even today in our Post-Modern world. According to his results, forty percent of adult Americans still have at least one person that they identify with as a personal hero.² It seems probable that during a historical period where much more emphasis was placed on the actions of individuals, as existed in nineteenth century America, the number of individuals who had personal heroes would probably have been even greater. But what exactly do heroes, or at least their images, contribute to a group’s culture?

Heroes are significant as they help individuals and groups identify their position in moral and political space, a key feature of identity.³ Heroes do this by providing an idealized reference, or a charismatic role model, around which individuals and even entire nations shape their actions.⁴ The humility and concern for equality attributed to Abraham Lincoln, for instance, has motivated generations of Americans to strive for

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

² Douglas V. Porpora, “Personal Heroes, Religion, and Transcendental Metanarratives”, *Sociological Forum*, Vol.11, No.2 (June 1996), 218.

³ Porpora, 212.

⁴ Porpora, 211.

those causes and to model their life decisions on his example.⁵ Hero worship is a normal aspect of human development, especially by the young as a consequence of their natural growth and search for values to believe in and role models to emulate.⁶ Harold Lubin views heroes similarly, stating that “heroes are the symbolic embodiments of our values and beliefs.”⁷ As the focus of nations, heroes embody the values and traditions associated with national character. This similarity is caused by the creation of an ideal person based on shared historical experiences; as a result, the “hero” is invested with culturally conceived ideal traits and serves as a role model for members of that society.⁸ This makes the hero larger than life, a symbolic or iconic image, communicating complex value systems and cultural tropes to the society which created the hero.

Heroism and hero-making are interactive processes, for without a social and value system to provide direction and meaning heroism would be impossible. This process of achievement and notice is possible only if the hero behaves in a manner that the culture in which he or she is embedded accepts as heroic.⁹ Daniel Boorstin, among others, extends this view to its logical conclusion, arguing that heroes are merely empty moulds into which individuals or societies can pour their own ideas.¹⁰ While most heroes have accomplished something to achieve notice, those who record heroism are crucial for the existence of heroes.

One of the main characteristics of a heroic narrative is drama. Not only does drama make the hero more interesting, it also enables the narrative to take on ritualistic

⁵ Dixon Wecter *The Hero in America: a Chronicle of Hero-Worship* (New York: Scribner, 1972), 271.

⁶ Charles Horton Cooley, *Human Nature and the Social Order* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 312-313.

⁷ Harold Lubin, ed., *Heroes and Anti-Heroes* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1968), 4.

⁸ Cooley, 315; Porpora, 210-211.

⁹ Lubin, 4.

¹⁰ Daniel Boorstin, “From Hero to Celebrity: The Human Pseudo-Event,” in Lubin, 326.

qualities that contribute to its cultural power.¹¹ The work of Joseph Campbell has illustrated the central role of heroes in human mythology and the fact that the “lives” of most of these heroes follow a set pattern, which seems to be built into the human psyche.¹² This pattern generally consists of a quest made up of a series of heroic actions.¹³ The well-known actions of Prometheus and more recently Luke Skywalker in *Star Wars* closely follow this formula. Lord Raglan builds on Campbell’s work, extending the argument to state that the lives of actual heroes are moulded to conform to what mythology and our psyche has taught us to expect of them. In Raglan’s view this places enormous pressure on writers and biographers to portray the heroes they write about in very specific ways.¹⁴ Raglan’s example of Shakespeare’s portrayal of Henry V’s debauched youth has, which been accepted into British public memory of Henry V because it conforms closely to what is expected of a heroic king, is a good illustration of how mythic drama can influence history.¹⁵

Young nations need heroes to bind themselves together.¹⁶ According to Eric Hobsbawm and Ernest Gellner, modern nationalism emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as European peoples sought to define their “national identity”

¹¹ Lubin, “The Warrior as Paradigm of the Hero, From Glory to Awareness: The Adventure Hero in America,” in Lubin, 12.

¹² Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 30-31.

¹³ The traditional hero quest includes: the hero’s acceptance of the quest, the hero’s meeting of friends and helpers, often a wise old man figure, as he or she carries out the quest, and successful achievement of the quest and finally the hero’s return with the ability to dispense boons.

¹⁴ Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 209.

¹⁵ Raglan, 209.

¹⁶ Paul C. Nagel, *This Sacred Trust: American Nationality, 1798-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 7; Lubin, 9.

and struggled to create “nations” in which to live.¹⁷ Scholars of nationalism Gellner, Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson, and Terrence Ranger agree that a nation is constructed, created through the concerted effort of individuals and institutions. On the basis of this view, Anderson defines a nation as “an imagined political community.”¹⁸ Heroes are a fundamental element of the imagining process. They are constructed around its values and therefore become national role models for all to emulate, which helps to provide a shared culture for the “imagined community.”¹⁹ The need to create something to coalesce around as a nation has resulted in a number of interesting traditions along with many national heroes. The supposedly ancient kilts of the Scottish Highlanders and the pageantry of the British crown as discussed in Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition* are just a few examples.²⁰ A notable American example was the need of early Americans for national heroes, a need which resulted in a biographical mania and the preservation of many American men and women as national symbols for future Americans.

When discussing American heroes the seminal work of Dixon Wecter is the obvious starting point. Asserting that hero worship is essential to American patriotism, Wecter maintains that Americans are more prone to hero worship than Europeans.²¹ Wecter sees this love of heroes as a replacement for the love of place that he believes is

¹⁷ Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 80; Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 38.

¹⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 6.

¹⁹ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 96-97.

²⁰ See Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 15-43; David Cannadine, “The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the Invention of Tradition, 1820-1977,” in Hobsbawm and Ranger, 101-165.

²¹ Wecter, 1-2.

more common among the Europeans.²² The abstract basis of American identity built on the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence also opens American patriotism to hero worship as heroes can embody ways of acting that are in accord with the principles so important to Americans. As a result “[the hero] is selected because he seems to fit the mould desired by the masses and, once his work is done, he is idolized to fill that mould even better.”²³ According to Wecter, numerous traits characterize American heroes that set them apart from the heroes of Europe or other cultures. As America is a democratic country its heroes must be “the people’s choice,” picked because they were publicly admired for their noble actions or morals.²⁴ Further, the values of personal modesty, unselfishness, and courteousness are required. Wecter also includes self-respect, honour, a sense of fair play, leadership ability, and resourcefulness in his list of approved traits. Among the traits Americans dislike in their heroes Wecter includes genius, which is seen as unnecessary, vanity and personal arrogance, effeminacy, and snobbishness²⁵

The recent work of John S. Lawrence and Robert Jewett adds depth to Wecter’s analysis as they attempt to unravel the motivations behind American hero worship, rather than examine the icons themselves.²⁶ Their most important contribution is the suggestion of an American monomyth providing a cultural basis for the understanding of heroic action. The idea of a defining mission or founding myth is not new; influential historians such as Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovich and Richard Slotkin have suggested the existence

²² Wecter, 8.

²³ Wecter, 6.

²⁴ Wecter, 11.

²⁵ Wecter, 484-485.

²⁶ John S. Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 5.

of archetypal cultural forms in American culture stretching back to early settlement.²⁷ Bercovich persuasively argues that the Pilgrims, settling in what is today America's northeastern states, quickly provided themselves and later generations of America with a mythology to help them build a better society in the New World.²⁸ Americans was mythologized as a terrestrial Eden that was always under threat from the Native American peoples that American settlers have continually displaced. Lawrence and Jewett argue that an American monomyth has grown up around idea of an "evil other" intruding on an Eden-like paradise.²⁹ This Eden is normally conceived of as a small orderly community, homogenous, without any internal conflict and surrounded by a welcoming pastoral countryside.³⁰ After this American Eden comes under threat, the American hero is called upon to defend it, either through political means as an elected or acclaimed leader, or, more commonly, as a member of the military or as a vigilante. This feeling of insecurity and the need for defense, based both in American mythology and in the very real struggle Europeans undertook to dominate the continent has led to the construction of a number of American heroes, from the early colonization onwards. In the coming chapters the ideas of Campbell, Raglan, Wecter, Lawrence and Jewett will be applied to examine how the expectations of heroic action affected the creation of the heroic narratives constructed around Stephen Decatur.

Decatur belongs to the second generation of national heroes in America. The young republic had a first generation naval hero in John Paul Jones. However, John Paul

²⁷ Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 5-6; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 136; Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 2-3.

²⁸ Bercovitch, 136.

²⁹ Lawrence and Jewett, 22.

³⁰ Lawrence and Jewett, 22.

Jones did not fully capture the imagination of Americans or receive attention of influential biographers necessary to transform him into a mythic hero and consequently his heroic narrative has not been updated with the evolution of American history. Instead of Jones, George Washington would be more useful as a referent. Washington, like Decatur, has had a significant amount of American mythology constructed around him by biographers. Second, the symbolism of Washington and Decatur has not ceased to be updated in American history. For example, a recent biography of Washington updates the discussion of his relationship with Jews in the context of the present Israeli-American relationship.³¹ Similarly, Decatur's heroic narrative has remained dynamic and relevant in the history of US Islamic relations. Finally, as Washington was the premier hero of the founding generation, comparing Decatur with him helps illustrate the need for a second generation of national heroes.

The main source of analysis in this thesis will be biography. Biography is the medium through which most people learn about the heroes of their society. The history of biography in the western world stretches back at least to Plutarch in the second century CE.³² As a subject, biography has occupied a somewhat amorphous position. It is generally accepted as a branch of history, but it is also identified as an element of literary studies, as popular entertainment, and even as an instructional tool for educators and psychologists. Generally, the historic branch of biography has had two purposes: to commemorate its subject and to employ the subject's life and actions didactically.³³ Americans in the early national period used biography largely to create heroes for nation-making purposes. Biography was a popular genre in the post-Revolutionary period

³¹ Fritz Hirschfeld, *George Washington and the Jews* (Newark: University of Delaware, 2005).

³² Edward O'Neill, *A History of American Biography, 1800-1935* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1968), 4.

³³ O'Neill, 3.

because of the need to build up national pride in the country. This accounts for the increase in the number of biographies published during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.³⁴ The work of Mason L. Weems is probably the greatest example of this phenomenon as Weems moulded his subjects to suit what he believed were his readers' tastes and to provide them with the best possible "moral instruction."³⁵ Weems' treatment of George Washington is the best known example.³⁶

According to Dana Merrill three factors deeply influenced American biography in the infant republic: First, a spirit of hero-worship resulting from the elation of victory in the War of Independence, Barbary Wars and the War of 1812; second, the desire to express the character of the new nation using the lives of great Americans; and third, due to the British cultural background, many of the principles and a taste for biographies were already present in the USA.³⁷ It is important to note the historical power of biography as a truly sensational biographical work or series can ensure the deification of an individual.³⁸ The unparalleled place of Washington and the other Founders in American history is an example of what successful biography can achieve. Indeed, early American biographers and historians saw it as their duty to write laudatory works venerating Washington and other revolutionary heroes. As one reviewer of a Washington biography put it, "the historian of Washington is the great teacher of the nation, who tells us what sacrifices it cost our fathers to prepare for us the blessings that we enjoy; what heroism was required to overcome the obstacles that beset their path; what self-denial it demanded

³⁴ O'Neill, 23; Dana Kinsman Merrill, *American Biography: Its Theory and Practice* (Portland, OR: The Bowker Press, 1957), 109; Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography & Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 19, 76.

³⁵ O'Neill, 22.

³⁶ See Mason Locke Weems, *Life of Washington*, ed. Marcus Cunliffe (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962).

³⁷ Merrill, 109-110.

³⁸ Merrill, 114.

to forget themselves in their love for posterity; how strong their wills, how firm their hearts, how sound their judgment, how serene their wisdom.”³⁹ As that quote implies and as Paula Backscheider warns, much of biography was hagiography rather than “fact”.⁴⁰ Hagiographic representations and interpretations can lend weight to an image of the subject that his or her contemporaries would not have recognized. This is especially true when momentum is built up as subsequent authors use the same work.⁴¹ In this way what starts as “interpretation” can become “fact.” The realm of interpreting personality (if the biographer attempts it) is also likely to be influenced by the biographer’s cultural assumptions and the readers’ expectations, given the often immense gulf that time or other circumstances can create between the subject, the biographer and the audience.⁴²

The work of Scott Casper, in this respect, is extremely enlightening. Casper offers the most recent and exhaustive study of how Americans of the nineteenth century wrote and read biography. As Casper notes, during the early nineteenth century American biography – indeed the republic itself – was characterized by a mix of assertiveness and insecurity.⁴³ As biographers lauded the achievements of heroic Americans, one boldly stated “the people of the land of Washington, Franklin, Rittenhouse, Rush and Hamilton, may dispute the palm of philosophy and patriotism with any other nation of the globe.” However, at the same time American biographers feared the attacks of European critics’ on the often unpolished style of American biography of the period.⁴⁴

³⁹ Merrill, 117.

⁴⁰ Paula R. Backscheider, *Reflections on Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3.

⁴¹ By momentum I mean the power to dominate all discussion about a historical person or event that a work (or a closely related group of works) can gain if its interpretation is continual and widely repeated, and as a result begins to channel subsequent research and to displace other sources of historical information.

⁴² Backscheider, 90.

⁴³ Casper, 36.

⁴⁴ Casper, 36-37.

Biographies produced in the first three decades of the nineteenth century were characterized by a strong element of what Casper identifies as “didactic nationalism,” as biographers worked to instil republican “character” in the populace and ensure that the virtues of the founding generation were preserved.⁴⁵ This desire led to a specific form of biography and, by extension, a specific portrayal of the subject. Coupled with the pressures of traditional heroic narratives, these forces often overpowered any aspiration to stick closely to factual evidence. Thus hearsay or outright fabrication often crept into an otherwise scholarly narrative in the name of spreading patriotism and virtue. An example from the work of Mason L. Weems, infamous for this sort of well-intended distortion, illustrates how powerful such additions can be in a hero’s narrative. In the very first lines of his *Life of Washington* Weems described Napoleon Bonaparte as both praising Washington to “some young Americans” and stating that posterity will remember Washington’s exploits while Bonaparte’s own name will disappear “in the vortex of revolutions.”⁴⁶ By using fiction Weems was able to provide Washington with an endorsement from the period’s best-known man and hook American readers as he heightened their pride and interest in their countryman who was known and admired by Napoleon himself.

Beginning in the late 1840s the goals of American biographers began to change. While patriotism and didacticism remained important, new emphasis was placed on discovering and describing the personality and emotions of the subject for the reader.⁴⁷ Casper terms this approach “Johnsonian theory” as it was begun by Samuel Johnson who

⁴⁵ Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2-3; Casper, 4, 19.

⁴⁶ Weems, 1.

⁴⁷ Casper, 202-203.

had attempted to portray the “domestic privacies” of his subjects, believing that it was in private that one’s true nature was revealed, not through public acts, as the republican approach to biography held.⁴⁸ Despite the increasing level of academic rigor among nineteenth century biographers, this new goal again placed pressure on them to invent or distort episodes in their subject’s life in order to illustrate his or her personality. As biographical style and the goals of the biographer have a profound effect on the image of the subject these elements of biographical writing will play an important role in this study.

⁴⁸ Casper, 3.

Chapter 2:

The Historical Context of Decatur's Rise to Heroic Status, 1798 to 1815

The Barbary Wars that saw the rise of Decatur are a well researched subject. A number of important works have been produced both about the Barbary Wars and about their effects on America at the time. Recent authors in this field include Robert Allison, Frank Lambert, Joshua E. London, and Richard B. Parker,¹ all of whom use Dudley W. Knox's compilation of the naval documents relating to the Barbary Wars.² These authors concentrate on diplomatic and military history. This chapter will rely on these works to provide historical context for this thesis.

After boldly casting off the stifling yet protective grasp of the British Empire, America was forced to rely on its own powers during its first shaky steps on the international stage.³ The first challenge the Republic faced was mounted by the Barbary States of Morocco, Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli whose privateers preyed on shipping in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean. The Barbary Wars consisted of a series of sporadic conflicts that would last from 1785 until 1815. Relations between America and the Barbary States were dominated by tense exchanges as the rulers of Barbary increased their demands and Americans were slow to deliver tribute. The result was two full-scale wars between the United States and Tripoli and Algiers, emphasizing the dangers the new

¹ Robert Allison, *The Crescent Obscured* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Joshua London, *Victory in Tripoli: How America's War with the Barbary Pirates Established the U.S. Navy and Built a Nation* (Hoboken: Wiley Publishers, 2005); Frank Lambert, *The Barbary Wars* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005); Richard B. Parker, *Uncle Sam in Barbary: a Diplomatic History* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004).

² Dudley W. Knox, ed. *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers: Naval Operations Including Diplomatic Background, 1785-1807* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939-44).

³ London, 13; Parker, 58-63.

republic faced in an unfriendly world.⁴ These conflicts had a number of important effects: they strengthened arguments for a stronger state capable of defending American interests; occasioned the foundation of a permanent navy, and gave the United States its first opportunity to assert itself and establish its position in the international order. These were all very important developments for the construction of national identity in America.

Privateering and piracy in the Mediterranean evolved during the centuries-long struggle between the Ottoman Empire and various Christian kingdoms for dominance in the Mediterranean. The practices of taking captives and extorting ransom had become the accepted *modus operandi* of Christian and Muslim states alike.⁵ Finding that privateering presented a lucrative sideline to their involvement in Mediterranean trade, Morocco, Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli began to outfit ships for raiding the commerce of weak states.⁶ As Fernand Braudel noted that piracy and privateering existed in symbiosis with successful trade.⁷ The Americans, who were carrying millions of dollars worth of goods through the Mediterranean annually during the late eighteenth century, undoubtedly presented tempting targets.⁸ Although the power of the Barbary States had peaked in the seventeenth century, by the time Americans encountered them in the nineteenth century they were only a shadow of their former power, they still posed a serious threat to the trade of weaker nations such as Denmark, the Kingdom of the two Sicilies and the USA.⁹ In part, the Barbary States remained a threat due to the strength of

⁴ Allison, 22,

⁵ London, 13-14; Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, translated by Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), Vol.2, 866-867.

⁶ Parker, 7.

⁷ Braudel, Vol.1, 127-130

⁸ Parker, xv.

⁹ Braudel, Vol.2, 882.

their fortified harbours and the warships their rulers maintained. The primary reason for their continued piracy was, however, that the great powers of Europe, notably Britain and France, found them useful to harass trading rivals without an open declaration of war, as American merchants were to find out.

Encouraged by Britain to attack American ships, which were competing with British merchants, Algiers declared war on America in 1785 and began to attack her ships.¹⁰ This surprised and dismayed American merchants who were accustomed to the protection provided by the British Navy. The attacks became doubly worrying as other European nations proved unwilling to protect American shipping.¹¹ Both Spain and Portugal had recently waged unsuccessful minor wars against Algiers, the strongest of the Barbary States, which ended with the Europeans paying indemnities and enabling the Barbary privateers to slip through the Straits of Gibraltar to prey on shipping in the eastern Atlantic in 1793. Being able to cruise the Atlantic enabled Algiers to capture eleven more American ships, increasing the number of American captives to 130.¹² By 1794 America was finally ready to begin building the navy that Thomas Jefferson had recommended in 1785 when the first Americans were captured.¹³ In the meantime, America pursued a less expensive alternative to the navy and peace was declared between America, Algiers, Tripoli, Tunis and Morocco at a price of over a million dollars, one fifth of the US government's entire budget for that year.¹⁴

¹⁰ Allison, 3.

¹¹ Parker provides an excellent discussion of the diplomatic machinations of the European powers during the period. Parker, 58-63.

¹² See Parker, Appendix 4 (208-214) for a list of American Trading vessels captured between 1785 and 1793.

¹³ Allison, 20; London, 41.

¹⁴ London, 43, Parker, xiv.

Relations between the United States and the Barbary States entered a period of relative stability. However, peace did not last and by 1801 America was again at war in the Mediterranean, this time with Tripoli. Thomas Jefferson, who had long advocated an aggressive approach to the Barbary States, had become President in 1801 and he was determined that the United States would be taken seriously by both the great powers of Europe and the lesser powers of the world.¹⁵ Further, Jefferson was as much interested in agrarian policy as he was in furthering the commercial interests of the Northeast. Defending the American desire for “free trade” was an excellent way of both establishing an American presence in international affairs and expanding American commerce in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.¹⁶

Consequently, when Yusuf Karamanli, the Bashaw of Tripoli, threatened war after the United States failed to deliver Tripoli’s tribute as promised, Jefferson seized the opportunity to display American power against the regency of Tripoli that had long annoyed America and was symbolic of all that Jefferson viewed as corrupt and anachronistic in the international order.¹⁷ The war began in early June 1801 when a squadron of five ships under Commodore Richard Dale was dispatched to seek an “honourable” peace from Tripoli. Little did Jefferson know that the war would drag on for four years and would require the efforts of thirteen ships and a mercenary army to finally achieve a negotiated peace with Tripoli.¹⁸

The first two squadrons dispatched in 1801 and 1802 under Commodore Richard Dale and Commodore Richard Morris achieved little. Commodore Dale established a

¹⁵ Lambert, 7, 124.

¹⁶ Parker, xv.

¹⁷ Lambert, 124.

¹⁸ Parker, 145, 158.

blockade of Tripoli, but found his deep draft American frigates unsuitable for chasing down lighter Tripolitan ships.¹⁹ Commodore Morris' performance was even more disheartening than Dale's. Treating his command as an opportunity to go on a pleasure cruise in the Mediterranean, he and his wife spent the majority of their time attending balls in Gibraltar and along the southern European coast while using the smallness of his force as an excuse for his lack of military progress.²⁰ Such dissolute actions made matters worse for America. Due to the porous nature of the blockade, Tripoli was able to reinforce its fleet and raid American commerce, taking the *Franklin* in June of 1802. The other Barbary States, angered by American interference in their trade with one another, and convinced that Americans were at best unwilling to fight and at worst utterly incompetent, threatened to declare war.²¹ As Frank Lambert notes "after a year and a half of blockading Tripoli, Americans not Tripolitans, were fearful of what the enemy might do."²²

American fortunes seemed to improve slightly in early 1803 when Commodore Morris roused himself enough from his carousing to intimidate and bribe the Tunisian Bey and his divan into continuing to honour their peace treaty with America. Morris, perhaps emboldened by this success, mounted an active blockade of Tripoli, attempting to destroy or damage its defensive fleet. Morris, however, failed miserably as his disorganized attacks actually raised the morale of the Tripolitan Bashaw who subsequently contemplated increasing his demands.²³ This made any negotiations that

¹⁹ Lambert, 136.

²⁰ Parker, 138.

²¹ Lambert, 137-138.

²² Lambert, 137.

²³ Parker, 137.

Morris attempted impossible and his command was terminated by the Secretary of the Navy on the grounds of incompetence.²⁴

In June 1803 Commodore Edward Preble replaced Morris. Unfortunately for Commodore Preble before he could even take up his command, American forces suffered their greatest misfortune, the loss of the forty-four-gun frigate *Philadelphia*. On October 31, 1803, while pursuing a Tripolitan xebec just outside Tripoli's harbour the *Philadelphia* ran aground. Unable to disentangle his frigate from the reef and surrounded by Tripolitan gunboats, Captain William Bainbridge surrendered the *Philadelphia* with its entire crew, providing the delighted Bashaw with a premier warship and 308 hostages. This disaster marked the low point of American fortunes in the first Barbary War. The US Navy had been unable to properly blockade Tripoli or intimidate the Bashaw and, with the loss of one its most powerful ships, the Navy's success in the Mediterranean seemed in doubt as 1803 came to a close.

Then, just four months later, Lieutenant Stephen Decatur and a small force of seventy men carried out a daring raid into Tripoli's heavily defended harbour and burned the *Philadelphia* on February 16, 1804 without losing a man.²⁵ This flash of brilliance, the first real success of the American campaign, stood out like a beacon against the inactivity and incompetence of the preceding years. The complete success of such a daring mission caused jubilation among the American public and an overjoyed US government quickly heaped glory on all those involved, especially the handsome Decatur whom Jefferson vowed to immediately promote to captain.²⁶ With the Bashaw's most

²⁴ William M. Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores: the American Navy, 1783-1815* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 81.

²⁵ Knox, Vol.4, 422-423.

²⁶ London, 162; *National Intelligencer*, (Washington DC, May 25, 1804).

powerful ship destroyed, Commodore Preble set about acquiring bomb ketches and gunboats from Tripoli's Mediterranean enemies to mount a direct attack on Tripoli. The attack was finally launched on August 3, 1804. Decatur, now a captain, distinguished himself again as he captured two Tripolitan gunboats during the attack.²⁷ After launching one last-ditch attack on September 4 with a fire ship, which exploded prematurely killing the five men on board, a disappointed Commodore Preble called off offensive operations and waited for reinforcements and his replacement by Commodore Samuel Barron.²⁸

With Commodore Barron was William Eaton, a former U.S. consul to Tunis. Over the winter of 1804/1805 Eaton raised a small mercenary army with the help of Hamet, the deposed brother of the Tripolitan Bashaw, to invade Tripoli.²⁹ While Eaton and Hamet attacked from the East, Barron maintained a tight blockade of Tripoli with the American squadron, which had grown to an intimidating twelve ships. This dogged determination to continue the war regardless of setbacks finally convinced the Bashaw that peace was desirable. Consul General Tobias Lear, assigned to Barron's command as chief negotiator, concluded a treaty on June 3, 1805 at the cost of \$60,000; a week later the US forces began to disengage from the Mediterranean. In the summer of 1805 Americans, elated by victory over the Tripolitans, felt the equal of any people on the globe as their newspapers and theatres lauded the heroes of the war, most notably Stephen Decatur.³⁰ Their victory also seemed to herald a new age as America fought in

²⁷ Knox, Vol.4, 295.

²⁸ Lambert, 149.

²⁹ Lambert, 150.

³⁰ Allison, 195; *Maryland Gazette*, (Baltimore, November 21, 1805).

the name of freedom, unlike the piratical vessels under the tyrannical control of the Bashaw or the cynical European regimes that encouraged them.³¹

During the War of 1812, encouraged once again by the British and believing that America was defenceless, Algiers declared war on the United States.³² After arriving in the Mediterranean at the head of a powerful squadron of ten ships, Decatur quickly set to work. He defeated the Algerian admiral and concluded a treaty with the Algerian Dey on June 30, 1815, just six weeks after he had left New York. Decatur then used his powerful squadron to intimidate the leaders of Tunis and Tripoli into signing very favourable peace treaties, dramatically completing all his objectives in less than three months.³³ This campaign, described by John Quincy Adams as “as splendid as anything that has occurred in our annals since our existence as a nation” again brought Decatur to the notice of the nation, delighting nationalists who felt America had finally established herself on the world stage.³⁴

Decatur rose to fame against a background of nation-making. Recently, American historians have become interested in the construction of American nationalism during the formative period. The works of Joyce Appleby, Scott E. Casper, Michael Kammen, Paul C. Nagel, Andrew S. Trees, David Waldstreicher, and Wilbur Zelinsky are good examples.³⁵ Our discussion of Decatur and of the role he played in defining American

³¹ Allison, 34.

³² Lambert, 184.

³³ Lambert, 191-195.

³⁴ John Quincy Adams quoted in Lambert, 195.

³⁵ Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography & Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991); Paul Nagel, *This Sacred Trust: American Nationality, 1798-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971); Andrew S. Trees, *The Founding Fathers and the Politics of Character* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American*

national identity will make use of these works. The time from 1798 to 1815, during which Stephen Decatur carried out the majority of his active service as been called the “time of survival” by Paul Nagel.³⁶ It was a tumultuous period in American history. Economically and demographically America was growing quickly and starting to expand beyond the borders of the original thirteen colonies. Politically a new understanding of the American “body politic” were taking shape as the Jeffersonian “revolution” brought previously marginalized Americans onto the political stage.³⁷ These convulsions were accompanied by deep cultural insecurities as Americans worried that the emerging society would be unable to carry on its mission to build a republican society or maintain the ideals of the revolutionary generation.³⁸ The fear of being unable to live up to the example of the revolutionary generation was acute in the first decades. The Founders died or left politics and a new and untested generation of Americans was forced to fill their shoes.³⁹ Such trying times meant the public was continually seeking stability and national cohesion, making this period one of great nationalist ferment.

David Waldstreicher, for example, shows how this emerging culture and national identity was founded on public celebrations and political actions. Acts of celebration, such as the Fourth of July, were extremely important to the process of constructing a national identity as they not only provided Americans with culturally important occasions and national symbols, but also acquainted Americans with each other in the most basic

Nationalism, 1776-1820 (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Wilbur Zelinsky, *Nation into State: The Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

³⁶ Nagel, 3.

³⁷ Andrew Robertson, ““Look on This Picture... and On This!” Nationalism, Localism and Partisan Images of Otherness in the United States, 1787-1820, in *The American Historical Review*, Vol.106, No.4, (October 2001), 1264.

³⁸ Casper, 4.

³⁹ Appleby, 2-6.

sense.⁴⁰ The nationalist meanings of these events were communicated to Americans by newspaper and book publishers across the United States.⁴¹ Print culture was the medium of nationalist discourse as it spread a feeling of national identity by giving most American men and women access to news and helping them to take part in national events.

Besides reporting important national events to Americans, print culture was used to discuss what the young nation's "national character" would be. To many Americans in this period, national character and personal character were linked.⁴² This view led to a strong interest in acts of heroism as examples of "American character" to be admired and copied. As discussed in Chapter 1, the result was an explosion of biography. Americans read and wrote avidly to define themselves.⁴³ This interest in "national character" made good on the rise of a second generation of American heroes. According to Wilbur Zelinsky, these men assuaged American fears that the country would not live up to its founders.⁴⁴ This search for national heroes to define and sustain America provided the heady background for the erection of Decatur as a national hero.

⁴⁰ Waldstreicher, 202.

⁴¹ Waldstreicher, 109.

⁴² Trees, 7.

⁴³ Casper, 19.

⁴⁴ Zelinsky, 43.

Chapter 3:

Decatur from Average to Extraordinary, 1779 to 1820

Stephen Decatur was a regular naval officer who during the first Barbary War he was transformed into a national hero. This chapter covers his lifetime chronologically paying particular attention to three broad periods. Up until the burning of the *Philadelphia* Decatur had not distinguished himself in any unusual way. His social position and ability conformed to the norm in the Navy of his time. The burning of the *Philadelphia* and the impact it had on America socially, politically and culturally combined to lay the foundations of Decatur's heroic status. Decatur's heroic status was maintained by the concerted effort of newspapers and writers of the time along with his successes in the War of 1812, the second Barbary War and his tragic death at the young age of 41.

Stephen Decatur was born on January 5, 1779 in the small Maryland town of Sinepuxent. His father, also named Stephen Decatur, was a captain in the revolutionary navy, making it necessary for the Decatur family to temporarily flee to Sinepuxent during the British occupation of Philadelphia in 1779. Little is known of Stephen Decatur's grandparents and nothing of their parents. According to Decatur's nineteenth century biographers, his grandfather was a sailor, possibly even an officer, in the French Navy, who turned up in Newport, Rhode Island, in the 1750s.¹ However, as will be discussed in Chapter Four these accounts tend toward exaggeration and the publication of any interesting and laudatory anecdotes; thus little can be said with certainty about Decatur's grandparents. Moving from Newport, Stephen's grandparents settled the Decatur family

¹ Alexander S. Mackenzie, *Life of Stephen Decatur, a Commodore in the Navy of the United States* (Boston: C.C. Little and J. Brown, 1848), 8; Waldo S. Putnam, *The Life and Character of Stephen Decatur* (Middletown, Conn: Clark & Lyman, 1821), 24.

in Philadelphia, where Stephen, his older sister and younger brothers James and John grew up.

Decatur's father was a successful merchant seaman and partner with the established Philadelphia merchants, Gurney and Smith. Stephen Decatur Sr. also served, with some success, as a privateer during the Revolution and as a captain in the Quasi War. With his naval and mercantile success the Decatur family seems to have had a comfortable life, and all the children are believed to have attended the Episcopal Academy near the family home. Stephen is believed to have also briefly attended the College of Pennsylvania, but showing little aptitude for higher education he left school at seventeen to work as a clerk for his father's trading partners. Then on April 30, 1798, as the Quasi War with France heated up, he was granted a midshipman's warrant and began his naval career on the USS *United States* at the relatively old age of nineteen.²

Stephen Decatur was an average naval officer. His family background, his social standing, his education, and even the little recorded information about his early service in the Navy closely conformed to the norm. According to Christopher McKee's social history of the early years of the US Navy, Decatur was quite average among the midshipmen of his day. He even came from Philadelphia, the city that provided most midshipmen at the time.³ Further, even the things he later became famous for, namely his patriotism and bravery, were to a great extent expected of naval officers.⁴ According to naval regulations officers were required to "prepare the ship for battle; to seek encounter

² Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honourable Profession: The Creation of the US Naval Officer Corps, 1794-1815* (Annapolis, MA: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 68-69.

³ McKee, 65.

⁴ McKee, 47.

with the enemy vigorously; to behave courageously himself and to inspire courage in subordinates; and to aid other US vessels to whatever extent was in his power.”⁵

In the early years of the Republic the US Navy offered its officers a very good career, with possibilities of advancement, above average pay and a respected social position. This allowed the Navy to select recruits from a large pool of applicants, ensuring that naval officers were a relatively homogenous group, drawn from what the Naval Commissioners thought were the better elements of American society. McKee’s rather touching description of the normal applicant for a midshipman’s warrant during the navy’s early days fits quite closely Decatur’s profile. His family’s social and professional background, where he lived, his education, and even many of the experiences Decatur allegedly had growing up, all fit closely to the norm McKee outlines.⁶ Decatur’s solidly middle class social background, as the son of a successful merchant and veteran of the Revolutionary war, was expected among that “gentlemanly and honourable profession.”⁷ The majority of Decatur’s peers were the children of politicians, government functionaries, successful merchants, or military officers, all well within the respectable classes of American society. Decatur’s education at grammar school and his (possible) brief attendance at the college of Philadelphia were not out of the ordinary for naval recruits of his time.⁸ Regardless of whether or not he ever attended university, he was not significantly better educated than his fellow midshipmen.⁹ In fact, many naval officers repeated his story of leaving school for a career in the Navy, as many young men seem to have found academia an onerous pursuit.

⁵ McKee, 172.

⁶ McKee, 115.

⁷ McKee, 70.

⁸ Mackenzie, 16.

⁹ McKee, 93.

After joining the US Navy in 1798, Decatur's early service record was good but undistinguished. During the Quasi war with France he served on board the frigate *United States*, under Captain John Barry, and was present for its capture of a French privateer in 1799 in the West Indies, but he received no special mentions in the documentary record of the Quasi-War.¹⁰ This suggests that he performed his duties well enough to avoid censure, but not well enough to receive inordinate praise. Decatur's promotion to Lieutenant after two years of service was quick, but not out of the ordinary for the period. During the early years of its existence the US Navy and its officer corps grew rapidly as the US sought to counter French attacks during the Quasi-War.¹¹ This meant that many young officers were promoted quickly through the ranks.¹² Decatur, as a competent midshipman, older with some experience at sea and long exposure to the Navy thanks to his father, was one of these quickly rising officers.

Decatur's early record in the Mediterranean was a mixed one. Between 1801 and 1803, the first two years of the Barbary War, he made a number of mistakes, caused primarily by the difficulty he seems to have had controlling the men under his command. For instance, two midshipmen fought and killed one another while under his charge during the first months of the Barbary war.¹³ While fighting amongst status-conscious midshipmen was not uncommon and duels were then a semi-accepted part of naval service, the fact that two young men fought and killed one another while directly under

¹⁰ Dudley W. Knox, ed. *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War between the United States and France: Naval Operations, February 1797-December 1801* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939-44), Vol.2, 474, Vol.7, 65.

¹¹ William M. Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores: the American Navy, 1783-1815*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), 32.

¹² McKee, 38.

¹³ Dudley W. Knox, ed. *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers: Naval Operations Including Diplomatic Background, 1785-1807* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939-44), Vol.2, 96.

his command suggests that he was subject to minor lapses in judgment like most young officers and not entirely the perfect officer his later heroic status has been made to suggest. A much more serious mistake on Decatur's part occurred on December 1, 1803 when the crew he sent ashore in Syracuse, Sicily, to get supplies to refit the schooner *Enterprise*'s rigging got very drunk and personally insulted Commodore Edward Preble. For such "negligence" on his part Decatur was chastised and ordered to make an enquiry into the conduct of his junior officers.¹⁴ His most grievous lapse of judgment occurred in May 1803 when he served as a second to one of his younger officers in an impolitic duel while in Malta. Stung by an insult while attending a play in Malta, the young American officer challenged the offending British officer to a duel. The duel resulted in the death of the British officer, thus jeopardizing the US Navy's position in that British stronghold.¹⁵ For his involvement as a second Decatur was shipped home to supervise the completion of the brig *Argus* and give British fury time to cool.¹⁶ Being sent back to the US, along with the young officer he had helped, was a relatively serious punishment as it meant that he was excluded from any action, and any hope of distinguishing himself for five months.

Decatur had his successes as well. His supervision of the last stages of the construction and outfitting of the brig *Argus* was a milestone in his early career. Although the task was completed months behind schedule due to inferior supplies, Decatur managed to sail the brig safely to Syracuse and take over command of the schooner *Enterprise* without mishap.¹⁷ Once in command of the *Enterprise* Decatur had

¹⁴ Knox, *Wars with the Barbary Powers*, Vol.3, 245.

¹⁵ Knox, *Wars with the Barbary Powers*, Vol.3, 267.

¹⁶ Knox, *Wars with the Barbary Powers*, Vol.2, 424.

¹⁷ Knox, *Wars with the Barbary Powers*, Vol.3, 212.

the good fortune to be involved in the capture of a Tripolitan ketch, subsequently renamed the *Intrepid* and used in the raid on Tripoli that was to make him famous.¹⁸

The burning of the *Philadelphia*, on February 16, 1804, was the event that transformed Decatur from a regular officer to a national hero. The burning of the *Philadelphia* was the first real success of the first Barbary War and therefore Decatur's position as the commanding officer of the small force that carried out the daring and dramatic night raid which destroyed the *Philadelphia* insured that he came to America's attention. Four factors combined to greatly increase the influence of this event and ensure the heroic drama Decatur's actions was not overlooked: the Navy's influence on the nature of the information provided; the laudatory newspaper reporting; the political environment in America during the first Barbary War; and the public desire for a national hero to prove American ability.

One important element of Decatur's narrative, indeed of any history of the US Navy during the early Republic, is how events were reported to the public. Unlike today, naval officers' complete reports (if they were deemed important) were published in American newspapers, and comprised the main source of news about events involving the US Navy and the Barbary War. This gave the American public of the time unparalleled access to information, but as naval historians William Fowler and Christopher McKee note, it also ensured events were reported expressly from the Navy's point of view.¹⁹ This fact becomes particularly important when one realizes that the naval officer commanding an expedition literally wrote the news about his mission. This means his (or his assistant's) ability to write an engaging report could affect how the

¹⁸ Knox, *Wars with the Barbary Powers*, Vol.3, 288.

¹⁹ Fowler, 55; McKee, 195.

public viewed him almost as much as his actual achievements. And as reports in this period were generally written in the form of letters rather than simply a statement of the bare facts, the author had considerable leeway in presenting events leading in some cases to a full-fledged narrative with its attendant characters and plot structure.²⁰ Decatur and Commodore Preble, Decatur's commander during his first important exploits, both wrote excellent reports that displayed a definite flair for dramatic effect. Preble's final report on the August and September attacks on Tripoli referred to Decatur as "the gallant Captain Decatur" who along with his "brave tars" put "pistol, sabre, pike and tomahawk to good use" when they closed with the enemy.²¹ Such dramatic and engaging description undoubtedly helped lend heroic substance to Decatur's exploits and importance to the war itself. Together the laudatory reporting and the fact that it was the American's first noteworthy success in the Barbary War, made the burning of the *Philadelphia* a hugely important event.

The burning of the *Philadelphia* was avidly reported in newspapers across the country. Most published one or more of the reports of the officers involved: Commodore Preble, the fleet's commander; Lieutenant Charles Stewart, who supported Decatur; and, of course, Lieutenant Decatur himself. Preble and Decatur's reports were most widely published and unsurprisingly displayed these two officers' writing ability.²² Preble's report heavily praised Decatur, carefully attributing the mission's success to his "gallant

²⁰ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth Century*, (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 1-11.

²¹ Knox, *Wars With the Barbary Powers*, Vol.4, 295. Commodore Preble believing that Decatur deserved promotion for the burning of the *Philadelphia* referred to him as Captain starting in February, although Decatur's commission did not arrive until September 1804.

²² See Appendix 2 for copies of Commodore Preble's, Lieutenant Stewart's and Lieutenant Decatur's reports on the burning of the *Philadelphia*.

and officer-like conduct” and the “brave officers and crew under his command.”²³ Preble seems to have been determined to use this success to present the Navy in as positive a light as possible. Putting the best face on events in the Mediterranean was not only important to help the US war effort, it was also necessary to safeguard Preble’s career as the previous Commodore, Richard V. Morris, had been court-martialled for his inept handling of the Barbary Squadron.²⁴ With these incentives in mind, Preble stated that Decatur and his men’s conduct was “beyond all praise” and assured the US public that in the future naval officers and men would “distinguish themselves” whenever the opportunity arose, as Decatur had done.²⁵ Newspapers often added their own hyperbole to their account of the burning of the *Philadelphia*. For example the *Aurora* stated that the frigate *Philadelphia*, completely refitted and made combat ready by the enemy and was crewed by between two and three hundred men. Despite such an intimidating enemy, the *Aurora* recorded, Decatur, and his seventy volunteers fearlessly “sprang on board and quickly had her in their power.”²⁶

Decatur, following the etiquette of the period, used his report to heap praise on his men. More importantly, Decatur also dramatically recounted the dangers that he and his men faced. By stating that the *Philadelphia* was moored within “half a gunshot of the Bashaw’s castle” and “a cable and half’s length of their cruisers,” which were further surrounded by “many large boats filled with men,” Decatur gave his readers the impression that his tiny force had been involved in some modern day version of a

²³ *National Intelligencer*, (Washington DC, May 23, 1804). Preble’s report was also published in every newspaper I have examined in my research, which includes: the *Providence Gazette*, Providence, the *Boston Gazette*, Boston, the *Aurora*, Philadelphia the *Richmond Enquirer*, Richmond, the *Maryland Gazette*, Baltimore, the *American Citizen*, New York and the *New York Evening Post*, New York.

²⁴ Fowler, 81.

²⁵ *National Intelligencer*, (Washington DC, May 23, 1804).

²⁶ *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, May 24, 1804).

Homeric epic.²⁷ This is not to belittle Decatur's accomplishment as his force carried out a daring and highly successful raid at the cost of only one injured man, but to highlight the details that Decatur chose to report. Conceivably, he could have noted that the men guarding the Tripolitan harbour were completely unprepared for a surprise attack, thus making their overwhelming numbers much less threatening. However, this would have made the successful burning of the *Philadelphia* much less impressive.²⁸

Also contributing to the power of Decatur's and Commodore Preble's version of events was the fact that they almost perfectly constructed the archetypical hero quest as defined by Joseph Campbell.²⁹ Decatur went forth on his quest with minimal assistance, an unimpressive ketch and a small crew, overcame great natural and human challenges, in this case, the weather and the Tripolitans guarding the *Philadelphia*, and successfully completed his quest with the destruction of the *Philadelphia*. And as in the heroic tradition discussed by Campbell, he returned with the ability to bestow boons on his fellows, namely the ability to act as an inspiration to Americans.³⁰ In further accordance with the traditional hero myth, the Maltese pilot, Mr Salvador, functioned admirably as the wise man or guide every archetypical hero meets in the course of his quest. Thus, with the wide publication of an easily recognizable and compelling heroic narrative the image of Decatur the Hero began to take shape.

²⁷ *National Intelligencer*, (Washington DC May 23, 1804). Decatur's report, like commodore Preble's, was published across America. See, the *Providence Gazette*, Providence, the *Boston Gazette*, Boston, the *Aurora*, Philadelphia the *Richmond Enquirer*, Richmond, the *Maryland Gazette*, Baltimore the *American Citizen*, New York and the *New York Evening Post*, New York.

²⁸ According to both Harold Lubin and Lord Raglan the narrative presentation of the Hero is extremely important to his heroic status. See Harold Lubin, ed., *Heroes and Anti-Heroes*, (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1968), 4; Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A study in Tradition, Myth and Drama*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 209.

²⁹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 49-169. A brief description of the elements of traditional hero myths is given in chapter one.

³⁰ *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, July 10, 1804).

Americans quickly responded to Decatur's heroism and threw together many public celebrations in his honour, which were undoubtedly accompanied by a great deal of unorganized and unrecorded merriment. In New York, for instance, Decatur's success was celebrated at the city's theatres through a pantomime and the singing of patriotic songs.³¹ The public celebrations in New York are particularly interesting as the theatre director gave a showing of the play *Barbarossa, or The Tyranny of Algiers* directly before *Valour Rewarded*, the latter being "a pantomime of Decatur's recapture of the *Philadelphia* and the glorious victory of Decatur and American Seamen over the Tripolitan corsairs".³² "Patriotic songs" and a procession bearing the "American Flag Triumphant" accompanied this laudatory pantomime as well.³³ The New York celebrations are probably one of the best examples of how important Decatur's raid was in an ideological sense. This was America's first major victory of the war, and better yet as Allison notes, it "transformed American embarrassment over the loss of the *Philadelphia* into a display of American prowess"³⁴ That both a play about the famous Mediterranean pirate Barbarossa and the display honouring Decatur were shown together is an interesting juxtaposition. It highlighted both the threat of the Barbary pirates posed to America and the heroism of Decatur who so recently vanquished those same "Tripolitan Corsairs." Further, what was seen as Ottoman or Muslim despotism in eighteenth and nineteenth century America made the Barbary States and their residents into a near perfect image of otherness.³⁵ This made the Barbary pirates an

³¹ *American Citizen*, (New York, May 23, 1804).

³² *American Citizen*, (New York, May 23, 1804).

³³ *American Citizen*, (New York, May 23, 1804).

³⁴ Robert Allison, *The Crescent Obscured* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 190.

³⁵ Frank Lambert, *The Barbary Wars* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 106.

excellent foil for American individuals such as Decatur to prove the uniqueness and abilities of the new nation against.

Decatur's burning of the *Philadelphia* also elicited a quick response from the White House. Jefferson, no doubt realizing that Decatur had made his naval policy a success, publicly announced on May 25, 1804 (less than a week after the news had arrived) that he would promote Decatur to the rank of Captain as a demonstration of his "high opinion of the gallant conduct of Lieutenant Decatur in taking and destroying the frigate *Philadelphia*."³⁶ From this point on Decatur became the darling of Jefferson's Republican Party which sought to use his exploits to explicitly and implicitly defend its naval policy and even to brand anyone who criticized Republican policies as unpatriotic.³⁷ The use of Decatur's success as a political cudgel began on May 28, 1804 as the *National Intelligencer* reported the strengthening of the Mediterranean squadron and published an open-ended piece attacking Federalists for their lack of support for the "gallant conduct of [American] seamen" and their criticism of how Jefferson was handling the war against Tripoli.³⁸ This use of Decatur's success continued long after the initial euphoria over the burning of the *Philadelphia* had passed. In his Congressional address on November 8, 1804, Jefferson alluded to Decatur's success and predicted the war with Tripoli would soon end.³⁹ Unfortunately for Jefferson, news that Preble's siege of Tripoli in August and September failed to subdue the Bashaw reached the United

³⁶ *National Intelligencer*, (Washington DC, May 25, 1804).

³⁷ Allison, 191-2.

³⁸ *National Intelligencer*, (Washington DC, May 28, 1804).

³⁹ *National Intelligencer*, (Washington DC, November 8, 1804).

States in December.⁴⁰ As a result another year of fighting would be required to finally bring Tripoli to terms.

The partisan nature that Decatur's heroic image initially took should not be taken to mean that he was a marginalized figure relegated to political discussion. Rather, one needs to understand the nature of political debate in America in the first decade of the nineteenth century to appreciate how important Decatur's involvement in the politics of the time was to his status as a hero. As David Waldstreicher and Joyce Appleby have noted, America in the early nineteenth century was in the midst of redefining its political system and founding a sense of national identity. One of the key methods of accomplishing both was through politically and culturally charged public celebrations.⁴¹ The Fourth of July was one such celebration. Initially celebrated to glorify Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, by the early nineteenth century the Fourth of July had become a broadly defined celebration of American nationalism. As such, it functioned as a key method of creating an American sense of self and in 1804 Decatur was intimately involved in this process.⁴²

In 1804 the Fourth of July celebrations were partially dedicated to Decatur as Americans sought to laud America's newest hero and use him to buttress their growing national pride. In the early nineteenth century there were two main methods of honouring people during celebrations, through the production of temporary monuments (somewhat similar to today's parade floats) and with public toasts. Decatur was

⁴⁰ *Maryland Gazette*, (Baltimore, November 29, 1804); *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, December 6, 1804).

⁴¹ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: the Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 7-9, 180; Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2-6.

⁴² Wilbur Zelinsky, *Nation into State: The Shifting Symbolic Foundations of American Nationalism*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 69-70.

immortalized in both. In Philadelphia, the leading city of the period, he received the honour of having a column in the Temple of Flame (a temporary structure built to honour heroic Americans) devoted to him.⁴³ This was quite a tribute, especially when one realizes that other columns were dedicated to entire institutions, such as the Navy, or to people of extraordinary national stature such as Washington and Jefferson.⁴⁴ Decatur was more widely honoured in toasts, and as contemporary newspapers preserved many of them, a close examination of American sentiment towards Decatur and his growing stature as a hero is possible. The *National Intelligencer* in Washington recorded a number of toasts to the Navy, some from as far away as Petersburg, Virginia.⁴⁵ While none directly praised Decatur as an individual, many mentioned the burning of the *Philadelphia* and expressed a great deal of national pride in this achievement. One toast to the Navy hoped America's "brave tars" would "teach all nations to respect the rights of the sea, and the barbarians of the Mediterranean to obey the dictates of humanity," succinctly expressing America's war aims.⁴⁶

In Philadelphia celebrations centred more on Decatur himself, as civic pride in a heroic Philadelphian connected localism with nationalism.⁴⁷ Some toasts lauded Decatur's raid on Tripoli, often linking its success with the "speedy release" of American captives in Tripoli, an assertion that Jefferson and the Republican Party sought repeatedly to make since news of the audacious destruction of the *Philadelphia* had first arrived.⁴⁸ Most toasts, however, simply praised Decatur's heroism, his "gallantry in a good cause",

⁴³ *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, July 4, 1804).

⁴⁴ Allison, 192-193.

⁴⁵ *National Intelligencer*, (Washington DC, July 4-11, 1804).

⁴⁶ *National Intelligencer*, (Washington DC, July 4, 1804).

⁴⁷ Waldstreicher, 202.

⁴⁸ *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, July 4-13, 1804).

and used him as an example of what Americans were capable of and as an inspiration to Americans in and out of uniform.⁴⁹ This quotation encapsulates the general themes of toasts to Decatur:

Lieutenant Decatur and his intrepid companions – May their brave and gallant conduct in the harbour of Tripoli, be a terror to their enemies, an example to their countrymen and finally procure them the esteem of every American.

Americans also celebrated their pride and newfound confidence on the world stage by singing jingoistic songs. One published by the Bank of Independence threatened to pay foreign kings in “metal” (a play on the materials used to make both money and cannon balls) if they should ever “run our bank” (America).⁵⁰ In a similar vein one popular toast claimed that it was “accident not war” that had led to the loss of the *Philadelphia*, suggesting that Americans had not suffered a military defeat in the war against Tripoli.⁵¹ Together the naval reports, circulated and embellished by American newspapers, the celebrations of the burning of the *Philadelphia*, the political needs of the Jefferson administration, the desires of an emerging American identity, and the forum of public expression provided by public celebrations on the Fourth of July, combined to construct the heroic image of Decatur.

During the rest of the Barbary War the *Aurora* and the *Maryland Gazette* ensured that Decatur remained front-page news in Pennsylvania and Maryland by publishing anything about their anointed hero they could find. Just before Independence Day celebrations began, the *Aurora* published extracts of a letter from an American captive in

⁴⁹ *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, July 10, 1804).

⁵⁰ *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, July 10, 1804).

⁵¹ *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, July 13, 1804).

Tripoli lauding the burning of the *Philadelphia*, “a grand and awful sight” that filled him with “infinite delight”.⁵²

The attempt of burning was certainly very daring, and reflects great honour upon the conductors of the expedition. Notwithstanding it was moonlight and the forts kept up a continual fire at them, they entered the harbour, set fire to the ship and affected their escape, amidst a heavy cannonading from the vessels and forts.⁵³

The *Aurora* also proudly reported that Decatur had been publicly honoured by Congress in November.⁵⁴ Both the *Maryland Gazette* and the *Aurora* also emphasized Decatur’s role in the American siege of Tripoli in August and September when reports of the action were published.⁵⁵ Then, in January 1805 the *Aurora* published extracts from a letter believed to be written by a British Commodore to Commodore Barron, who had replaced Preble in September 1804, lauding the Americans’ brave efforts against Tripoli and urging the Americans to force Tripoli to accept their terms.⁵⁶ The *Aurora* along with several other American newspapers also printed a statement from the Vatican in Rome expressing its view that “the American commander, with a small force, and in a short time, has done more for the cause of Christianity, than the most powerful nations of Christendom have done for ages.”⁵⁷ This continual exposure and praise cemented Decatur’s action as heroic and symbolic of America’s triumphant entrance onto the world stage.

The growing acceptance of Decatur as a great American hero was further enhanced as his story began to take on a life of its own as newspapers printed “further

⁵² *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, July 3, 1804).

⁵³ *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, July 3, 1804).

⁵⁴ *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, November 20, 1804).

⁵⁵ *Maryland Gazette*, (Baltimore, November 29, 1804); *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, December 6, 1804).

⁵⁶ *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, January 16, 1805.)

⁵⁷ *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, January 16, 1805); *New York Evening Post*, (January 12, 1804).

details” of his “heroic deeds.” In the years immediately after his appearance the bare outlines provided by naval reports began to be fleshed out and embellished as the process of constructing a mythic hero narrative around Decatur began.⁵⁸ On March 21, 1805 the *Maryland Gazette* published a very dramatic account of Decatur’s daring capture of two Tripolitan gunboats during the American attack on August 3, 1804. Decatur captured both gunboats despite being vastly outnumbered, defeated numerous “Turks” in single combat, and was saved by the self-sacrifice of one of his crew whose “skull was split” by the blow he intercepted.⁵⁹ The recounting of such feats, long after the events actually occurred, is quite indicative of both the heroic stature Decatur’s image had gained and the strong desire of Americans to see the war as a rousing example of American ability.

Beyond commanding the raid that burned the *Philadelphia*, Decatur had the final piece of good fortune to be given command of the frigate *Congress* which was to escort the Tunisian ambassador to Washington.⁶⁰ This assignment guaranteed his arrival would garner both public and official interest due to both his celebrity and the exotic character of his charge.⁶¹ As a result Decatur and the *Congress* were saluted by every port they passed and feted in every port they landed in, further adding to his fame in America.⁶²

When the war ended and most of the US fleet had returned home, Decatur and his exploits were given a prominent place in accounts of the conflict. In 1806 two “histories” of the war with Tripoli were published, both of which described Stephen Decatur as a

⁵⁸ *Maryland Gazette*, (Baltimore, March 21, 1805).

⁵⁹ *Maryland Gazette*, (Baltimore, March 21, 1805).

⁶⁰ Knox, *Wars With the Barbary Powers*, Vol.5, 38, 312.

⁶¹ It should be noted that during this period “Turks” or other such “exotic” ethnicities were displayed at theatres and verity shows as curiososiities. See, James Ellison, *The American Captive, or the Siege of Tripoli. A Drama in Five Acts*. (Boston: Joshua Belcher, 1812).

⁶² *Maryland Gazette*, (Baltimore, November 21, 1805); Knox, *Wars With the Barbary Powers*, Vol.6, 521.

prominent hero of the conflict.⁶³ The first history to feature Decatur was Blyth's *History of the War between the United States and Tripoli*. This history gathered and repeated the newspaper accounts of Decatur's exploits. It gave Decatur a prominent place in the war, but did not add substantially to his image as it generally repeated what had already been reported in newspapers. The first work to start "fleshing out" the narrative of Decatur's actions was Joseph Hanson's heroic "poem", *The Mussulmen Humbled or A Heroic Poem in celebration of the bravery displayed by the American Tars in the contest with Tripoli*. Hanson devoted entire sections of his historical poem to describing Decatur's burning of the *Philadelphia* and his involvement in the August attacks on Tripoli.⁶⁴ In one memorable passage Hanson described Decatur's actions when boarding a Tripolitan gunboat as akin to "the powerful Ajax" as he "[sprung] among the savage crew! And with his flaming sword [struck] down who'er opposed [him]."⁶⁵ Clearly Decatur's image as an American hero was strengthened by poetic and laudatory accounts of his heroics, just as the unimpressive war with Tripoli was transformed into a rousing success and testament to American enterprise.⁶⁶

While Decatur's reputation was made during the first Barbary War, he added to his heroic image in the War of 1812 with his dramatic capture of the British frigate *Macedonian* on October 25, 1813.⁶⁷ The capture of the *Macedonian* not only brought

⁶³ See Stephen C. Blyth, *History of the War Between the United States and Tripoli, and the Other Barbary Powers* (Salem, Mass: Printed at the Salem Gazette, 1806); Joseph Hanson, *The Mussulmen Humbled or A Heroic Poem in celebration of the bravery displayed by the American Tars in the contest with Tripoli*, (New York: Southwick and Hardcastle, 1806).

⁶⁴ Hanson, 12-15, 15-23.

⁶⁵ Hanson, 19.

⁶⁶ Alison, 191-192; Hanson, 27-32.

⁶⁷ *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, December 15, 1812); *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, December 23, 1812). See Palmer Thomas', *Free Trade and Sailors Rights*, Illustrated with engravings of the actions (Pennsylvania: Denis Hart, 1813), a short book which was devoted primarily to recording the public praise Decatur received for his capture of the *HMS Macedonian*.

Decatur the adoring attention of the nation but it also made him a very rich man.⁶⁸ His image was slightly dented when he surrendered the US frigate *President* to the British on January 14, 1815, but when hostilities ended and Decatur was repatriated to the United States he was given command of the first squadron that was sent to deal with Algiers. Under British prodding, Algiers had declared war on the United States during the War of 1812.⁶⁹ Decatur, commanding a powerful squadron of ten ships and anxious to distance himself from the loss of the *President*, quickly set to work. He concluded a treaty with the Algerian Dey on June 30, 1815.⁷⁰ Decatur then used his powerful squadron to intimidate the leaders of Tunis and Tripoli into signing very favourable peace treaties, dramatically completing all his objectives in less than three months. This victory again brought Decatur to the notice of the nation and went a long way to establishing him as one of the most important heroes of his generation. After these achievements a more relaxed period of Decatur's life began. He received a seat on the Board of Navy Commissioners, built a very impressive house in Washington, a stone's throw away from the White House, and entered Washington society with his wife Susan.⁷¹

Decatur died tragically in 1820 during a duel with a fellow naval officer, Samuel Barron, but quickly became enshrined in national memory. His tragic and romantic death at the age of forty-one cut short a life that many of his contemporaries felt sure was destined for further greatness.⁷² His death occasioned the production of a number of

⁶⁸ McKee, 346-347.

⁶⁹ Lambert, 188.

⁷⁰ Parker, 128-129.

⁷¹ The house Decatur built is still standing today and has become a national historic site. See Helen Duprey Bullock, ed., *Decatur House* (Washington: National Trust For Historical Preservation, 1967); Decatur House, <http://www.decatourhouse.org/site/history.htm>, accessed, (February 28, 2008).

⁷² See, Angus Umphrville, *An Oration on the Death of Commodore Stephen Decatur of the US Navy, who was killed in a duel by James Barron, formerly commodore of the Chesapeake* delivered in Pittsburgh April, 1820.

biographies that strove to preserve his heroic nature for further generations of Americans,
and it is to these works that we now turn.

Chapter 4:

Decatur's Early Biographies and Mythmaking in the Nineteenth Century

During the later years of Decatur's life and after his death the narrative constructed around him entered its most creative phase. The relatively scanty documentary evidence covering Decatur's life has given his early biographers great deal of influence on how his life would be remembered. The works of R. Patterson, Waldo S. Putnam and Alexander S. Mackenzie, in particular, have deeply influenced American public memory as their representations of Decatur have shaped all subsequent biographies.

The first true biographies of Decatur emerged during the later stages of the War of 1812 as part of propaganda materials designed to lift American spirits. In these works Decatur was lauded for his heroic capture of the British frigate *Macedonian* and his success against the Barbary pirates was again brought to the public's attention in plays, speeches, newspaper articles and short "histories".¹ With these works a narrative centered completely on Decatur for the first time, beginning with his birth and carrying the reader up to the last years of the war of 1812. R. Patterson's account represents the best example of the early biographies written during the later years of Decatur's life.

Patterson's *Naval Biography, or the lives of the most distinguished naval heroes of the present day* presented Decatur's life along with other distinguished Naval officers and it seems to have been well known as Isaac Bailey copied it for his biography of Decatur in his *American Naval Biography*.² Patterson's work was quite brief (fifteen pages) and was written before Decatur's death, making it impossible for Patterson to fully cover his

¹ See Thomas Palmer, *Free Trade and Sailors Rights*, Illustrated with engravings of the actions (Pennsylvania: Deniss Hart, 1813), for a wartime collection of such materials.

² See Isaac Bailey, *American Naval Biography* (Providence, R.I.: Mann for Bailey, 1815).

subject's life. And while Patterson's work also failed to develop the didactic themes other biographers have attached to Decatur's character, it still made a number of important contributions to the Decatur narrative.

Patterson was the first to present Americans with a coherent account of Decatur's life. Patterson's gives an account of Decatur's life from his birth "on the eastern shore of Maryland" up to his defeat of "one of the finest ships in the British Navy", the *Macedonian*, on October 25, 1812.³ This change from fragmentary records of recent events to a true narrative was a very important step in the construction of the Decatur narrative. According to Hayden White, it is only when events are placed within a narrative that they become comprehensible and the historical meanings of events or individuals can be communicated.⁴ This production of meaning inherent in the construction of the Decatur narrative would be continued at much greater length in the work of Putnam and Mackenzie, and continues today in work of Leonard Guttridge and other recent biographers of Decatur.

Patterson also contributed one of the most compelling heroic episodes to the Decatur narrative, the story of how Decatur avenged his brother's death during the August 3, 1804 attack on Tripoli. According to Patterson, in the heat of the battle and after already having captured one enemy gunboat, Decatur received word that his brother had been treacherously killed by a Tripolitan Captain who had feigned surrender. In the quotation below Patterson relates his version Decatur's impassioned response:

The feelings of the gallant Decatur, on receiving this intelligence, may more easily be imagined than described. Every consideration of prudence and safety was lost in his eagerness to punish so dastardly an

³ R. Patterson, *Naval Biography, or the Lives of the Most Distinguished Naval Heroes of the Present Day* (Pittsburgh: Patterson and Engles, 1814), 27.

⁴ Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 84-86.

act, and to revenge the death of a brother so basely murdered. He pushed within the enemy's line with his single boat, and having succeeded in getting alongside of the retreating foe, boarded her at the head of eleven men, who were all the Americans he had left.

The fate of this contest was extremely doubtful for twenty minutes. All the Americans except four were now severely wounded. Decatur singled out the commander as the peculiar object of his vengeance. The Turk was armed with an esponton, Decatur with a cutlass; in attempting to cut off the head of the weapon his sword struck on the iron and broke close to the hilt. The Turk at this moment made a push, which slightly wounded Decatur in the right arm and breast. He immediately seized the spear and closed with the Turk. A fierce struggle ensued, and both fell, Decatur uppermost. By this time the Turk had drawn a dagger from his belt and was about to plunge it into the body of his foe, when Decatur caught his arm, and shot him with a pistol, which he had taken from his pocket. During the time they were struggling on the deck the crews had rushed to the aid of their commanders and, a most sanguinary conflict took place, insomuch, that when Decatur had dispatched his adversary, it was with the greatest difficulty that he could extricate himself from the killed and wounded that had fallen around him.⁵

This dramatic has been an accepted and repeated, often with further embellishment, in every subsequent biography of Decatur and has also been a popular subject for American artists.⁶ Despite this event's appearance in historical works and acceptance into American public memory, it is mostly fiction. American records of the August 3 attack attest to the fact that Decatur's brother, James, was killed in the act of seizing a Tripolitan gunboat, and that Decatur captured two enemy gunboats during the engagement.⁷ The assertion that Decatur avenged his brother's death, which lends the episode extra weight, as well as the precise details of Decatur's dramatic hand to hand struggle with "the Turk" are,

⁵ Patterson, 24-25.

⁶ See, for example, James T. De Kay, *A Rage for Glory: The Life of Stephen Decatur, USN* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 66-67. The most common embellishment is to describe Decatur's adversary as "strong and powerful" or "gigantic" in size and a "ferocious" fighter, making the Decatur's triumph reminiscent of David's triumph over Goliath. See Waldo S. Putnam, *The Life and Character of Stephen Decatur* (Middletown, Conn: Clark & Lyman, 1821), 132; Alexander S. Mackenzie, *Life of Stephen Decatur, a Commodore in the Navy of the United States* (Boston: C.C. Little and J. Brown, 1848), 92 respectively.

⁷ Dudley W. Knox, *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers: Naval Operations Including Diplomatic Background, 1785-1807* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939-44), Vol.4, 345.

however, unverifiable. In fact, Commodore Edward Preble and Lieutenant Richard Somers, who both submitted lengthy reports on the engagement, state that the boat containing James Decatur's killer was able to escape due to "superior sailing".⁸ Preble, in particular, stated that he was quite upset that the "poltroon" escaped.⁹

This blending of fact and fiction is quite indicative of how the Decatur narrative has been constructed and how a compelling story about a hero can transform myth into history. A dramatic story of a murdered brother avenged in single combat was grafted onto an impressive foundation, in this case the capture of two enemy gunboats, thus transforming an impressive, but not extraordinary, event into a heroic triumph. Taking over from Patterson in 1821 was Waldo S. Putnam who's *Life and Character of Stephen Decatur* was the first full-length biography published after Decatur's death.

Putnam, an ardent American nationalist, carefully crafted his version of Decatur to provide Americans with an inspiring example of American ability. This approach paces Putnam squarely within the style of "didactic nationalist" biography commonly. As Casper argues, this method of biography was meant to "teach and inspire the young," commemorate great Americans and "proclaim the new nation's place beside – or superiority to – European monarchies".¹⁰ Following the program of "didactic nationalism" Putnam's primary goal was to present Decatur as a romantic and inspirational hero and prove the ability of Americans and the superiority of the American system over the "monkish gloom" of Europe and the barbarity of "mohametans".¹¹ Like previous revolutionary figures Revolutionary figures such as George Washington and

⁸ Knox, *Wars With the Barbary Powers*, Vol.4, 345.

⁹ For Commodore Edward Preble's report, see Knox, *Wars With the Barbary Powers*, Vol.4, 293-308.

¹⁰ Scott E. Casper, *Constructing American Lives: Biography & Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 19.

¹¹ Putnam, 25, 59.

Patrick Henry, Decatur was moulded into an example of republican virtue, suitable to be emulated by future Americans.¹²

The two themes of heroism and nationalism run through Putnam's biography of Decatur and continually reinforce each other. In Putnam's work Decatur's heroism is personal, and also the product of America and its particular society and institutions. Like Patterson, Putnam began with a brief sketch of Decatur's family background and he immediately asserted both themes, arguing that Decatur's heroic character resulted from the melding of French "chivalrous gallantry" and Irish "romantic courage" a combination possible only in America.¹³ Putnam was also quick to proclaim the unparalleled opportunities America offered to her citizens by describing how Decatur's grandfather came to America penniless and his grandson was able to achieve awe-inspiring success. Such success would not have been possible in a European continent strangled by the "abused prerogative of the crown, [and] the arrogance of an insolent high church priesthood."¹⁴ An idealized version of Decatur's childhood is presented. Depicting Decatur as he learned the values of public service from his republican patriarch, Putnam worked to demonstrate the form of American parenting he believes will ensure that America will be able to maintain the traditions its illustrious founders.¹⁵ As Decatur did nothing extraordinary during the Quasi War with France, Putnam satisfied himself with describing American triumphs and claiming that if Decatur had been involved in any

¹² Casper, 50-51; Marcus Cunliffe *George Washington: Man and Monument* (New York: New American Library, 1958), 15.

¹³ Putnam, 24. Biographers of Decatur have difficulty agreeing on exact nature of Decatur's background. Alexander Mackenzie provides the most complete explanation of his paternal lineage; however, as will be discussed later in this chapter, even this explanation is problematic.

¹⁴ Putnam, 23.

¹⁵ Putnam, 45.

notable engagements he would have distinguished himself.¹⁶ The average nature of his service before this burning of the *Philadelphia* was either glossed over or portrayed as the interlude foreshadowing his later heroism. In this way, Putnam reworked Decatur's life to create a narrative of near continual heroism.

The Life and Character of Stephen Decatur really begins to build up momentum in Chapter Five which covers the beginning of the First Barbary War in 1801. More than any of Decatur's nineteenth century biographers, Putnam presented his readers with a damning view of the natives of Barbary. Putnam's demonization of the Tripolitans (and later the Algerians) was caused by his ardent nationalism, his support for freedom of religion, in America, and a strong desire to emphasize Decatur's heroism and didactic qualities by contrasting him with a frightening "other." After briefly citing the inaction and effeminate nature of European monarchies as the underlying reason for the "sons of Ishmael's" power, Putnam launched into a lewd description of Moslem cruelty and barbarity towards Christians, proclaiming that "Mahometans" "immolate" Christians "upon the blood-stained altars of Mahomet."¹⁷ This portrayal of America, Europe and the Tripolitans is very important to Putnam's narrative as it allows him to characterize Americans as morally upright defenders of Christianity and humanity against the barbarism of Islam and the degeneracy of old Europe. This interpretation is given further weight by Putnam's careful quotation of the Pope's 1805 statement that "[America] has done more for the cause of Christianity, than the most powerful nations of Christendom have done for ages."¹⁸ In this interpretation of the First Barbary War, Decatur was cast as the American "white knight" out to save the Christian world. To further strengthen his

¹⁶ Putnam, 47-48.

¹⁷ Putnam, 59.

¹⁸ *Aurora*, (Philadelphia, January 16, 1805), quoted in Putnam, 156.

arguments and display Decatur's heroism Putnam makes extensive use of biblical allusion. In his account of Decatur's burning of the *Philadelphia*, Putnam proclaimed Decatur and his men's safe return from the perilous harbour of Tripoli a "resurrection", adding that the presence of a favourable breeze that allowed the *Intrepid* to escape the fiery wreck of the *Philadelphia* made it seem "as if heaven smiled" on Decatur's mission. Putnam also described the "Turk" who murdered James Decatur in Goliath-like terms, giving Decatur's fictional hand-to-hand struggle with the "gigantic" Turk a more epic and religious cast than Patterson's version.¹⁹

While Putnam used biblical metaphor to emphasize Decatur's role as a saviour and avenger in the "Christian" struggle against "Mahometans," he also relied extensively on classical allusion to drive home Decatur's outstanding patriotism. This was a logical choice, given the familiarity of most educated American readers with Classical works during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Putnam began by likening the Decatur family to the famous Roman republican family, the Decii, to emphasize Decatur's devotion to the American Republic.²⁰ The use of classical illusions continued throughout *The Life and Character of Stephen Decatur* as Decatur and the Americans who "sacrificed" themselves for their country are compared to various classical heroes who had nobly served their country or died in its cause.²¹

Along with his use of biblical and classical metaphor, Putnam, with a nod to emerging currents of Romanticism, also mixed in references to Decatur's chivalry and

¹⁹ Putnam, 131-132; Patterson, 24-25.

²⁰ Putnam, 28.

²¹ Putnam, 175, 149-150.

personal nobility.²² In one episode Putnam claimed that in the aftermath of the August 1804 attacks on Tripoli the “noble-hearted Decatur treated his wounded prisoners with the greatest humanity” and even convinced Commodore Preble to return fourteen of them “to their friends”.²³ This chivalry apparently led the Bashaw of Tripoli to praise his enemies and state, “the Americans in battle are fiercer than lions, and after victory, kinder than Mussulmen”.²⁴ While there is no record of the magnanimous freeing of Tripolitan prisoners, this fictional anecdote does make Decatur and the Americans seem the very picture of chivalrous warriors, which was Putnam’s intention.²⁵

Putnam was also careful to point out Decatur’s sense of civic duty, a theme integral to his use of Decatur as an instructive instrument. At the time it was believed that one’s true “character” was shown through one’s public actions.²⁶ For anyone to be accepted as a respectable republican, public service was a requirement. Therefore, Putnam’s Decatur, like most heroes of the founding generation, displayed an exceptional talent and passion for all his duties to the state. Decatur was an extremely able administrator, introducing the Jeffersonian system of naval stations and gunboats to defend the American coastline in the years before the War of 1812. After the 1815 Barbary War Decatur was “indefatigable” in his position as Naval Commissioner.²⁷ By emphasizing Decatur’s more mundane, but no less important, abilities Putnam was able

²² Hayden White characterizes a Romantic narrative as “a drama of the triumph of good over evil...and of the ultimate transcendence of man over the world he was imprisoned in by the Fall.” See, White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7. Sir Walter Scott’s hugely successful Romantic novel *Ivanhoe* was published in 1819 and would have been in circulation during Putnam’s writing of *The Life and Character of Stephen Decatur* in 1820-1821.

²³ Putnam, 138.

²⁴ Putnam, 139.

²⁵ Knox, *Wars With the Barbary Powers*, Vol.4, 397, 480. The possibility of a prisoner exchange is discussed, but there is no generous release of prisoners recorded.

²⁶ Casper, 31-33.

²⁷ Putnam, 166, 302.

to make a case for Decatur as a rational republican gentleman. Presenting a subject worthy of imitation was of course a primary goal of any “didactic nationalist” biographer and an integral part of American efforts to construct a coherent form of nationalism during the early nineteenth century.

There are no contemporary accounts expressly discussing the contribution the Decatur narrative to the construction of an American national identity, which makes it difficult to gauge how much effect the heroic narrative had. The many towns that were named for Decatur after his death, however, suggest that biographies of Decatur did spread their dramatic stories across America and at least a few Americans were impressed enough by the Decatur narrative to memorialize him in their town’s name.²⁸ Further, Putnam’s efforts to establish Decatur as an icon for the young US navy seem to have been successful.²⁹ The naval historian John Schroeder agreed with Putnam’s interpretation of Decatur as a idol of the Navy, stating that as Decatur was one of the navy’s premier heroes his memory has exerted a strong influence over the Navy from its early days as successive generations of naval officers “idolize” him and the values they believe he stood for.³⁰ With the efforts of Putnam’s work and other early biographers, the Decatur narrative grew and captured the imagination of at least some American sailors and citizens, suggesting that his memory was influential in nineteenth century America.

Putnam’s approach to biography and his nationalism had a significant affect on how Decatur has been remembered. Decatur’s stainless heroism, republican values and especially his personal nobility and intrepid bravery were all partially the result of

²⁸ See Frank M. Abate, ed., *American Place Dictionary: A Guide to 45,000 Populated Places, Natural Features and Other Places in the United States* (Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics, 1994), Vol.1-4.

²⁹ Putnam, 29.

³⁰ Schroeder, John H., “Stephen Decatur: Heroic Ideal of the Young Navy,” in *Command Under Sail*, ed. James C. Bradford (Annapolis, MA: United States Naval Institute, 1985), 214-215.

Putnam's persuasive writing. The affects of hero-making on national history are even more apparent in work of the next biographer to take up the Decatur narrative, Alexander S. Mackenzie. Mackenzie's *Life of Stephen Decatur* has been cited in every biography of Decatur, academic or popular, written in the twentieth century.³¹ Even more importantly, Mackenzie's work was used as a primary source in Dudley W. Knox's *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers*, the most important documentary source for the history of the Barbary Wars. This has given Mackenzie's work a great deal of momentum and it has influenced both the history of the Barbary Wars and the records of Decatur's life.³²

Mackenzie's influence becomes problematic when one realizes that he was quite obviously in awe of Decatur. In his biography Mackenzie gleefully related a brush with his idol. It occurred during the second Barbary War while Mackenzie was serving aboard the US brig *Chippewa*. The *Chippewa* crossed paths with Decatur in Gibraltar just as he and his squadron was triumphantly sailing back to the US after defeating Algiers. When heading into Gibraltar, Mackenzie glimpsed an "individual of distinguished mien" (Decatur) going aboard the US ship of the line, *Independence*, and experienced such a flood of admiration and "patriotic pride in his boyish heart" that he forever after remember his sighting of Decatur.³³ That Decatur was the personal hero of his most influential biographer has definitely contributed to Decatur's stature in the American

³¹ Irwin Anthony, *Decatur* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931); Charles Lewis, *The Romantic Decatur* (New York: Book for Libraries Press, 1971); Helen Nicolay, *Decatur of the Old Navy*, illustrated by Norman Price (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1942); James T. de Kay, *A Rage for Glory: The Life of Stephen Decatur, USN* (New York: Free Press, 2004); Spencer Tucker, *Stephen Decatur: A Life most Bold and Daring* (Annapolis: Navel Institute, 2005); Robert Allison, *Stephen Decatur, American Naval Hero, 1779-1820* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005); Leonard Guttridge, *Our Country Right or Wrong: The Life of Stephen Decatur the U.S. Navy's Most Illustrious Commander* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2006).

³²Knox, *Wars With the Barbary Powers*, Vol.4, 347-348.

³³ Mackenzie, 289.

Pantheon. In fact, as previous scholars of heroism have noted, the existence of such a devoted and partisan biographer has often been the key an individual's entrance into public memory.³⁴

Mackenzie's work emphasized what Casper identified as the "Johnsonian" mode of biography; however, he still used Decatur didactically on occasion. As noted above, biographies written in the mode of "didactic nationalism" focused on the subject's public life as a pattern to be emulated. In contrast, the "Johnsonian" mode focused on the portrayal of the individual.³⁵ To write this style of biography Mackenzie relied heavily on "original information, derived from private sources",³⁶ these were primarily oral accounts of Decatur provided by the memories of his contemporaries and fellow officers.³⁷ While oral histories are an accepted historical source, they can be problematic. Two problems with memory, bias and suggestibility, are particularly relevant in this case. These problems arise because human memory, while capable of amazing feats, is also quite malleable, often confusing or conflating different people or events and always reshaping itself to take into account new information.³⁸ Bias refers to the "distorting influences of our present knowledge, beliefs and feelings" on our memories of past events, which occur as our knowledge of the past is filtered through our present knowledge.³⁹ The problem of suggestibility is caused by people's "tendency to incorporate misleading

³⁴ Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America: a Chronicle of Hero-Worship* (New York: Scribner, 1972) 5.

³⁵ Casper, 33-34.

³⁶ Mackenzie, 3.

³⁷ Mackenzie, 3-4.

³⁸ Schacter, Daniel, *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001), 1-4.

³⁹ Schacter, 138-139.

information from external sources into their personal recollection.”⁴⁰ These problems make relying on decades-old memories highly problematic.

By the 1840s, presumably when Mackenzie was writing the *Life of Stephen Decatur*, Decatur’s living contemporaries would have been at least sixty years old, increasing the possibility of “memory errors” with the onset of old age. Further, Decatur had been lauded as a hero during his lifetime, making error of suggestion very likely as those around him would have been bombarded with, and no doubt impressed by, accounts of his heroism. And finally as we have seen, Mackenzie himself was far from an unbiased observer making his collection and incorporation of memories questionable. Thus, it is possible that over the years many memories of Decatur were at least partially fabricated, moulded by years of retelling and hyperbole. Mackenzie’s account of Decatur’s youth and early naval service seems especially vulnerable to such biased accounts. And as the documentary record is silent about Decatur’s early life, it is difficult to correct any fictions or embellishments Mackenzie or his sources may have built into the Decatur narrative. Despite this most subsequent biographies of Decatur have relied exclusively on Mackenzie’s work as he was the first to discuss Decatur’s youthful experiences at length.

In an effort to discover the root of Decatur’s heroism and present a more complete picture of his personality, Mackenzie examines Decatur’s childhood in detail. Mackenzie began with a brief sketch of Decatur’s lineage. He unequivocally stated that Decatur’s grandfather came from La Rochelle and that he had served in the French Navy as a lieutenant, and that he had been stranded on Rhode Island in the mid eighteenth century

⁴⁰ Schacter, 113.

where he met Decatur's grandmother.⁴¹ Mackenzie then commented that "well the know beauty of Newport women" had entrapped many men. This comment may simply be meant to flatter readers from Newport, but as it seems to be part of a local folk tale it raises the possibility that he may be using local mythology to explain the eldest Decatur's coming to America.⁴² The description of Decatur's youth begins with his first sea voyage at age eight made, apparently, to cure whooping cough.⁴³ Cured by the sea air, Mackenzie recorded that Decatur "grew up a lively, intelligent, and uncommonly promising boy."⁴⁴ According to Mackenzie, Decatur's early life was full of mischief and high spirited adventure. During these years of "mischief," rather than becoming ill behaved, rebellious or contemptuous of formal education, Decatur exhibited personal bravery, impeccable morals, natural leadership, avid patriotism, a strong interest in education and respect for his elders.

Mackenzie demonstrated these budding heroic traits with separate anecdotes.⁴⁵ Decatur's highly developed sense of morality and personal bravery are demonstrated by his continual defence of any lad "imposed on by another older or stronger than himself".⁴⁶ Mackenzie illustrated Decatur's natural talent for leadership by stating:

In all [he and his friends] boyish adventures he took the lead in agility and address. During the winter, when the glassy surface Schuylkill invited the boys to skim over it on the swift skates, no one excelled him in hurry, prisoner's base and the other games of the season. ...On these excursions, Captain Dick was ever the expert file-leader.

⁴¹ Mackenzie, 8.

⁴² Mackenzie, 9.

⁴³ Mackenzie, 11.

⁴⁴ Mackenzie, 11.

⁴⁵ Mackenzie cites Decatur's surviving boyhood friends Mr Francis Smith, Mr J. K. Hamilton, and Commodore Charles Stewart as the sources of these anecdotes and his description of Decatur's early character; see Mackenzie, 11-12.

⁴⁶ Mackenzie, 12.

In another anecdote Decatur demonstrated his patriotism, foreshadowing his future defense of his country, by fighting with a group of American Jacobins who tried to remove his blue cockade - signifying loyalty to Washington's policy of neutrality - and replace it with a tri-colour cockade.⁴⁷ According to Mackenzie, Decatur also had a deep respect for formal learning, spending hours after work studying mathematics.⁴⁸ Finally, Decatur also showed his respect for his elders and his great personal loyalty by giving the first pay cheque he received as a midshipman to his old pre-school teacher, a widow who had fallen on hard times.⁴⁹ A youth who beats up the school bully, fights for his patriotic beliefs, gives his first paycheque to his widowed pre-school teacher and studies mathematics in his spare time, seems a little too perfect for reality. But by beginning his biography in this way Mackenzie did an excellent job of creating a gallant American hero and it is this kind of painstaking detail that has made Mackenzie's polished version of Decatur so pervasive in American memory.

Mackenzie's efforts to mould Decatur into the perfect hero continued throughout the *Life of Stephen Decatur* as he expounds Decatur's, seemingly, numberless virtues, and uses anecdotes that hold up Decatur as a life long hero and an inspirational example for Americans. The story told to Mackenzie by Robert T. Spence about Decatur's service during the Quasi War, is one such anecdote:⁵⁰

The first time I had the pleasure of seeing this illustrious man was in the West Indies, during our differences with the French Republic. He was then a lieutenant on board of one of our largest frigates, whose officers had been selected from among the most promising in the navy, and were, on the occasion to which I allude, generally on the quarter deck, grouped,

⁴⁷ Mackenzie, 15-16.

⁴⁸ Mackenzie, 17.

⁴⁹ Mackenzie, 24.

⁵⁰ Mackenzie identifies Robert T. Spence as the source of this anecdote, but gives no other information about him; see Mackenzie, 35.

as is the custom, in different places, conversing on various subjects of their profession. I was introduced to many of them. ...in Decatur I was struck with a peculiarity of manner and appearance, calculated to rivet the eye and engross the attention. I had often pictured to myself the form and look of a hero, such as my favourite Homer had delineated; here I saw it embodied.⁵¹

Spence remembers that after enquiring into the character of this young hero he was told:

“Decatur is an officer of uncommon character, or rare promise a man of an age, one perhaps not equalled in a million!”⁵² Immediately after Decatur was described to Spence in such glowing terms, Spence was fortunate to witness the heroism of this stunning man firsthand. While Spence was talking with the ship’s officers, a man apparently fell overboard and, Decatur realising that the ship’s boats would not be able to reach him in time, leaped overboard and “upheld the youth above the surging wave” until the *United States*’ boats could reach them.⁵³ Mackenzie, in turn, encouraged the belief in Decatur’s innate heroism and importance to the Navy by including Spencer’s biased memories, which transposed Decatur’s later heroism on him as a youth. The authenticity of Spence’s memory of Decatur saving the young sailor is difficult to determine. There is no record of Decatur’s rescue of the sailor in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War between the United States and France the United States*.⁵⁴ However, it is possible that some version of this event occurred and simply has been lost to the documentary record. Regardless of the story’s authenticity, what should be noted is how Mackenzie used any information available to him to construct a highly romantic narrative about Decatur’s exceptional character and heroism.

⁵¹ Mackenzie, 35.

⁵² Mackenzie, 35.

⁵³ Mackenzie, 35.

⁵⁴ See Dudley W. Knox, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War between the United States and France: Naval Operations, February 1797-December 1801* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939-44), Vol. 1-7.

Mackenzie's account of Decatur's burning of the *Philadelphia* and avengement of his brother was substantially the same as Putnam's it. Like Putnam, Mackenzie also provides his readers with a negative portrayal of the Tripolitans, contrasting their penchant for treachery and cowardliness with American bravery and fortitude.⁵⁵ Besides the stories about Decatur's youth, the most important addition Mackenzie made to the Decatur narrative was his anecdote about Admiral Horatio Nelson's praise of the burning of the *Philadelphia*. According to Mackenzie, Nelson pronounced Decatur's burning of the *Philadelphia* "the most bold and daring act of the age."⁵⁶ Overjoyed with this anecdote, Mackenzie asked "[w]hat greater honour could await any act of naval heroism than such praise from Nelson?" adding that "In due time, we shall see how this sound of praise begun on the shores of Europe, was re-echoed from our own".⁵⁷ Thus Mackenzie used this anecdote to support the belief that the burning of the *Philadelphia* prompted worldwide adulation of Decatur, and, by extension, America. Yet Nelson's statement has a curious history. It does not emerge in any newspaper account published during or immediately after the Barbary War, nor is it present in any earlier biographies of Decatur or histories of the Barbary Wars.⁵⁸ Regardless of whether or not Mackenzie put the words into Nelson's mouth, his popularization of them added significantly to Decatur's reputation. Almost every subsequent biographer of Decatur has repeated this anecdote as proof of Decatur's international renown, making it a significant addition to the heroic narrative and another good example of how hero narratives can lead to the acceptance of mythology as history.

⁵⁵ Mackenzie, 90-94

⁵⁶ Mackenzie, 81.

⁵⁷ Mackenzie, 82.

⁵⁸ See biographical lists of newspapers, published documents and unpublished primary documents for a list of sources examined.

The legacy of Jacksonian democracy also shows in Mackenzie's biography as Mackenzie emphasized Decatur's "benevolent" and democratic approach to command.⁵⁹ Decatur apparently commanded through love, rather than fear.⁶⁰ Apparently Decatur was able to win the devotion of his men through a combination of personal charm and interest in their welfare. In fact, according to Mackenzie, the only lapse in Decatur's renowned self-command was caused by the mistreatment of one of his enlisted men by a junior officer.⁶¹ The junior officer was chastised and Decatur let it be known that such actions would not be tolerated under his command. However, the most compelling proof of the devotion of Decatur's men that Mackenzie presented was the self-sacrifice of Rubin James during the much mythologized attack on Tripoli on August 3, 1804. During the desperate fighting, Rubin James apparently threw himself between Decatur and an enemy, intercepting a blow aimed at Decatur with his head, thus rescuing "his beloved commander by an act of heroic self-sacrifice that has never been surpassed."⁶² This selfless act makes a very impressive case for the belief that Decatur's men were devoted to him above all else. However, as the selfless action of Rubin James has also been attributed to another sailor, Daniel Frazer, and the name "Rubin James" does not appear among the list of wounded from the August 3 attack on Tripoli, its authenticity is questionable.⁶³ Mackenzie noted this confusion in an appendix, but after personally meeting Rubin James, stated that he was convinced that Mr James was the man who

⁵⁹ Mackenzie, 337.

⁶⁰ Mackenzie, 50.

⁶¹ Mackenzie, 336.

⁶² Mackenzie, 92.

⁶³ Knox, *Wars With the Barbary Powers*, Vol.4, 296, 309, 348, 362. The only mention of Rubin James in the documentary records of the Barbary Wars is in an excerpt taken from Mackenzie's book. See Knox, Vol.4, 347.

saved Decatur.⁶⁴ This uncertainty over who actually performed the heroic act is another good example of the malleable nature of memory and records in Mackenzie's biography of Decatur. The confusion has been repeated continuously in subsequent biographies and depicted by artists as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Mackenzie's final touch in the dramatic characterization of Decatur was that of self-education and ingenuity, making him an American "renaissance man". As noted above, Mackenzie was careful to point out Decatur's many talents and depth of character even in his youth. Self-sufficiency, a quintessential American value, is carefully accredited to Decatur, from his teaching himself mathematics and navigation in his youth to a life-long pursuit of personal education. Mackenzie, anxious it seems to prove the breadth of Decatur's interests, provided evidence of Decatur's "fondness for natural history" in his collection of "rare and valuable marine animals".⁶⁵ Besides his interest in natural history, Decatur also had a "highly inventive turn" and a "shrewd, discerning" mind.⁶⁶ This apparently gifted mind was put to work creating, among other things, a "beautiful machine" for forming horseshoes and an improved artillery shell which Decatur refused to use against the British as he "meant to have fair play with them," according to his friend Mr Gallatin.⁶⁷ Not content with the image of Decatur as military man and an intellectual, Mackenzie also described his refined social graces, "his eminent susceptibility" to music and poetry and his "ardent taste for sculpture and painting along with his fluency in Italian and "acquaintance" with French.⁶⁸ In short, according to Mackenzie, Decatur was not only a successful military commander, but also an

⁶⁴ Mackenzie, 360-364.

⁶⁵ Mackenzie, 131-132.

⁶⁶ Mackenzie, 338.

⁶⁷ Mackenzie, 338-339.

⁶⁸ Mackenzie, 341-343.

intellectual, an inventor, an accomplished socialite. Mackenzie's emphasis of Decatur's self-sufficiency and non-martial abilities of inventiveness and social charm round out the image of Decatur, broadening his ability to inspire Americans in all walks of life. By calling attention to all these abilities Mackenzie sought to make Decatur a truly Emersonian⁶⁹ "representative man" encapsulating much of what Americans wanted to see in themselves in the romantic era of the mid-nineteenth century.⁷⁰ While Mackenzie's presentation of Decatur as a brilliant polymath in the mould of Thomas Jefferson, has been picked up by some of Decatur's twentieth century biographers, the majority have tended to pick one or two of the many qualities Mackenzie endowed Decatur and generally emphasized his martial abilities rather than his social refinements, as we will see in Chapter Six.

To sum up, the foundational version of the Decatur narrative was written in a period during which Americans were seeking to define and solidify their national identity and to record and commemorate their history. While the Revolution and its heroes received most attention, the men of the post revolutionary generation were also of interest for their own achievements and their ability to maintain revolutionary virtues. Decatur, as the scion of a Revolutionary veteran and a highly patriotic family, and with his successful service to his country in four wars, was very well suited to bridging the gap between the revolutionary generation and the first generation of the young Republic. During his lifetime, his heroism was used in a propagandistic fashion, as an example of American valour and ability. Then in 1821, immediately after his death, Putnam presented Decatur as the consummate national hero, an icon of the Navy and a role model

⁶⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Representative Men," in *Essays and Lectures* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 627, 632.

⁷⁰ Wecter, 482-487.

for all Americans seeking to serve their country. Twenty-seven years later, during the Mexican-American War, Decatur's story was told again. Building on early accounts of his patriotic heroism, Mackenzie's narrative strove to add depth to Decatur's "character" and at the same time broaden his appeal to Americans by claiming him as a "representative man" of American democracy.

With the solid foundations the momentum of the written word could take over.⁷¹ The existence of this corpus of written work about Decatur, especially Mackenzie's *Life of Stephen Decatur*, has dominated subsequent presentations of Decatur. An excellent example of the influence of Mackenzie's biography is its use in Knox's *Naval Documents Related to the United States with the Barbary Powers: Naval Operations Including Diplomatic Background, 1785-1807*, published by the US Naval Department as the official primary source for the Barbary Wars.⁷² This is quite telling as it lends a great amount of authority to Mackenzie's work and creates a circular chain of evidence and a situation where historians can use mythology without knowing. But the conflation of mythology and history, as Decatur's case shows, is also what goes into the making of a nation.

⁷¹ By momentum I mean the power to dominate all discussion about a historical person or event that a work (or a closely related group of works) can gain if its interpretation is continual and widely repeated, and as a result begins to channel subsequent research and to displace other sources of historical information.

⁷² Mackenzie quoted in Knox, Vol.4, 347.

Chapter 5:

Iconography of a National Hero in the Nineteenth Century

While Putnam and Mackenzie could only describe Decatur's good looks and heroic physical appearance, artists, both during and after his life, visually displayed his looks and his heroic actions for Americans. As the old aphorism goes, seeing is believing, and seeing pictures of Decatur as a dashing young man or locked in mortal struggles with America's enemies has undeniably supported the construction of his heroism. Pictures of Decatur have entered US official memory in relatively substantial numbers. The US Naval Historical Center lists fifteen paintings of Decatur on its web site.¹ Since these works of art first entered American public history in nineteenth century they have been displayed for Americans. Today they are presented to the US public in the US Navy Art Collection in Washington D.C., in the U.S. Naval Academy Museum in Annapolis, Maryland, in a number of museums and private collections, and they have also been prominently displayed in biographies of Decatur and histories of the Barbary Wars.² It should also be noted that a statue of Decatur stands outside the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, continually presenting Decatur to US naval recruits. Together

¹ U.S. Naval Historical Center <http://www.history.navy.mil/index.html>, pages were accessed on (February 4, 2008). Three of sculptures of Decatur are also displayed by the U.S. Naval Historical Center, but as sculpture was not as widely used a medium as paint these sculptures will not be analyzed. Biographies of Decatur in the twentieth century have also published a number of original illustrations of Decatur, including many of the images discussed in this chapter.

² Recent biographies and histories of the Barbary Wars which provide illustrations of Decatur include: Spencer Tucker, *Stephen Decatur: A Life most Bold and Daring* (Annapolis: Navel Institute, 2005); Leonard Guttridge, *Our Country Right or Wrong: The Life of Stephen Decatur the U.S. Navy's Most Illustrious Commander* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2006); Robert Allison, *Stephen Decatur, American Naval Hero, 1779-1820* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005); Joseph Wheelan, *Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror 1801-1805* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2003); Frederick Leiner, *The End of Barbary Terror* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). These children's novels about Decatur also provide illustrations, many based on portraits of Decatur: Iris Vinton, *The Story of Stephen Decatur*, illustrated by Graham Kaye (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1954); Bradford Smith, *Stephen Decatur: Gallant Boy*, illustrated by Nathan Goldstein (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1962); Wyatt Blassingame, *Stephen Decatur: Fighting Sailor* (Champaign, IL: Garrard Publishing Co., 1964).

these works of art have helped shape American memory of Decatur and the Barbary Wars and they will continue to do so. The influential nature of artistic works, particularly paintings, means that examining them and the ideas they communicate is an important element of deconstructing the Decatur narrative, therefore, this chapter will examine works of Decatur from the two most popular artistic genres that he was presented in, portraiture and narrative painting.

As art can be a somewhat difficult source to analyze, a brief discussion of the various approaches to its cultural, social and ideological significance is warranted. Due to its social and cultural importance art has been subject of examination by numerous art historians, psychologists and cultural anthropologists. While the resulting discussions about the nature of art and its place in human civilization are quite intriguing, they are far outside the scope of this work which is primarily interested in how works of art can affect public memory.³ It is sufficient to say that art is both a subjective and objective experience. Art is objective as the creator embeds personal and cultural meanings within his or her work, and subjective as the viewer approaches the artist's presentation with preconceived ideas. The viewers, however, can have their understanding of reality, especially of individuals or specific events, changed by a powerful piece of art.⁴ Beyond the questions of how people interact with art, using art as a source also requires knowledge of the cultural and historical events surrounding the work as well as and the dominant artistic styles and conventions of the period. It is also imperative that the

³ For those who are interested in pursuing this topic further see: Henry A. Millon and Linda Nochlin, *Art and Architecture in the Service of Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978); Albert E. Elsen, *The Purposes of Art* (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1981); Michael Ann Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image* (London: Cornell University Press, 1996); Murray Edelman, *From Art to Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaidon Press, 1972); Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art* (New York: Rutledge, 1999), 3 Vols.; Michael Podro, *Depiction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁴ Podro, 7-9.

historian be aware of the use of symbols within a work of art. As Browne, Fishwick and Browne note in the introduction of *Dominant Symbols in Popular Culture*, “[c]ivilization depends on symbols to supply meaning” without which individuals would have no common basis for communication and culture could not exist.⁵

Symbolism within a work of art can be as subtle as a darkening in the shading of a picture to lend it a specific mood, or as overt as the display of popular symbols. The overt use of symbols is common in popular art forms like political cartoons or propaganda, both of which commonly use symbolic figures, like Uncle Sam, to represent highly complex ideas or even entire nations very effectively within a very limited pictorial space.⁶ The cultural historian Clifford Geertz has argued that symbolic meanings imbedded in art express a culture’s fundamental meanings around which entire societies and cultures are built.⁷ This view of art, as a repository of cultural meaning, is the foundation of semiotics and will provide the basis of our approach to art here.

Works from two genres of art will be examined here: portraiture and narrative painting. Both can have a considerable effect upon the memory of an individual as they shape the personal appearance and characteristics of the subject and which of the subject’s achievements are remembered. As they perform this function portraits and narrative paintings, preserve and spread cultural meaning, providing symbols for a national culture to coalesce around. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, portraiture was the most popular artistic genre in America as large numbers of Americans

⁵ Ray B. Browne, Marshall W. Fishwick and Kevin O. Browne, *Dominant Symbols in Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular press, 1990), 1.

⁶ Toby Clark, *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century* (London: The Everyman Art Library, 1997), 106.

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 108-109.

had their portraits painted.⁸ As painting an accurate portrait required considerable skill and the paint itself was expensive and difficult to transport, therefore, having a portrait painted was an expensive activity, generally undertaken by the wealthy and successful classes of American society. Portraits “secured or marked social standing, endorsed fame, chronicled genealogical distinctions and rehearsed personal memory.”⁹ Artists allowed subjects to choose how they would display themselves, could lessen any physical traits their patrons found unappealing, or showed them surrounded by the images of their success.¹⁰ In this way idealized “pictures” of Americans began to emerge in the early nineteenth century as Americans sought to create an acceptable image of themselves.¹¹

The question of personal image was particularly important for national figures, making portraiture one of the prime mediums through which Americans of the nineteenth century came to physically know their heroes and important political figures. Therefore, according to Barbara Groseclose having a suitable portrait painted and publicly displayed or circulated throughout American towns became a common practice and was very important to how individuals were viewed by the “imagined community” of which they were a part.¹² Besides traveling displays, engravings of famous portraits were often published and circulated. For example a number of Decatur’s portraits that will be discussed were part different editions of the *National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished*

⁸ Barbara Groseclose, *Nineteenth-Century American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 35.

⁹ Groseclose, 35; Shearer West, *Portraiture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 71.

¹⁰ West, 21, 93.

¹¹ David Lubin, *Picturing a Nation: Art and Social Change in Nineteenth-Century America* (London: Yale University Press, 1994), x-xii.

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 6-7. Groseclose, 35-37.

Americans. As a notable American, his portrait was displayed, along with a short biography, beside other American notables such as George Washington.¹³

The fame of the painter also contributed to the status a portrait lent to its subject, which encouraged Americans to seek out famous artists.¹⁴ Probably the most famous American portraitist during the early national period was Gilbert Stuart. During his long career Stuart's talent and productivity made him famous in America and he produced portraits of, among others, Washington, John Adams and Decatur. As Stuart's works were copied or mimicked by later artists and engravers, they have enjoyed a great deal of influence over the American memory of the men he painted.¹⁵ A good example of this is the deep influence Stuart had on the iconography of Washington. Stuart's heavy jawed portrait of Washington has become the accepted image of the first president and is probably one of the most widely known images in America. Thomas Sully, another famous portraitist of the time, also painted of important Americans, among them both Washington and Decatur. That Decatur was painted by two of the most famous artists of the period is significant. It attests to his celebrity during the period and even more importantly it meant that highly complementary images of Decatur were created and subsequently entered American official memory both due to the fame of Decatur and the artists that painted him.¹⁶

Let us begin with a miniature Decatur had painted while serving in the Mediterranean. The miniature Decatur had painted of himself during the war against

¹³ James Barton Longacre and James Herring, *National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans* (Published by James B. Longacre Minor Street, 1837), 130.

¹⁴ Groseclose, 37-38.

¹⁵ Abraham Davidson, *The Story of American Painting* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, INC., 1974), 50.

¹⁶ Davidson, 31, 50.

Tripoli presents a handsome young naval officer with dark curly hair and fashionably cut sideburns.



Miniature portrait of Stephen Decatur, 1801-1805¹⁷

The artist's rendering of his aquiline nose and strong jaw line also adds sophistication to his looks, lending him a noble air, counterbalancing the whimsical nature of his hair.

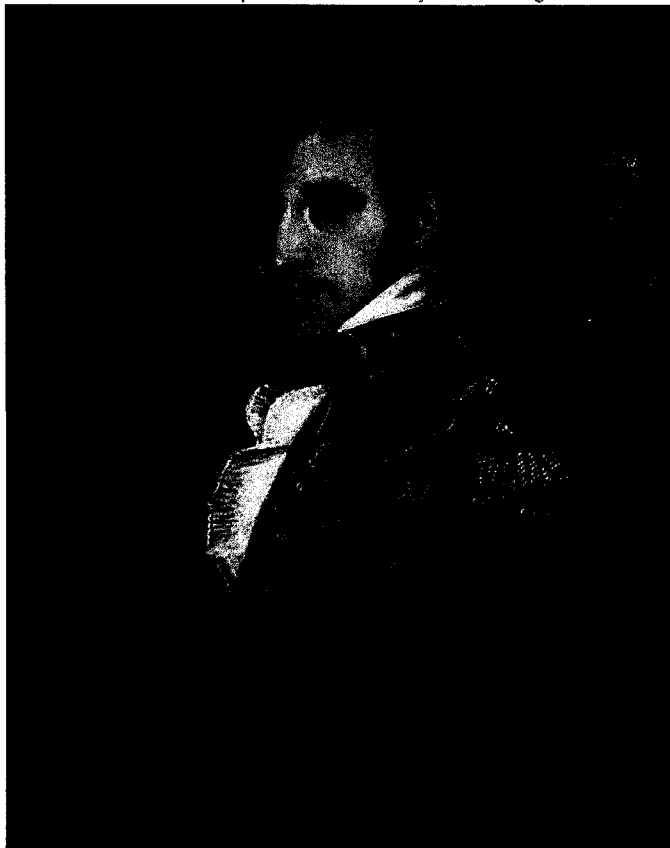
Beyond Decatur's handsome appearance the artist's depiction of his clear-eyed gaze into the middle distance lends him a quietly confident quality befitting a naval officer.

Portraits of Decatur by the well-known portraitists Gilbert Stuart and Thomas Sully depict a somewhat older and much more mature Decatur. Unfortunately, Stuart's

¹⁷ This portrait was painted by an Italian artist during the war against Tripoli, 1801-1805. Robert Allison attributes this miniature to Olivio Sozzi, see Allison's *Stephen Decatur, American Naval Hero, 1779-1820* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 121. The Naval Historical Center, however, states only that it was painted by an unknown Italian artist during the Barbary War. Naval Historical Center photograph, accessed through the Naval Historical Center web site, (February 4, 2008), <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/pers-us/uspers-d/s-decatr.htm>.

portrait of Decatur is unavailable. In the original's stead we have included a painting by Orlando Lagman which closely copies Stuart's original. Lagman's copy presents Decatur as a mature naval commander, with his calm commanding gaze staring out from the canvas and giving the viewer a sense of a powerful personality. The youthful and slightly romantic air of the miniature is replaced in this portrait by the confident aura of success.

Photo # NH 85590-KN Stephen Decatur. Portrait by Orlando S. Lagman after Stuart



Decatur by Orlando S. Lagman, 1965, after Gilbert Stuart¹⁸

As in the miniature Decatur is dressed in an imposing, heavily embroidered doublebreasted uniform. Decatur is again well groomed, with the curly locks of his hair

¹⁸ This portrait, although painted in the twentieth century is the most faithful copy of Gilbert Stuart's early nineteenth century portrait of Decatur. Naval Historical Center photograph, accessed through the Naval Historical Center web site (February 4, 2008), <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/pers-us/uspers-d/s-decatr.htm>.

reminding the viewer of his youthful vigour and romanticism. Sully's portrait of Decatur was painted in 1816 after Decatur's return from his highly successful cruise against the Algerians and the other Barbary powers in 1815. It also presents Decatur as a mature and supremely confident naval commander. The emotionally expressive natures of Sully's and Stuart's (and Lagman's) paintings are good examples of the melding of Neo-Classical and Romantic styles common in America at that time. This places images of Decatur within an artistic context that sought to both communicate enlightened republican values and glorify individuals.

Photo # KN-2780 Stephen Decatur. Portrait by Thomas Sully



Decatur by Thomas Sully, 1816¹⁹

¹⁹ Naval Historical Center photograph, accessed through the Naval Historical Center web site (February 4, 2008), <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/pers-us/uspers-d/s-decatr.htm>.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to pinpoint the locations of these paintings during the early nineteenth century when Decatur's heroic narrative was under feverish construction. This in turn makes it very difficult to say how many people could have viewed them and exactly how much they contributed to Decatur's status as an American hero. However, as at least half a dozen portraits of Decatur were painted in the early nineteenth century, some of them by famous artists, and as there was a strong tradition of public display and circulation, it is quite possible that his portrait would have been seen by at least the socially connected of America's larger cities.²⁰ Further, images of Decatur, by Stuart, Sully, Alonzo Chappel, G. Strickland, and John W. Jarvis, among others, were made into engravings and widely circulated in both in "National Gallery" books and as part of biographies and advertisements.²¹ Of the many engravings made in the early nineteenth century two are particularly interesting, one made by G.R. Hall of a Chappel portrait and one by A.B. Durand of a Sully portrait.

Hall's engraving of Chappel's portrait of Decatur, while officially undated, is likely meant to depict Decatur on his final cruise against the Barbary privateers in 1815. Decatur is shown completely in his element, standing behind the mainmast of his ship, surrounded by the powerful tools of his trade and grasping a telescope and looking every bit the commanding hero. Decatur's pose also shows off his physical fitness and gives

²⁰ Cite West and Davidson, Lubin as well.

²¹ Naval Historical Center website (February 4, 2008), <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/pers-us/uspers-d/s-dect-d.htm>. See James Barton Longacre and James Herring, *National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans* (Published by James B. Longacre Minor Street, 1837). The Naval Historical Center refers to at least two of these "National Portrait Galleries," unfortunately my research has only been able to locate Longacre and Herring's publication.

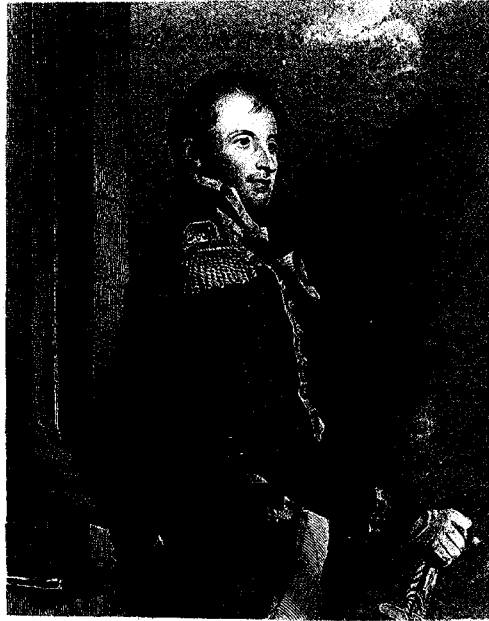


Stephen Decatur

Decatur by G. R. Hall, copy of a portrait by Alonzo Chappel²²

him a youthful vitality that is not easily communicated in the standard head and shoulders portrait. Durand's engraving of Sully's portrait is in a similar style. It presents Decatur, fashionably attired in a well cut uniform, with his gloved hand resting lightly on a sword while standing regally and staring into the middle distance as if he were inspecting a parade. The neo-classical building in the background may have been a reference to the impeccable republican credentials that his heroic narrative awards him.

²² Naval Historical Center photograph, accessed through the Naval Historical Center web site (February 4, 2008), <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/pers-us/uspers-d/s-decatr.htm>.



STEPHEN DECATUR
Stephen Decatur

Decatur by A. B. Durand, copy of a portrait by Thomas Sully²³

Together these portraits of Decatur provided Americans of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with an image of Decatur as naval hero. Decatur is sometimes given a mature and commanding air, sometimes the audacity and vitality of youth, but always the romance and nobility of a hero. The creation of this heroic image of Decatur is a very important element of the production his hero narrative as it gave Americans a specific understanding of Decatur, which has be preserved and propagated by the continual display of these portraits of Decatur in galleries, biographies and histories.

The second genre of painting that was widely used to depict Decatur was narrative painting. Narrative painting was popularized by the Neo-Classical and Romantic movements of the eighteenth and nineteen centuries. Its primary purpose was

²³ Naval Historical Center photograph, accessed through the Naval Historical Center web site (February 4, 2008), <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/pers-us/uspers-d/s-decatr.htm>.

to commemorate the actions of influential individuals or important events in a nation's history.²⁴ According to Abraham Davidson, the practice of narrative painting became popular in America after the Revolution when Americans sought to commemorate the important events and to preserve the memory of the individuals involved. Military achievements, such as Washington's crossing of the Delaware, and political events, such as the signing of the Declaration of Independence, are among the many important Revolutionary moments that were memorialized in famous paintings.²⁵ Due to the power of these images many people's understanding of those events and the individuals involved has been deeply influenced by the artists' depictions. Like the works of biographers, narrative paintings have had an influence on the construction of American national identity and public history. The use of paintings in such a way is an excellent example of how art can communicate complex ideas and create nation symbols. For example the artist often modifies the event to bring forward a specific narrative, the heroism of an individual for instance, as is done in Emanuel G. Leutze's *George Washington Crossing of the Delaware*.²⁶ In Leutze's picture Washington stands at the prow of his boat symbolically leading his men across the Delaware. Undaunted by dangerous nature of his actions Washington is given an almost supernatural aura and he becomes the heroic symbol of Americans determination to win their independence. These constructive forces are at work in the narrative paintings of Decatur produced in the nineteenth century as artists used his life to paint heroic pictures which in turn reinforced the heroic narrative constructed around him.

²⁴ Davidson, 26.

²⁵ Davidson, 30-31.

²⁶ Davidson, 31.

The first narrative painting examined is Dennis Malone Carter's, *Decatur Boarding the Tripolitan Gunboat*, one of the most emotionally powerful depictions of Decatur. It is an excellent work to examine as it interprets a historical event of great importance to the memory of Decatur, his fictitious avengement of his brother's death. Further, as it depicts American seamen engaged in a battle, it might shed some light on the American view of the Barbary War and American perceptions of their enemies. While more is known about this work than many others depicting Decatur, no detailed history is available. Even its exact date of production is unknown and Carter's artistic career extended from the 1850s until 1881. It is a large piece, 1.1 x 1.5 meters, meaning it was most likely displayed in a gallery, and its influence was probably greatest among the social elites who more commonly visited art galleries.²⁷ Currently, a copy is displayed in the Naval Art Collection in Washington D.C., making it a part of America's official memory. In this painting Carter chose to depict one of the most dramatic episodes in the Decatur narrative, Decatur's fictitious avengement of his brother's death during the August 3, 1804 attack on Tripoli. Decatur triumphantly killing the perfidious Tripolitan captain is the central figure of the painting. Behind Decatur stands Daniel Frazer (or Rubin James) shielding his captain from a Tripolitan's cutlass blow in another act of American heroism.

Carter's *Decatur Boarding the Tripolitan Gunboat* is a classic example of narrative painting in the Romantic style. Romanticism often used historical events as

²⁷ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC and Penguin Books, 1973), 24.



Decatur Boarding the Tripolitan Gunboat, by Dennis M. Carter²⁸

subject matter, depicting them with strong emotion and chaotic movement as Carter did.²⁹ On examination a number of elements immediately strike the viewer. First, the viewer is instantly aware of two belligerent groups, obviously delineated by colouring and attire. Second, the viewer is struck by the work's intensity, as it attempts to bring the desperate nature of armed struggle to life. Finally, the viewer becomes aware of a sense of movement from left to right within the work. This progression is accomplished by the use of shading and the movement of the figures depicted, both are of great symbolic importance to the painting. The symbolism of light and dark is well used in the shading of the painting as the American seamen advance boldly out of the light forcing the Tripolitans to retreat into the darkness from whence they came. The Americans success subduing their adversaries and penetrating the exotic darkness with light can be

²⁸ Naval Historical Center photograph, accessed through the Naval Historical Center web site (February 4, 2008), <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/pers-us/uspers-d/s-dect-k.htm>.

²⁹ Hauser, Vol.3, 155-156.

interpreted as symbolizing America's triumph in the Barbary Wars. This painting can also be viewed as part of the orientalist discourse that informed American views of the Middle East at that time.³⁰

The material accuracy of the painting is up for debate. For instance, Decatur is shown wearing a dress uniform, something very unlikely during a battle, and the rest of the figures', both Americans and Tripolitans, attire is also quite stylized. However, both inaccuracies lend drama to the picture and make Decatur's actions more heroic. It is also interesting to note that there are no American casualties to be seen. The viewer's eye is centred on Decatur by depicting him with right to left motion against the movement of the other figures in painting. Further, Decatur is pictured in his moment of triumph over the treacherous Tripolitan. The self-sacrifice of seamen Daniel Frazer (or Rubin James), shown throwing himself between his captain and a Tripolitan's blade, is also prominently displayed.³¹ By depicting Decatur at this moment, Carter constructs an image which argues that Decatur possesses personal valour and the love of his men, both necessary virtues for a hero.

The next painting this thesis will examine was painted by Alonzo Chappel. *Decatur's Conflict with the Algerine at Tripoli*, as Chappel's painting is titled, presents the same event as Carter depicts, but Chappel narrows the focus to concentrate the viewer's eye on Decatur and Rubin James (or Daniel Frazer). Like Carter's work, Chappel's painting is a work of Romantic art with strong colours and movement, and the depiction of very intense emotions. Like Carter, Chappel also chose to privilege emotional power over strict material accuracy. As in *Decatur Boarding the Tripolitan*

³⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 20-22.

³¹ Alexander S. Mackenzie, *Life of Stephen Decatur, a Commodore in the Navy of the United States*, (Boston: C.C. Little and J. Brown, 1848), 92.

Gunboat, there are very strong nationalist and orientalist symbols at work. In the painting's background lie slain Tripolitans and two American sailors are in the act of killing another Tripolitan, dramatically affirming the ability of Americans to defeat their enemies.

Photo # NH 56753 "Decatur's Conflict with the Algerine at Tripoli"



Engraving of a painting by Alonzo Chappel³²

In the foreground the viewer's eye is centred on Decatur, again in a dress uniform, and a sailor identified as "R. James" by a tattoo on his forearm, struggling with two rather picturesquely dressed Tripolitians, complete with turbans, pantaloons and bristling

³² This engraving was made in 1874, however the Chappel painted the original work in 1851. This work has been included rather than as the available pictures of the original are blurred, making a close examination of the work difficult. Naval Historical Center photograph accessed through the Naval Historical Center web site (February 4, 2008), <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/pers-us/uspers-d/s-dect-k.htm>.

moustaches.³³ Besides Decatur's aggressive heroism Chappel, seems to have been particularly struck by the self-sacrifice of Rubin James, as he centres the painting on the sailor's sacrificial act. Chappel communicated this to the viewer by giving James an almost Christ like aura, depicting him as a very innocent looking youth surrounded with a semi-halo, a burst of light behind and around his head. By presenting James as an innocent boy sacrificing himself for Decatur, Chappel, like Carter, emphasized both the high regard Decatur's men had for him and the purity and heroism of American sailors.

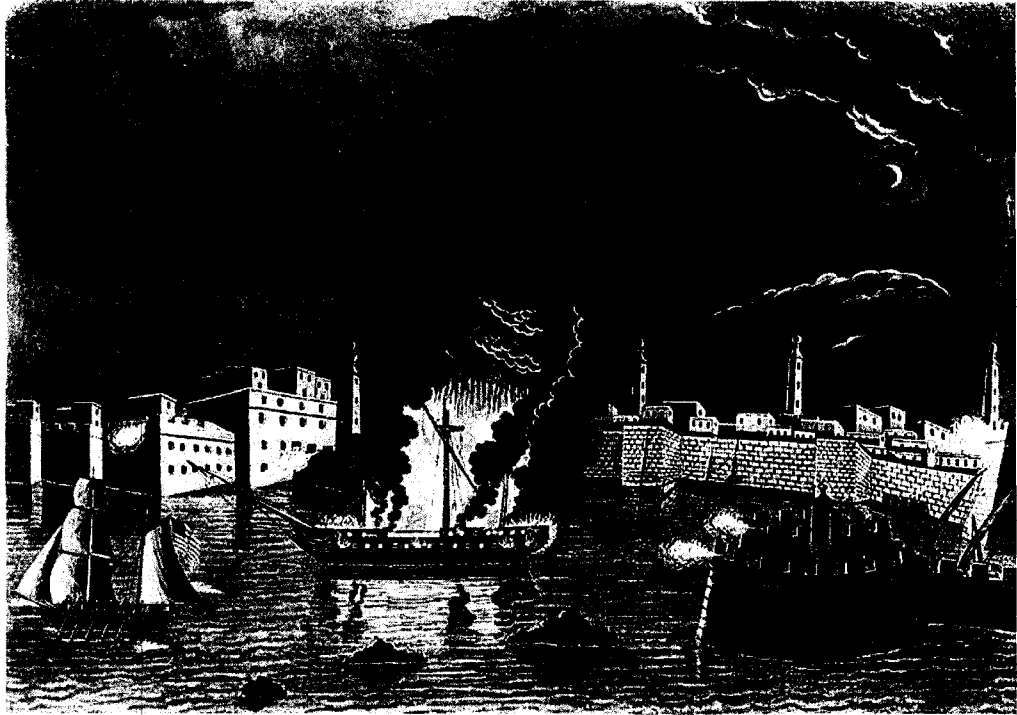
The final narrative painting analyzed here was produced in 1808 by F. Kearny. It is an engraving of Decatur's burning of the *Philadelphia* and is one of the earliest depictions of Decatur in action. Unlike Carter and Chappel's works it is not centred on Decatur and his individual actions, but rather on the successful American raid to burn the *Philadelphia*. The oversized American flag fluttering on the *Intrepid*, in the left foreground, emphasizes this nationalistic tone. The caption reading: "Burning of the Frigate Philadelphia in the Harbour of Tripoli, 16th Feb. 1804, by 70 Gallant Tars of Columbia commanded by Lieut. Decatur", however, makes it clear that this nationalist triumph was the work of Decatur. The danger Americans faced venturing into Tripoli's harbour is also communicated to the viewer by showing the fortified towers firing on the escaping *Intrepid*. The "many large boats filled with men" mentioned in Decatur's dramatic report of the raid are also depicted lending it the same daring drama.³⁴ Over all, despite the limitations of an engraving, Kearny manages to communicate what he

³³ That Chappel identifies the sailor as "Ruben James" suggests he based this work on Mackenzie's *Life of Stephen Decatur* who argued that it was Ruben James who saved Decatur not Daniel Frazer. See Mackenzie, 360-364.

³⁴ *National Intelligencer* (Washington DC, May 23, 1804).

obviously felt was the dangerous and romantic drama of Decatur's burning of the *Philadelphia*.

Photo # NH 56751 "Burning of the Frigate Philadelphia in the Harbour of Tripoli ..."



Engraving of the Burning of the *Philadelphia*, by F. Kearny, 1808³⁵

Carter's, Chappel's and Kearny's narrative paintings and engravings, along with the many others produced during the nineteenth century, presented Americans with compelling images of Decatur's heroism both on an individual and a national level. . Together these narrative paintings helped biographers and hero-worshipping Americans to construct a heroic narrative around Decatur and ensure it became part of America's public memory. Beyond their portrayal of Decatur as a dauntless American hero, the interplay between narrative paintings and the early biographies of Decatur was also very

³⁵ Naval Historical Center photograph accessed through the Naval Historical Center web site (February 4, 2008), <http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/events/barb-war/burn-phl.htm>.

important to the construction of a convincing hero narrative around Decatur. Both Carter's and Chappel's paintings of Decatur show him dispatching the "gigantic Turk" who, according to the narrative first written R. Patterson, killed his brother.³⁶ The fictional event is showed in great detail; for example the spear and broken sword, discussed by Patterson and subsequent biographers, is shown underneath Decatur.³⁷ The reliance of Chappel and Carter on the heroic narrative built around Decatur by his biographers is an excellent illustration of the key role biography played in the memory of Decatur and its influence on Americans. The paintings produced by Carter and Chappel in turn extended the influence of Decatur's biographers by visually portraying their stories and spreading a heroic image of Decatur.

Art, primarily paintings, have been used construct a compelling image of Decatur as a hero. This heroic image of Decatur compliments and extends the heroic narrative constructed around him adding to his heroic status and helping to guarantee it a position in American memory. In his portraits Decatur exudes confidence, success, romance, and a youthful promise of further success all of which were important ideas to the young Republic during the insecure early nineteenth century.³⁸ In narrative paintings Decatur is the consummate patriotic hero. He is courageous, undaunted by any forces arrayed against him in his pursuit of American interests, loved by his men, and has strong personal character pushing him to greatness and steadying his morals as he undertakes heroic feats. These images of Decatur contributed to the acceptance of his the heroic

³⁶ Waldo S. Putnam, *The Life and Character of Stephen Decatur* (Middletown, Conn: Clark & Lyman, 1821), 131-132.

³⁷ R. Patterson, *Naval Biography, or the Lives of the Most Distinguished Naval Heroes of the Present Day* (Pittsburgh: Patterson and Engles, 1814), 24-25.

³⁸ Paul Nagel, *This Sacred Trust: American Nationality, 1798-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 3-4; Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2-3.

narrative into American official memory and ensured that his heroic narrative would affect history of events that he was involved in.

Chapter 6:

Continuation of the Decatur Narrative to the Present

In the twentieth century interest in Decatur has been near continuous. Since the 1930s there has been at least one biography, children's book or fictional work published about him in every decade. This interest has risen to a fever pitch in the first decade of the twenty-first century as Decatur has been the subject of no less than four biographies.

Irvin Anthony's *Decatur*, published in 1931, was the first full-length biography of Decatur printed in the twentieth century. Of the biographies of Decatur distributed in the early twentieth century Anthony's was the only one to add in any substantial way the Decatur narrative as Decatur's other twentieth century biographers, Charles L. Lewis and Helen Nicolay, generally repeated the work of Alexander S. Mackenzie and other nineteenth century biographers and only added to the momentum of the Decatur narrative rather than its content. The two additions made by Anthony were subtle, but they began the process of adapting Decatur to fit the demands of Americans in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Anthony's first addition to the Decatur narrative was his adamant assertion that Decatur was born in a two-room log cabin on the edge of the "brackish" water of Sinepuxent Bay.¹ In post-Lincoln America, the rustic log cabin has become a quintessential staple of American democratic mythology.² By declaring that Decatur was born in such traditional surroundings, Anthony was able to symbolically link Decatur to the democratic, individualistic self-reliance and folksy familiarity associated with the humble log cabin in American tradition. This forms a sharp contrast with more stern

¹ Irvin Anthony, *Decatur* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), 8-9. The log cabin is something from the pioneering days of the mid nineteenth century and definitely not part of the material culture of late eighteenth century Maryland. See David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folk Ways In America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 264-74.

² Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America: a Chronicle of Hero-Worship* (New York: Scribner, 1972), 222-223.

republican traditions of duty and personal restraint that were originally attached to Decatur.³ Thus with the log cabin episode Anthony was able to repackage Decatur to make him more appealing to twentieth century Americans and their more democratic values.

Anthony's second addition concerns an episode in 1801, when the frigate *Essex* was in Barcelona during Commodore Richard Dale's command of the American squadron. According to Anthony's version of events, Decatur responded to a Spanish officer's insults to himself and his fellow Americans by threatening to "cut [the Spanish officer's] ears off."⁴ Mackenzie discussed the altercation in his biography of Decatur, but in his version Decatur conducted himself in a far more controlled and gentlemanly fashion with no hint that such a rash and insulting threat had been made.⁵ This minor addition starts the adaptation of Decatur from the more gallant, almost knightly romantic hero portrayed in Putnam and Mackenzie's biographies, to the more gritty and aggressive hero, in the mould of a western gunslinger, popular with twentieth and twenty-first century Americans.⁶ This change in the presentation of Decatur's heroism, emphasizing gritty aggression, is present in most twenty-first century biographies of Decatur, which stick closely to Anthony's version of the incident in Barcelona rather than Mackenzie's.⁷

³ Alexander S. Mackenzie, *Life of Stephen Decatur, a Commodore in the Navy of the United States* (Boston: C.C. Little and J. Brown, 1848), 15-16.

⁴ Anthony, 75-76.

⁵ Mackenzie, 51.

⁶ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 253-254.

⁷ James T. de Kay, *A Rage for Glory: The Life of Stephen Decatur, USN* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 40; Spencer Tucker, *Stephen Decatur: A Life most Bold and Daring* (Annapolis: Navel Institute, 2005), 27-28; Robert Allison, *Stephen Decatur, American Naval Hero, 1779-1820* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 31; Leonard Guttridge, *Our Country Right or Wrong: The Life of Stephen Decatur the U.S. Navy's Most Illustrious Commander* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2006), 48.

Lewis' and Nicolay's biographies of Decatur stuck very close to the narrative as originally constructed by Mackenzie, Putnam and Patterson, by presenting Decatur as a chivalrous and gallant romantic hero. Further, while neither went to quite the extent as Mackenzie did to make Decatur an American renaissance man, both were careful to note his intelligence and broad interests, not just his bravery and fighting abilities.⁸ However, in their record of Decatur's avengement of his brother's death, both diverge from Mackenzie's version of the event. Neither credits Rubin James with saving Decatur's life during his hand-to-hand struggle with the Tripolitan captain, citing James's absence from the surgeon's records of the wounded. Instead they award the honour to Daniel Frazer.⁹ In a rare example of a critical approach to the Decatur narrative, Nicolay argued that Decatur may not have been able to find his brother's killer in the confusion of battle.¹⁰ However, despite their minor changes to the Decatur narrative, both Lewis and Nicolay still provided highly laudatory accounts of Decatur's life. Further, the informal almost novelistic style that both authors use brings the reader very close to the action, which in itself makes Decatur seem both more human and more heroic. Lewis was also careful to include a number of portraits and narrative paintings of Decatur and his exploits, including the Gilbert Stuart portrait discussed above.¹¹ Finally, Nicolay, in particular, emphasized Decatur's patriotism repeating the extremely nationalistic quote attributed to Decatur: "Our Country! In her intercourse with foreign nations may she always be in the right, and always successful, right or wrong."¹² However, this emphasis of Decatur's

⁸ Charles Lewis, *The Romantic Decatur* (New York: Book for Libraries press, 1971), 4, 88; Helen Nicolay, *Decatur of the Old Navy*, illustrated by Norman Price (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1942), 12.

⁹ Lewis, 64-65, Nicolay, 109-110. Anthony also cites Frazer as Decatur's saviour; see Anthony, 145-146.

¹⁰ Nicolay, 109-110.

¹¹ Lewis, 186.

¹² Nicolay, 183.

intense patriotism is unsurprising as Nicolay was writing during the first years of the Second World War when American jingoism was in full swing.

The first novel about Decatur was also published during the first years of the Second World War. The main contribution of Corinne Lowe's *Knight of the Sea* was to make the already dramatic and entertaining Decatur narrative even more gripping as she provided minute by minute accounts of Decatur's more famous adventures and insight into what she believed to be his innermost thoughts and feelings. Lowe's account of the burning of the *Philadelphia* and Stephen Decatur's reaction to his brother James's death are quite instructive of her style and warrant quoting at length. This is how she describes Decatur and his men boarding the *Philadelphia*:

"Board," shouted Stephen Decatur and jumped for the main chains of the *Philadelphia*. He slipped and fell. Midshipman Charles Morris of the *Constitution* was the first to make the deck of the frigate. But Stephen recovered himself at once. His cutlass was gripped in his hand. Behind him, armed with swords and tomahawks and pikes, came his boarding party.

Terrified, swarthy men in turbans and wide baggy trousers scattered like leaves before the wind. Some of them snatched dirks and yataghans from their sashes. Some jumped over board. Others rushed shrieking down the hatches. Still others managed to get away in their cutters. It was on the forecastle that they made their most desperate stand. But those dirks and yataghans fell soon from lifeless hands. In five minutes Stephen and his boarders had rid the forecastle and the quarterdeck of every corsair.¹³

Lowe's description of James Decatur's death after the August 3 attack on Tripoli works hard to wrench the heartstrings of any reader:

[James Decatur] was unconscious and his pulse a mere flicker. Bending over him tenderly Stephen realized that the end might come at any moment. They had hardly lifted him to the frigate before his breath stopped forever. The sun was just setting and now great plumes of rose in the western sky tinted the Mediterranean. It was as if the last day on which James Decatur lived wanted to do him honour.

¹³ Corinne Lowe, *Knight of the Sea: The Story of Stephen Decatur* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1941), 142-143.

“I’m-sorry” breathed Midshipman Morris with a little catch in his voice. Stephen turned back from the far radiance of the sky and water. “Aye, Charles,” said he solemnly, “but I would rather see him thus than living with any cloud on his honour.”

All that night he kept vigil beside the dead. His brother’s body lay on a shot-box and already the flag, which would cover it for tomorrow’s burial hung near by. Sailors of the watch whipped off their glazed hats as they passed. Mournfully the ship-bells seemed to toll. As Stephen listened he could think of only one thing. When the four bells struck after midnight it would be early morning in the Philadelphia countryside. Then his mother would be reading aloud from the Episcopalian prayer book. She would be asking God to spare her two boys from the perils of the deep. For weeks she could not hear that God had denied part of her prayer. That she should be thus cheated, that she should go on praying without hope – this seemed infinitely more cruel than that she should know now.¹⁴

Throughout her novel, Lowe generally remained faithful to Mackenzie’s version of the Decatur narrative, embellishing events Mackenzie and other early biographers recorded with florid prose rather than substantively adding to the story built around Decatur. The same is true of her illustrator who generally copied nineteenth century paintings, notably Alonzo Chappel’s painting of Decatur struggling with the Tripolitan captain, adding the emotional power communicated by visual images to the novel.¹⁵

Brian Burland’s and Edwin Hoyt’s novels continued the Decatur narrative’s tradition of mixing fact and fiction.¹⁶ Their novels, if anything, were even more sensational than Lowe’s. Burland’s was fittingly described in a jacket review by Martin Levin of the *New York Times* as “a lively, unusual adventure novel, full of the smell of the sea and the stench of injustice.”¹⁷ Burland’s hero worship of Decatur is particularly intense throughout his novel, a point of view principally motivated by a desire to clear

¹⁴ Lowe, 166-167.

¹⁵ Lowe, 158.

¹⁶ See Brian Burland, *Stephen Decatur, The Devil and Endymion* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1975); Edwin Hoyt, *Decatur’s Revenge* (Thorndike, Maine: G.K. Hall & Co., 1975).

¹⁷ See the rear jacket cover of Burland.

Decatur of any guilt for his loss of the frigate *President* in last days of the War of 1812.¹⁸

It is important to note the momentum that semi-historical works such as Lowe's, Burland's and Hoyt's have added to the Decatur narrative by enhancing its emotional power and widening its readership.

A number of children's books further expanded the reach of the Decatur narrative. These monographs, written in the 1950s and 1960s, presented Decatur as a boy somewhere between Tom Sawyer and Beaver Clever, possessing both bravery and a knack for adventure (and misadventure), but also earnest goodwill and a strong sense of duty. All three of these books were meant exclusively for children. They were printed in large letters, employed simple grammar, and all possessed a very strong subtext that you should want to grow up big and strong and patriotic like "Steven" Decatur.¹⁹ Further, emphasizing the inspirational and educational potential of the Decatur narrative, the authors Iris Vinton, Bradford Smith and Wyatt Blassingame devote a significant part of their books to covering Decatur's childhood. In Smith's *Stephen Decatur: Gallant Boy*, for instance, pages 1 to 168 discuss Decatur's childhood, and only twenty-four pages - 168 to 192 cover his entire naval career. Smith concludes with the line "those years of boyhood... had made [Decatur] the man he was"²⁰ As these children's biographies were meant for quite young and impressionable boys, it seems likely that they would have been very effective in disseminating Decatur's image as a true American hero to a new generation of Americans.

¹⁸ Burland, i-ii.

¹⁹ Iris Vinton, *The Story of Stephen Decatur*, illustrated by Graham Kaye (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1954); Bradford Smith, *Stephen Decatur: Gallant Boy*, Illustrated by Nathan Goldstein (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1962); Wyatt Blassingame, *Stephen Decatur: Fighting Sailor* (Champaign, IL: Garrard Publishing Co., 1964).

²⁰ Smith, 192.

While Vinton and Blassingame generally stuck closely to the Decatur narrative told by Mackenzie and retold by Lewis in 1937, albeit in a simplified and abbreviated form, Smith added two interesting episodes to Decatur's childhood. Smith gave Decatur and his schoolboy "chums" a small sailing boat which involved them in two adventures. In the first, while idly sailing in the Delaware River, Decatur and his friends came across a farmer who needed his produce transported to market in Philadelphia. Like the good little capitalists Smith obviously believes they would have been, Decatur and his friends began a business hauling vegetables to market.²¹ This addition was probably meant to be anti-Communist, for Smith was, after all, writing at the height of the early Cold War. It also functioned as an example of Decatur's enterprise, to encourage an enterprising spirit in all American boys. The second adventure occurred during one of Decatur and his friends produce hauling trips. A man they recognize as Mr Jefferson asked for a ride to find some "peace and quiet."²² After a discussion of America's naval policy the episode ended with a moment foreshadowing Decatur's later exploits as Jefferson told the boy Stephen Decatur "when you're a Captain and I'm president we'll do something about those Barbary pirates."²³ Besides the material and emotional additions to the written story about Decatur these books also presented their young readers with a highly detailed and dramatic pictures of Decatur and his adventures. The illustrations Graham Kaye provided to Vinton's *The Story of Stephen Decatur*, are particularly good. Decatur and his friends skate on the Schuylkill River on a snowy Pennsylvania afternoon. He commands a boat to rescue French privateers from their sinking ship during the Quasi

²¹ Smith, 132-133.

²² Smith, 137.

²³ Smith, 141.

War. And in one of the few pictures that copies an existing painting, he fights off the Tripolitan captain who killed his brother.²⁴

Continual interest in Decatur blossomed into an obsession with the publication of four biographies of Decatur from 2003 to 2006. At first glance it is surprising that Decatur has once again gained America's attention exactly two hundred years after he first became a national hero. However, on closer examination the sudden rise in popularity of Decatur's heroic image becomes much less surprising. The most obvious reason for the recent interest in Decatur was America's reengagement in the Middle East. As Decatur is by far the best-known hero of the Barbary Wars, reinvigorating his memory as an example of past successes in the Middle East helps Americans find their bearings and believe that success is possible. Leonard Guttridge, for instance, stated in his biography of Decatur that the Barbary pirates were the "Islamic extremists" of their day and suggesting that as Americans once ended the Barbary States' "religiously motivated" piracy, America can stop Islamic terrorists today.²⁵

Like biographies of Decatur, histories of the Barbary Wars have been coming thick and fast since 9/11 and the launch of the "War of Terror." The titles of many of these recent books are quite telling. Joseph Wheelan called his history of the Barbary Wars, *Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror 1801-1805*, David Smethurst published his semi-history as *Tripoli: The United States' First War on Terror* and Frederick Leiner titled his history of America's war against Algiers in 1815 (the second

²⁴ Vinton, 33, 76-77, 140.

²⁵ Guttridge, 7.

Barbary War) simply, *The End of Barbary Terror*.²⁶ Although these three books are by no means representative of all recent histories of the Barbary Wars, they do make up a significant subset. Wheelan's and Smethurst's histories of the Barbary Wars are centred on the heroics of Decatur, and to a lesser degree William Eaton. For instance, Wheelan has devoted an entire chapter to Decatur's burning of the *Philadelphia* and carefully quoted Pope's praise of the war, and included Mackenzie's anecdote about Nelson's congratulation of Decatur and his fellow Americans.²⁷ Smethurst's book consists of little else than the dramatic accounts of Eaton's and Decatur's heroics, suitably described in modern vernacular to make history as exciting as possible for the reader.²⁸ Together, Wheelan and Smethurst have presented American successes in the Barbary Wars as the result of daring American heroics and willingness to take aggressive action, completely glossing over the complexity of the Mediterranean and the important diplomatic actions described by Richard Parker in his *Uncle Sam in Barbary*.²⁹

A further problem with Wheelan's and Smethurst's and even Leiner's work is their treatment of the people and rulers of Barbary Coast. The long history and close interaction of all the peoples living around the edge of the Mediterranean as described by Fernand Braudel is overlooked. Wheelan, the only one of the three authors to give any sort of historical background, argued that the Barbary States were waging an unceasing jihad against all Christians and emphasizes the bloodthirsty raids and the cruel slavery the

²⁶ Joseph Wheelan, *Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror 1801-1805* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2003); David Smethurst, *Tripoli: The United States First War on Terror* (New York: Ballantine, 2006); Frederick Leiner, *The End of Barbary Terror* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²⁷ Wheelan, 180, 195.

²⁸ Smethurst, 2.

²⁹ Richard B. Parker, *Uncle Sam in Barbary: a Diplomatic History* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004).

Barbary States practiced.³⁰ As a result the leaders of the Barbary States and their followers are presented as threatening caricatures rather than three-dimensional humans.³¹

These tendencies toward hero-worship and superficiality are even present in some more academic works, notably Leiner's *The End of Barbary Terror*. Leiner, who published a highly complimentary article on Decatur in 2001, has presented his readers with a personality driven narrative of the war against Algiers.³² Decatur is presented as a consummate naval hero, as Leiner briefly listed his exploits and defended him against any suggestion that Decatur may have been less than noble on occasion.³³ Leiner has also drastically oversimplified the reasons behind the 1815 war against Algiers, as he brushed aside Britain's encouragement of the Algiers' to declare war against America.³⁴ This omission is quite surprising, as other historians of the conflict including Richard Parker and Frank Lambert have emphasized the British (and to a lesser degree French) use of the Barbary powers to harass the shipping of smaller nations like the United States.³⁵ Further, Leiner's grand claim that the Americans put an end to "Barbary terror" is, upon close examination, rather hollow. The power of the Barbary States had been declining for centuries from their fifteenth century peak, according to Fernand Braudel and Richard Parker.³⁶ So American success in 1815 was more of a "historical inevitability" than a

³⁰ Wheelan, 9, 17.

³¹ Smethurst, 110-111.

³² See Fredrick Leiner, "Decatur and Naval Leadership" *Naval History*, Vol.15 (October 2001), 30-34.

³³ Leiner, *The End of Barbary Terror*, 41-45, 63. Decatur's acceptance of the command of the first American squadron in the war against Algiers and his successful efforts to force Algiers to terms before William Bainbridge, who commanded the second squadron, could arrive has been seen as slightly self-aggrandizing by some historians. See Guttridge, 181-183.

³⁴ Leiner, 7-8.

³⁵ Parker, 61-62; Frank Lambert, *The Barbary Wars* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 184.

³⁶ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, translated by Siân Reynolds (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), Vol.2, 1221; Parker, 5-6.

sharp break with the past. The overly self-congratulatory histories of the Barbary War presented by Wheelan, Smethurst and Leiner are an excellent example of how presenting history as a narrative of hero worship can lead to a flawed or distorted understanding of the past. In this case the jingoistic history of the Barbary Wars as told by these men emphasized the utility of the aggressive use of force and the American ability to change the world with ease, both rather dangerous ideas, especially as they are based on a flawed understanding of events.

A second and only slightly less obvious reason for Decatur's popularity is Americans search for heroes to lionize and use to assuage the American sense of helplessness in the aftermath of the attacks on September 11.³⁷ In her book *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*, Susan Faludi has made plain how this search for heroes to restore the idea of American "invincibility" has led to the resurgence of many "man of action" heroes from America's historical and fictional past and present.³⁸ The strong desire for security and "invincibility" is founded on one of America's most pervasive foundation myths, that of the American Eden, as the new and perfect civilization that was shining beacon to the rest of the world.³⁹ Closely connected with this myth is a deep fear of any threat to this American Eden which often takes the form of an intruding "evil other."⁴⁰ The attacks on September 11, 2001 conformed closely to this mythic cycle, igniting deeply held cultural anxiety in many Americans and setting off the desperate search for heroes to "save" America.

³⁷ Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 46.

³⁸ Faludi, 200.

³⁹ Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964), 5-6; John S. Lawrence, and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), 22.

⁴⁰ Lawrence and Jewett, 24-25.

For the Decatur narrative this has meant intense interest as Americans looked through their past for anything that could offer guidance and comfort. Decatur, as a patriotic hero who had bravely protected America against both the Barbary pirates and the British Empire, was in the circumstances obviously a very comforting hero to find. Further, as the Barbary Wars, with a few distortions, could serve as an early example of a successful “war on terror,” the Decatur narrative became doubly useful, becoming both a source of assurance in American ability and a source of inspiration for how the “War on Terror” should be fought.

When coupled with the uncertainty many Americans felt in the new international situation created by the fall of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the familiar Cold War system of international relations, the perceived threat of Islamic terrorism and search for nationally comforting heroes created a situation in some ways reminiscent of the one America found itself at the beginning of the nineteenth century when Decatur first appeared.⁴¹ This similarity is superficial at best. America’s current political, economic, military, and cultural situation is vastly different than it was in 1801. However, as the creation and popularization of national heroes is in many ways a superficial exercise and relies as much on what people believe as what is actually the case, this similarity should be taken seriously as a cause of the resurgence of the Decatur narrative.

Now that we have some understanding of why the Decatur narrative has returned, it is time to examine its latest retellings. Particular attention will be paid to any changes that have been made to it to appeal to a new century’s audience, to how the momentum of

⁴¹ This view of the Cold War as stable system is discussed in John Lewis Gladdis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

the Decatur narrative has been maintained, and finally to what it can tell us about the construction of heroes and history in America. James Tertius de Kay's *A Rage for Glory: The Life of Stephen Decatur USN*, was the first of the twenty-first century biographies of Decatur. Like all other biographies of Decatur produced between 2000 and 2006, de Kay's book presented a complimentary picture of Decatur and his heroism. De Kay generally stuck closely to Mackenzie's presentation of Decatur, liberally quoting large sections of Mackenzie's work, including Robert T. Spence's admiring description of Decatur as a young lieutenant.⁴² One particular aspect of Mackenzie's narrative that de Kay and other recent biographers of Decatur have been careful to highlight was his humane treatment of his seamen and his ability to inspire them without resorting to physical correction.⁴³ De Kay makes plain his belief in the virtue of appealing to sailors' sense of patriotism by comparing Decatur's egalitarian treatment of his men and inspiring speeches with Bainbridge's "stolid unimaginative" nature and reliance on harsh discipline.⁴⁴

De Kay also has presented Decatur as something of a polymath, especially interested in botany and new naval technology, relating Mackenzie's statements about Decatur's collection of rare marine life and recounting Decatur's unsuccessful cooperation with marine inventor Robert Fulton to build a steam powered warship during the War of 1812.⁴⁵ However, de Kay stopped short of making Decatur the full-blown American Renaissance man that Mackenzie depicted, instead presenting him primarily as a military man of action. De Kay admires what he sees as Decatur's penchant for bold

⁴² De Kay, 37.

⁴³ Tucker, 31; Allison, 30.

⁴⁴ De Kay, 38

⁴⁵ De Kay, 136, 170.

and decisive action. For example he approvingly related Decatur's willingness to cut through diplomatic red tape during the war against Algiers, as Decatur made threats and promises his that diplomatic envoy William Shaler feared he could not keep.⁴⁶ This privileging of the aggressive aspects of the Decatur narrative is the norm in recent biographies of Decatur and the highly developed sense of personal honour and republican duty Mackenzie and Putnam endowed him with is minimized as it is no longer required of American heroes. Taken as a whole, de Kay's *A Rage for Glory: The Life of Commodore Stephen Decatur, USN*, amounts to a retelling of Mackenzie's *Life of Stephen Decatur*. The only change to the narrative centres around Decatur's ability for action and progressive ideas are privileged over his sense of honour and duty. However, as both elements are present in both biographies, this is a very minor change, making de Kay's work a good example of how the momentum of the Decatur narrative influences the memory of Decatur.

In his biography, *Stephen Decatur: A Life Most Bold and Daring*, Spencer Tucker directly addressed the tendency of the last one hundred and fifty years of Decatur biographies to be largely repeats of the Decatur narrative as established by Mackenzie and Putnam. In a foreword written by James Bradford and in his own preface Tucker criticized James Tertius de Kay for adding nothing new to the history of Decatur and promised to bring the "standards and practices of a professional historian" to this study and remedy the confusion created by the many popular biographies of Decatur.⁴⁷ Despite this promising beginning, the results are somewhat disappointing. One gets the sense that the momentum of the Decatur narrative overwhelmed Tucker's efforts to take a critical

⁴⁶ De Kay, 159.

⁴⁷ Tucker, xii, xvii.

approach to Decatur's life. The first problem with taking a critical approach to the Decatur narrative becomes immediately apparent in Tucker's first chapter. Despite his criticism of Mackenzie's work for its many inaccuracies and reliance on anecdotal evidence, Tucker was forced to rely on it for any information about Decatur's youth. As a result he has cited Mackenzie more than any other source and unsurprisingly remains very close to the Decatur narrative as outlined by Mackenzie.⁴⁸ Tucker remained faithful to that narrative as he has repeated Mackenzie and Irvin Anthony's descriptions of all the important events, including Nelson's supposed praise of Decatur's daring and Decatur's avengement of his brother's death, both of which are of very dubious accuracy, something which Tucker never mentions.⁴⁹

The most disappointing section of Tucker's work is his discussion of Decatur's capture of the British frigate *Macedonian* during the War of 1812. In this instance Tucker provided an excellent study of the two ships involved, the HMS *Macedonian* and USS *United States*, painstakingly recounting their construction and various strengths and weakness. Tucker's research showed that this famous battle of equals, between the "most formidable frigate in the British navy" and USS *United States*, was actually a battle between quite unequal opponents.⁵⁰ According to Tucker the *United States* significantly out gunned, out ranged and out manned the *Macedonian*, making it an obviously more powerful ship.⁵¹ However, despite unequivocally showing that the USS *United States* was

⁴⁸ Tucker, 191-192.

⁴⁹ Tucker, 67-68.

⁵⁰ Mackenzie, 157, repeated by Tucker, 113.

⁵¹ According to Tucker the *United States* carried more cannons, 55 to the *Macedonian*'s 49, besides carrying more guns the *United States* also carried more powerful guns. The *Macedonian*'s main battery consisted of 18-pounder cannons and 32-pounder carronades. The *United States* carried 24-pounder cannons and 42-pounder carronades. This meant the weight of broadside the *United States* fired was almost twice as heavy as that of the *Macedonian*. The heavier gun of the *United States* also had a longer range. Besides this huge difference in armament the *United States* also carried significantly more men than

a far more powerful ship, Tucker refused to draw the obvious conclusion; that the contest was not one between equals. Instead, sticking rigidly to the established narrative he complimented Decatur's "masterly manoeuvring" and the bravery of his men.⁵² Thus, despite Tucker's attempts to bring a more critical approach to the Decatur narrative, he did not challenge the established narrative substantially, point out the constructed nature of Decatur's character or even discuss the questionable authenticity of important events in Decatur's heroic narrative. That being said, if one is looking for a well written and engaging retelling of the orthodox Decatur narrative then, Tucker's book is an excellent choice.

The only biography to approach the Decatur narrative in a really critical manner was Robert Allison's *Stephen Decatur: American Hero, 1779-1820*. Allison was the only recent biographer who noted both the possibility that the story of Decatur's avengement of his brother's death might have been mostly fiction and the dubious factuality of Nelson's praise.⁵³ Despite pointing out some of the factual discontinuities of the Decatur narrative, Allison, however, stopped far short of questioning Decatur's heroic status and how much of that status is owed to the hard work of his biographers. Instead, Allison downplayed the problematic nature of many details in the Decatur narrative. For example, in the case of Nelson's praise he argued that it was "possible that Mackenzie heard it from a sailor who was in the Mediterranean at the time" and regardless of the

the *Macedonian*, 478 to its 300, thus nullifying any possibility of the *Macedonian* taking advantage of its manoeuvrability and boarding the *United States* to secure victory despite being outgunned. Tucker, 113-118.

⁵² Tucker, 118.

⁵³ Allison, 53; Patterson, 24-25; Mackenzie, 81.

statement's authenticity Decatur's destruction of the *Philadelphia* made a lasting impression in the Mediterranean world and of course in America.⁵⁴

The most recent biography of Decatur, published in 2006 by Leonard Guttridge, again has stuck closely to the established Decatur narrative. In many ways Guttridge's biography, *Our Country Right or Wrong: The Life of Stephen Decatur the U.S. Navy's Most Illustrious Commander*, has brought the recent biographies of Decatur full circle as he moved away from Tucker and Allison's attempts at a more critical stance and less flamboyant prose to a dramatically written narrative centred directly on Decatur's heroic actions. Guttridge began his narrative with a description of the poor two-room farmhouse that he believed Decatur was born in.⁵⁵ Like Anthony's statement that Decatur was born in a log cabin, this statement emphasizes the democratic promise of America, and even gives his mother a pioneering cast similar to that most famous of heroes' mothers, Nancy Hanks, Lincoln's mother.⁵⁶ Guttridge then quickly moved through Decatur's childhood, noting his penchant for adventure and "fisticuffs."⁵⁷ This mix of democratic values and daring physical aggression are Decatur's primary characteristics in Guttridge's account as Decatur both inspired his men by treating them as equals and accomplished daring feats of physical bravery during attacks on Tripoli.⁵⁸ This characterization of Decatur brings him closest to what Richard Slotkin sees as the American archetypal hero of the twentieth century, the gritty gunfighter, physically aggressive and unpolished but possessing a strong belief in democratic ideals.⁵⁹ Guttridge's characterization marked

⁵⁴ Allison, 53.

⁵⁵ Guttridge, 24.

⁵⁶ Wecter, 222.

⁵⁷ Guttridge, 28.

⁵⁸ Guttridge, 46, 71.

⁵⁹ Slotkin, 143-144.

the most concerted attempt to transform Decatur into a hero more in keeping with late twentieth century models, rather than the nineteenth century ideal of the honourable Renaissance man that some recent biographers, such as Allison, have remained partially faithful to.⁶⁰ It is an interesting thought experiment to wonder which description of Decatur is actually more accurate, but as that actual individual has long since been subsumed the many biographies of him, it is impossible to say.

Beyond describing Decatur's heroism in dramatic detail, Gutteridge also provides his readers with over twelve portraits and narrative paintings of Decatur along with some of other naval commanders and Susan Decatur.⁶¹ Along with those provided by Gutteridge, many portraits and narrative paintings have been made available to Americans by Tucker and Allison.⁶² As a result images of Decatur burning the *Philadelphia*, desperately struggling with Tripolitans, pounding the *Macedonian* into submission and just generally looking noble and heroic have been widely disseminated, adding a compelling visual element to the generally laudatory presentation of Decatur in recent biographies.

At this point a number of observations can be made about the Decatur narrative and heroes in America. The most apparent observation concerns the strength the Decatur narrative has built up over the nearly two hundred years of its existence. Since biographers in the early nineteenth century began constructing a heroic narrative around Stephen Decatur, the narrative has gained momentum with every retelling and minor addition to the point where it is now near impossible to discuss the life of Stephen

⁶⁰ Allison, 78.

⁶¹ Gutteridge, 15-17. The paintings under discussion are found in an overleaf between pages 192 and 193 of Gutteridge.

⁶² Tucker, overleaf between 136-137; Allison overleaf between 119-120.

Decatur in any other way. In short, despite its often mythical nature, the Decatur narrative has been accepted as history, and thus it is very difficult to change or contradict in any meaningful way as historians Tucker and Allison discovered. The idea of momentum is key to understanding how the story constructed around Decatur, and it seems like many other historical events or individuals became almost unquestionable. In this thesis I have described a narrative as gaining momentum. By that, I mean that a general structure of the narrative has been constructed and repeated in a coherent manner by other authors to the extent that it is difficult to find information about the individual or event that is not influenced by the constructed narrative. The result is that the narrative eventually drives out most other versions of events (or individuals' lives) and becomes accepted as fact, regardless of its actual truth-value. In this case, the narrative was constructed around Decatur and reached a near complete form in the work of Alexander S. Mackenzie and every subsequent biography or historical novel that repeats Mackenzie's narrative adds to its momentum. Mackenzie's narrative was emploted as a romance with Decatur as the hero. The crucial childhood events illustrating his heroic potential were provided. Decatur's first all important successes were lauded and his later heroic acts were related along with his personal development as a mature and complete hero able to act in a variety of roles. Finally his tragic early death allowed him to die with his fame intact and gave his biographers the liberty to reminisce about future possibilities. Decatur's life was moulded into near archetypical hero story that has become part of America's history.⁶³ What should be emphasized is the role of the biographer and historian in the process. While Decatur fortuitously preformed his acts of

⁶³ Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 173-175.

heroism when America was looking for a hero and his actions were quickly brought to Americans attention, he could not have achieved his current place in American history without his devoted biographers. However, in turn these biographers presented his life in ways that suited their purposes and added important details to his life, with the result that the Decatur remembered in history today may have little resemblance to the individual that lived two hundred years ago.

That the historical memory of individuals and events can be so easily shaped is not only an academic problem. It has very serious problems has very serious implications in American society today. Broadly speaking, it allows the American past to be abused to gain legitimacy for projects in the present. The Decatur narrative does two things: first, it provides Americans with a certain type of hero that emphasizes one way of interacting with the world; second, the pervasive influence of the Decatur narrative distorts the history of events Decatur was involved in, making alternative, and perhaps more useful, understandings of those events difficult.

Although Decatur is far from the most influential American hero, within certain groups, notably the Navy, and in connection with the Barbary Wars he is a major figure. Further his famous patriotic phrase “Our country, may she always be in the right; but our country right or wrong!” has helped to frame any debate over the role of patriotism in America as Americans agree with or criticize the statement.⁶⁴ The bravery, decisive action, and unwillingness to compromise that Decatur is remembered for have made him an important figure in the Navy’s intuitional memory, according to Tucker, who has cited him as one of the Navy’s premier heroes.⁶⁵ Naval historian John Schroeder has argued as

⁶⁴ David M. Kennedy, “Our Truest Measure of Patriotism”, *New York Times* (July 4, 2000).

⁶⁵ Tucker, xi.

one of the Navy's foremost heroes, Decatur has exerted a strong influence over the navy, especially in its early days, but even today as successive generations of naval officers "idolize" him and the values they believe he stood for.⁶⁶ As noted two of America's most pervasive myths are the myth of America as Eden, the last best hope for mankind, and the myth of the evil intruder.⁶⁷ Due to the power of this myth protective heroes such as Decatur can have an important influence in America when the country feels threatened. As being a guiding light is one of the functions of heroes this should come as no surprise to anyone, rather what is important in the case of Decatur is the model of action he has been fashioned to represent. As New York State Senator John J. Marchi wrote to then President Jimmy Carter during the Iran hostage crisis to urge decisive action, "Heretofore, this nation has proudly borne a reputation for acting decisively... Let us show again that we are still the kind of nation that Stephen Decatur glorified less than 200 years ago in Tripoli Harbor."⁶⁸ Decatur, it seems, can be used to justify a call for aggressive action rather than negotiation or compromise. While aggressive action has its place in international affairs, such a course can no longer be pursued with jingoistic disregard as it could in Decatur's day without serious consequences.

Beyond the type of hero that Decatur narrative presents to Americans, its momentum has also exerted an influence on America's understanding of the Barbary Wars and to a lesser degree American interactions with the Middle East. By casting American actors in a heroic light and the Barbary pirates as the "evil other" so persuasively, the Decatur narrative has deeply affected how the memory of the Barbary

⁶⁶ Schroeder, John H., "Stephen Decatur: Heroic Ideal of the Young Navy," in *Command Under Sail*, ed. James C. Bradford (Annapolis, MA: United States Naval Institute, 1985), 214-215.

⁶⁷ Lawrence and Jewett, 22, 26.

⁶⁸ "Decatur's America" in *New York Times* (January 7, 1981).

Wars and of people of the Middle East are presented not only for the general public but in the academic community as well. The result is that the Barbary Wars and motivations of Middle Eastern peoples are vastly oversimplified and the complex world in which America and the Barbary States existed and the many factors and inconsistencies that motivate people and states to take action has been ignored.

Conclusion:

Heroic Mythology and History

Decatur, an otherwise average naval officer, became a hero due to a single event, his burning of the captured *USS Philadelphia*. This event catapulted him onto the national stage largely because Americans had been previously so unsuccessful in their war with Tripoli that Thomas Jefferson and the Republicans needed a success to silence Federalist critics of their naval policy. The young and dashing Decatur also worked admirably for American nationalists as a symbol of the young country's national promise and ability in the face of a hostile world. Luckily for those who would make Decatur a hero, he was involved in actions in the war against Tripoli, won laurels in the War of 1812 for the capture of the frigate *Macedonian*, and also commanded the first US squadron in the 1815 war against Algiers. Together, these actions provided the skeleton onto which politicians, journalists, biographers, historians and the American public placed the characteristic garments of heroism, embellishing and inflating Decatur's relatively successful life until it became the narrative of an extraordinary hero that exists today.

The works of R. Patterson, Waldo S. Putnam, and most of all Alexander S. Mackenzie were extremely important to the establishment of the Decatur narrative and Decatur's acceptance into the American pantheon. Together they largely defined his personal character and popularized the first embellishments to his life, effectively beginning the construction of the Decatur narrative. Of the early embellishments few were more important than these three: the childhood experiences Mackenzie related as

the foundation of the noble republican polymath he made Decatur into;¹ the romantic drama of Decatur's avenging his brother's death first related by Patterson and repeated by Putnam and Mackenzie;² and finally, the praise of Admiral Horatio Nelson, who according to Mackenzie's claim, called Decatur's burning of the *Philadelphia* "the most bold and daring act of the age."³ On the strength of their extremely laudatory presentations of the Decatur, these three major additions (along with a number of more subtle changes) to Decatur's life and their dramatic style, these authors successfully wrote Decatur, the hero, into American history.

The work of Patterson, Putnam and Mackenzie gave the Decatur narrative a great deal of momentum. Once Mackenzie's culminating version of Decatur's life was published in 1848, Decatur's historical identity was largely set and Mackenzie's work quickly became the most important primary source for all subsequent studies of Decatur. As a result, Mackenzie's work, and to a lesser degree that of Patterson and Putnam has channelled all subsequent studies of Decatur along similar lines, making different interpretations of Decatur's life and heroic stature difficult. The momentum that the Decatur narrative increased as later biographers in the twentieth century, such as Charles Lewis and Helen Nicolay, repeated the story told by his early biographers.⁴ By the end of the twentieth century the heroic narrative built around Decatur had become so embedded in American history that biographers of Decatur in the twenty-first century, who tried to

¹ Waldo Putnam, *The Life and Character of Stephen Decatur* (Middletown, Conn: Clark & Lyman, 1821), 29; Alexander S. Mackenzie, *Life of Stephen Decatur, a Commodore in the Navy of the United States* (Boston: C.C. Little and J. Brown, 1848), 15-16.

² R. Patterson, *Naval Biography, or the Lives of the Most Distinguished Naval Heroes of the Present Day*, (Pittsburgh: Patterson and Engles, 1814), 24-25.

³ Mackenzie, 81.

⁴ Charles L. Lewis, *The Romantic Decatur* (New York: Book for Libraries press, 1971), 88; Helen Nicolay, *Decatur of the Old Navy*, illustrated by Norman Price (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1942), 12.

take a critical approach to the narrative, found it difficult to make substantial criticisms or corrections.

The work of Robert Allison, the most critical of Decatur's recent biographers, is the best illustration of the difficulties faced when changing an established narrative with centuries of momentum behind it. Throughout his biography of Decatur, Allison appeared torn between correcting the flaws of the Decatur narrative and writing a complimentary biography of someone he believed to be a hero. Allison's struggle is most obvious in his treatment of Mackenzie's Nelson anecdote. Allison begins by stating that there is no record of Nelson ever having said Decatur had committed the "most bold and daring act of the age." Then realizing that he might be undermining Decatur's heroic stature, he equivocates and argues that Mackenzie may have heard this from sailors in the Mediterranean and the anecdote had simply not entered American record until Mackenzie's biography.⁵ Despite this semi-critical approach Allison stuck closely to the most complete of the early biographies, Mackenzie's, adding further to its nearly unassailable position in American history.

However, despite the strength of the Decatur narrative's coherent structure, it has not remained entirely unchanged. Biographers have continually repackaged Decatur to appeal to subsequent generations of Americans. This makes the narrative constructed around Decatur quite complex as it undergoes small, but significant remodelling. These changes strengthen his position as an American hero while at the same time slightly altering the memory of his life and character. To date two different repackagings of Decatur have so far been popular.

⁵ Robert Allison, *Stephen Decatur, American Naval Hero, 1779-1820* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 53.

The first of these versions of Decatur presented him as a republican polymath. Being a military man, an intellectual, and a socialite, made him the incarnation of the elite public gentleman of the late eighteenth century. This character type has been preserved as an archetypical founding father. Mackenzie, who had obviously imbibed this vision of the perfect hero laboured, to give Decatur all the traits required to be an American renaissance man.⁶ Consequently, this was accepted as Decatur's character throughout the nineteenth century. Judging by his acceptance into the American pantheon and his popularity in place names during settlement of the American mid-West and South, this packaging of Decatur contributed to his popularity. This presentation of Decatur was also accepted by some biographers and historians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Lewis and, to a lesser degree, Allison both present their readers with Decatur "the renaissance man."⁷

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, a different version of Decatur became more prevalent in biography and history. Beginning with Irvin Anthony biographers gave Decatur more democratic roots which were more in keeping with American politics in the twentieth century. Anthony started the construction of Decatur "the democrat" with his story of Decatur's birth in a log cabin, which immediately brings to mind the story of President Lincoln's birth.⁸ As this version of Decatur became more democratic he also became a little wilder: threatening to cut off a Spanish captain's ears for insulting the US Navy, and losing the gentlemanly polish that Mackenzie had worked so hard to cover him with.⁹ Decatur's transition into a strict man of action, similar to the

⁶ Mackenzie, 50, 131-132, and 341-343.

⁷ Lewis, 4, 88.

⁸ Irvin Anthony, *Decatur* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931), 8-9.

⁹ Anthony, 75-76.

heroic archetype of the gritty gunslinger, became more pronounced in the twenty-first century. Leonard Guttridge exemplified this trend as he emphasized Decatur's penchant for "fisticuffs" as a child and willingness to make tough decisions quickly and confidently.¹⁰ This characterization of Decatur updated the narrative written about him to correspond to twentieth century American conceptions of what was heroic and also to provide Americans with a hero capable of action in a post 9/11 world.¹¹

Beyond providing Americans with a hero tailored to their tastes, the Decatur narrative has also deeply affected the American memory of the Barbary Wars and, to a lesser degree, their approach to the entire Middle East. By remembering the Barbary Wars as the backdrop to Decatur's heroism, a deeply inaccurate understanding of both the Barbary Wars and the peoples of North Africa has been encouraged. Accepting the Decatur narrative's thesis that the Barbary Wars were won by American heroism alone obscures the much more complex military and diplomatic reality. During the War against Tripoli peace was negotiated, not won by the sword alone.¹² Furthermore, recognizing that Americans were in constant contact and negotiations with the Tripolians while the war was being fought is vital to the historical record as knowledge discounts the one sided portrayal of Tripolitan and Algerian people in biographies of Decatur and some histories of the Barbary Wars. How could the Tripolitans be the ignorant, savage, irrational pirates persecuting a holy war against America and all Christians that Putnam, Mackenzie and later historians and biographers present them as, when they were acutely

¹⁰ Leonard Guttridge, *Our Country Right or Wrong: The Life of Stephen Decatur the U.S. Navy's Most Illustrious Commander* (New York: Tom Doherty Associates, 2006), 46, 71.

¹¹ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 143-144; Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 46.

¹² Richard B. Parker, *Uncle Sam in Barbary: a Diplomatic History* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004), 158-159.

aware of their diplomatic and military situation and willing to negotiate for peace, as long as it benefited them?¹³ Reinstating these facts into the historical record is important as they help to discredit the use of force alone to solve diplomatic problems and the current American tendency to rely on their often mythical, overwhelming military power. They are also essential as they help to correct the simplistic view of the people of North Africa encouraged by the Decatur narrative and other inaccurate histories of the Barbary Wars.

The powerful position of the Decatur narrative in American history illustrates the strong need for critical history. This is not to say heroes should not be remembered for their exploits as the ability of heroes to inspire is an essential part of human culture, but rather that the power of their stories to shape history must be recognized and used carefully. The hero narrative, with its connections to human psychology and semi-religious mythology, is very seductive to the public and even to academics.¹⁴ The dramatic narrative form hero stories often take also endows them with cultural power as they are easy to remember and often appear to have wider meanings, which in turn makes them popular to read, again increasing their influence.¹⁵ This means historians need to be aware of this power when approaching historical entities, such as the Decatur narrative, and must be careful not to make the same mistakes as past biographers and historians. Correcting the factual flaws of such work is vital to ensure the historical record is remembered as accurately as possible and to make the employment of distorted history for partisan purposes as difficult as possible.

¹³ Putnam, 59; Mackenzie, 62.

¹⁴ Douglas V. Porpora, "Personal Heroes, Religion and Transcendental Metanarratives," *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 11, No. 2, (June 1996), 210-211; Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 383-384.

¹⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 1-11; Lord Raglan, *The Hero: A study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 205-206.

Appendix 1.

Chronology

- 1779 January 5, Stephen Decatur born at Sinepuxent, Maryland.
April-May, Decatur's family returns to Philadelphia
- 1785 Algiers declares war on United States early July. July 25, Algerine pirates capture *Maria*. August 1, Algerine pirates capture *Dauphin* or *Dolphin*.
- 1788 June 21, US Constitution is ratified.
- 1789 April 30, George Washington becomes first president of United States.
July 14, French Revolution begins.
- 1793 September 12, truce between Portugal and Algiers declared, allowing Algerine Pirates to enter the Atlantic.
October to November Algerine pirates capture eleven American ships and 108 men.
- 1795 September 2, US negotiator Joseph Donaldson arrives in Algiers. Peace concluded on September 5.

- 1796 Decatur begins working as a clerk with Gurney and Smith (established merchants in Philadelphia), his father's business partners.
November 4, US negotiator Richard O'Brien negotiates peace treaty with Tripoli.
- 1797 March 4, Adams becomes President.
August 1, Joseph Famin, a French merchant, negotiates peace with Tunis on America's behalf.
- 1798 April 30, Decatur, age nineteen, joins US Navy as a midshipman. He is first posted on frigate USS *United States*.
July, United States and France begin fighting undeclared Quasi War.
August, Decatur sees his first action during a cruise of West Indian waters.
- 1799 June, Decatur receives lieutenant's commission.
- 1801 Quasi War between US and France ends.
May 14, Tripoli declares war on United States, after payment of tribute is late.
July 24, American squadron of three frigates and a schooner under Commodore Richard Dale impose blockade on Tripoli. Dale sails to Malta after three weeks of ineffective blockade.
May, Decatur serves as first lieutenant on board the frigate *Essex*.

July 31, schooner USS *Enterprise* under Lieutenant Sterett captures Tripolitan polacca *Tripoli*, marking the first American victory of the Barbary Wars.

1802 May 25, Commodore Richard Morris takes over command of Mediterranean squadron.

May, Decatur transfers to frigate *New York*.

June 22, sultan of Morocco declares war on US for disrupting grain shipments to Tripoli. United States placates Morocco with gift of one hundred gun carriages and peace is restored.

1803 May 12, frigate *John Adams* under Captain Rodgers captures Moroccan ship *Meshuda* attempting to run blockade with military supplies. In response Moroccan sultan orders his navy to seize American ships.

May 29, after inconclusive engagement with Trpolitan gunboats Morris attempts negotiations with Tripoli but cannot agree to terms.

March, Decatur sent home for his involvement in death of a British officer during a duel between American and British officer in Malta.

August, Decatur placed in temporary command of brig *Argus*, carries out refit.

August 26, frigate *Philadelphia* under Captain Bainbridge captures Moroccan cruiser *Mirboka* with American brig *Celia* in tow.

September 12, Commodore Edward Preble arrives on frigate *Constitution* to replace Morris.

October 4, combined squadron of four frigates makes a display of strength at Tangier in response Sultan of Morocco reaffirms treaty of 1786.

October 31, *Philadelphia* runs aground off Tripoli. 306 Americans including Captain Bainbridge are taken prisoner and Tripoli gains a 44 gun Frigate.

November, Decatur arrives in Mediterranean, transfers from *Argus* to schooner *Enterprise*.

1804 February 16, Stephen Decatur and men of ketch *Intrepid* destroy *Philadelphia* in Tripoli's harbour. This action makes Decatur a national hero when word of it reaches the United States and Decatur is quickly promoted to captain.

March 26, Commodore Preble opens negotiations with Tripoli through French consul. Preble forced to abandon negotiations and leave due to gales.

June 12, Preble reopens negotiations offering \$60,000 for ransom and gifts, however the Tripolitan Bashaw rejects his offer.

August 3, American squadron attacks Tripoli bombarding fortifications and engaging in the Tripolitan gunboat fleet. It was during this battle that Stephen Decatur captured two gunboats and according to his biographers avenged the death of his brother.

August 4, Tripolitan Bashaw refuses to negotiate unless Preble offers more money.

August 6, Preble attacks again targeting shore batteries.

August 10, Preble attempts to negotiate again offering \$120,000 in ransom and gifts. This offer is rejected.

August 24 and 27, American squadron bombards Tripoli by night.

August 30, the Bashaw of Tripoli demands \$400,000 plus presents in response to Prebels' attempt to negotiate.

September 3, Preble bombards Tripoli again, however the Tripolitan Dey position does not soften.

September, 4 Preble sends a fire ship, the *Intrepid*, into Tripoli. It explodes prematurely, killing the thirteen sailors on board. This marks the end of Commodore Preble's campaign.

September 10, Commodore Samuel Barron replaces Preble.

1805 March, William Eaton and Hamet (the Tripolitan Bashaw's brother) meet and raise a small army in Egypt. In return for American help regaining his throne Ahmad aggress to free all American prisoners and renounce all claims to tribute.

April 25, Eton, Hamet and army of four hundred mercenaries along with eight US marines, supported by sloop *Hornet*, brig *Argus*, and schooner *Nautilus*, take Derna (Tripoli's second largest town). This event accounts for the mention of Tripoli in the Marine's hymn.

May 22, Rodgers replaces Barron as Commodore of US squadron

June 4, Lear (American consul) and Rodgers reach peace agreement with Tripolitan Dey, paying \$60,000 to ransom US prisoners, but no tribute.

June 12, Eaton, Hamet and US Marines are evacuated from Derna, ending US attempts to make the friendly Hamet the Bashaw of Tripoli.

August 1, US sail into Tunis forcing Tunisian Dey to choose between peace or war. Tunis agrees to send ambassador to US to resolve grievances arising from the seizure of Tunisian ships during the war against Tripoli.

October, Decatur arrives in US and is feted as a hero wherever he travels.

- 1807 US squadron withdraws from Mediterranean.
- June 22, frigate *Chesapeake* under captain James Barron attacked by British frigate *Leopard*, and forced to give up three US seamen.
- 1809 March 4, James Madison becomes president.
- 1812 June 12, United States declares war on Great Britain.
- July, Algiers declares war on United States.
- October 25, Decatur in command of frigate *United States* captures British frigate *Macedonian* under command of captain John Carden.
- 1814 May, Decatur placed in command of frigate *President* and defence of New York against possible British attack.
- 1815 January 15, Decatur forced to surrender the frigate *President* after attempting to escape British blockade of New York.
- March 2, Treaty of Ghent ratified, ending War of 1812.

June, first US squadron under Commodore Decatur arrives in Mediterranean.

Second squadron under Commodore Bainbridge follows.

June 17, Decatur defeats Algerian Admiral Rais Hamidou and proceeds to Algiers to dictate terms of peace.

June-July, US squadron under Decatur calls at Tunis and Tripoli to show off US power and browbeat the Barbary Coast into remaining at peace with the United States.

1820 March 22, Decatur dies in a duel with James Barron, a former naval officer.

Appendix 2.

Commodore Edward Preble's Report of the Burning of the *Philadelphia*, as published in the *National Intelligencer*, Washington D.C., May 25, 1804.

Lieutenant Charles Stuart's Report of the Burning of the *Philadelphia*, as published in the *National Intelligencer*, Washington D.C., May 25, 1804.

Lieutenant Stephen Decatur's Report of the Burning of the *Philadelphia*, as published in the *National Intelligencer*, Washington D.C., May 25, 1804 and as published in the *Aurora*, Philadelphia, May 24, 1804.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 23.

OFFICIAL.

To the hon. ROBERT SMITH, Secretary
of the Navy.

United States Ship Constitution,
Syracuse Harbour, Feb. 19, 1804.

Sir—I have the honor to inform you, that the United States brig Syren, lieutenant-commandant Stewart, and Ketch Intrepid of 4 guns, lieutenant-commandant Decatur, arrived here last evening from a cruise. They left this port the 31 inst. with my orders to proceed to Tripoli and burn the frigate (late the United States frigate) Philadelphia, at anchor in that harbour. I was well informed that her situation was such as to render it impossible to bring her out, and her destruction being absolutely necessary to favour my intended operations against that city, I determined the attempt should be made.

I enclose you copies of my orders on this occasion, which have been executed in the most gallant and officer-like manner, by lieutenant-commandant Decatur, assisted by the brave officers and crew of the little Ketch Intrepid under his command. Their conduct in the performance of the dangerous service assigned them cannot be sufficiently estimated.—It is beyond all praise. Had lieutenant Decatur delayed one half hour for the boats of the Syren to have joined him, he would have failed in the main object, as a gale commenced immediately after the frigate was on fire, and it was with difficulty the Ketch was got out of the harbour. The Syren, owing to the lightness of the breeze in the evening, was obliged to anchor a considerable distance from the city, which prevented her boats from rendering much assistance, as they might have done, had they entered the harbour earlier. Lieutenant Stewart took the best position without the harbour, to cover the retreat of the Intrepid; that the lightness of the wind would admit of his conduct through the expedition has been judicious and meritorious—but few of the officers of the Squadron could be gratified by sharing in the danger and honor of the enterprise. In justice to them, I beg leave to observe that they all offered to volunteer their services on the occasion; and I am confident whenever an opportunity offers to distinguish themselves, that they will do honor to the service.

I enclose you lieutenant-commandant Stewart and Decatur's official communication, with the names of the officers on board the Ketch.

With the highest respect,

I have the honor to be, Sir,

Your most obt. humble servt.

EDWARD PREBLE.

United States Brig Syren,
Syracuse Harbour, Feb. 19, 1804.

Sir,

I have the honor to enclose for your information the principal occurrences and observations during our late expedition, in company with the Ketch Intrepid, lieutenant-commandant Decatur, to effect the destruction of the frigate Philadelphia in the harbour of Tripoli, and on the happy termination of that enterprise I heartily congratulate you. I only have to lament that a junction had not been formed with the Intrepid by the boats of the Syren under the command of lieutenant Caldwell, as I make no doubt they would have been able to carry and destroy one or both of the frigates lying near the frigate.

You will observe by my notes, that the boats were dispatched in due season to meet the Intrepid, agreeable to our arrangement; but circumstances rendering it advisable for lieutenant-commandant Decatur to enter upon the enterprise much earlier than was intended, the junction with the boats was consequently defeated until after the ship was on fire, and the Ketch retreating out of the harbour.

I have the honor to be,

Your very obedient servant,

(Signed)

CHARLES STEWART.

Commodore Edward Preble,

Commander of the U.

States Squadron in the

Mediterranean.

On board of the KETCH INTREPID }
at Sea, February 17th, 1801. }

SIR,

I have the honor to inform you, that in pursuance of your orders of the 1st inst. to proceed with this Ketch off the Harbour of Tripoli, there to endeavour to effect the destruction of the United States, late frigate Philadelphia, I arrived the 6th in company with the United States Brig Syren; Lieut. Commandant Stewart on the 7th, but owing to the badness of the weather, was unable to effect any thing until last evening when we had a light breeze from the N. E. at 7 o'clock I entered the harbour with the Intrepid, the Syren having gained her station without the harbour in a situation to support us in our retreat. At half past 9 laid her along side the Philadelphia—boarded, and after a short contest carried her—I immediately fired her in the store rooms, cock pit, and birch deck, and remained on board until the flames had issued from the fore-deck-hatchways and ports, and before I got from along side, the fire had communicated to the rigging and tops. Previous to our boarding, they had got their Tompions out, and hailed several times, but not a gun fired.

The noise occasioned by boarding, & contending for possession (although no fire arms were used) gave a general alarm on shore, and on board their cruisers which lay about a cable and a halfs length from us; and many large boats filled with men lay around, but from whom we received no annoyance. They commenced a fire on us from all their Batteries on shore, but with no other effect than one shot passing through our top-gallant sail.

The frigate was moored within half gun shot of the Bashaw's Castle, and of the principal Battery. Two of their

The frigate was moored within half gun shot of the Bashaw's Castle, and of their principal Battery. Two of their cruisers lay within two cables length on the Starboard quarter, and their gun-boats within half gun shot on the Starboard bow—She had all her guns mounted and loaded, which as they became hot, went off—As she lay with her broad side to the town, I have no doubt but some damage has been done by them—Before I got out of the harbour, her cables had burnt off, and she drifted in under the Castle, where she was consumed. I can form no judgment as to the number of men that were on board of her—there were about 20 killed—a large boat full got off, and many leapt into the sea. We have made one prisoner, and I fear from the number of bad wounds he has received, will not recover, although every assistance and comfort has been given him.

I boarded with sixty men and officers, leaving a guard on board the Ketch for her defence; and it is with the greatest pleasure I inform you, I had not a man killed in this affair, and but one slightly wounded. Every support that could be given I received from my officers, and as the conduct of each was highly meritorious, I beg leave to enclose you a list of their names—Permit me also, sir, to speak of the brave fellows I have the honor to command, whose coolness and intrepidity was such, as I trust will ever characterise the American tars.

It would be injustice in me, were I to pass over the important services rendered by Mr. Salvador the Pilot, on whose good conduct the success of the enterprise in the greatest degree depended—He gave me entire satisfaction.

I have the honor to be,

with great respect,

your most obedient servant,

(Signed)

STEPHEN DECATUR, Junr.

Commander Edward Preble,
commanding the United
States Squadron in the
Mediterranean.

It would be injustice in me, were I to pass over the important services rendered by Mr. Salvador the Pilot, on whose good conduct the success of the enterprise in the greatest degree depended—He gave me entire satisfaction.

I have the honor to be,

with great respect,

your most obedient servant,

(Signed)

STEPHEN DECATUR, Junr.

Commander Edward Preble,
commanding the United
States Squadron in the
Mediterranean.

The following is a list of the officers employed on board the Ketch Intrepid under my command in boarding and destroying the Frigate Philadelphia in the harbor of Tripoli on the 16th inst.

James Lawrence,	} Lieutenants.
Joseph Bainbridge,	
Jonathan Thom,	
Lewis Herman—Surgeon.	

Ralph Izard,	} Midshipmen.
John Rowe,	
Charles Morris,	
Alex. Laws,	
John Davis,	
Thomas M'Donough,	
Thos. Oakley Anderson,	Syren.

belonging to the
Constitution.

Enterprise.

Of a letter from Lieutenant Decatur to Commodore Preble, containing an official account of the destruction of the frigate Philadelphia, dated

On board the ketch Intrepid,
at sea, February 17th, 1804.

SIR....

I HAVE the honor to inform you that in pursuance of your orders of the 1st instant to proceed with this ketch off the harbour of Tripoli, there to endeavour to effect the destruction of the United States late frigate Philadelphia, I arrived there in company with the United States brig Syren, lieutenant commandant Stewart, on the seventh, but owing to the badness of the weather, was unable to effect any thing, until last evening, when we had a light breeze from N. E. At 7 o'clock I entered the harbour with the Intrepid, the Syren having gained her station without the harbour, in a situation to support us in our retreat) at half past nine laid her along side the Philadelphia, boarded and after a short contest carried her. I immediately fired her in the store rooms, gun room, cock-pit, and birth deck, and remained on board until the flames had issued from the spar deck hatchways and ports, and before I got from along side, the fire had communicated to the rigging and tops; previous to our boarding, they had got their tomkins out and hailed several times, but not a single gun was fired. The noise occasioned by boarding and contending for possession (altho' no fire arms were used) gave a general alarm on shore and on board their cruisers, which lay about a cable and a half length from us, and many large boats filled with men lay round, but from whom we received no annoyance. They commenced a fire on us from all their batteries on shore, but with no other effect than one passing through our top gallant sail. The frigate was moored within half a gun shot of the bashaw's castle and their principal battery, their two cruisers lay within two cables length on the starboard quarter, and their gun boats within half a gun shot on the starboard bow, she had all her guns mounted and loaded, which, as they became hot, went off, and as she lay with her broadside to the town, I have no doubt but some damage has been done by them. Before I got out of the harbor her cable had burnt off and she drifted under the castle, where she was consumed. I can form no judgment as to the number of men that were on board her. There were about twenty killed; a large boat full got off; and many leapt into the sea. We have made one prisoner, who, I fear, from the number of bad wounds he has received, will not recover, although every assistance and comfort has been given him. I boarded with sixty men and officers, leaving a guard on board the ketch for her defence, and it is with the greatest pleasure I inform you I had not a man killed in this affair, and but one slightly wounded. Every support that could

be given was given from my officers, and as each of them was highly meritorious. I have the honor to commend, whose coolness and intrepidity was such, as I trust will ever characterize the American tars. It would be injustice in me, were I to pass over the important services rendered by Mr. Salvadore, the pilot, on whose good conduct the success of the enterprise in the greatest degree depended. He gave me entire satisfaction.

I have the honor to be, sir,

With great respect,

Your most obed't. humble serv't.

STEPHEN DECATUR, JUN.

A list of the officers engaged in the destruction of the Philadelphia.

Lieut. James Lawrence,
Joseph Bainbridge,
Jonathan Thorn,
Mr. Ralph Izard, midshipman,
Thomas M'Donough,
Charles Morris,
John Davis,
John Row,
Alexander Laws,
Thomas Anderson.

A letter from an officer on board the Constitution, after mentioning the destruction of the Philadelphia, says, "Each officer strove to be employed in the expedition; but most of them were, of course, refused, but with assurances however, that they should all have opportunities enough of displaying their courage in the course of the summer.

A letter from another officer mentions that the vessel sent to destroy the frigate, entered the harbor of Tripoli in the night, and passing for a Maltese was assisted by those on board the Philadelphia in getting along side, where having arrived, the Americans instantly sprung on board and soon had her in their power.

Lieutenant Decatur, and midshipman Morris, were the first persons who boarded the Philadelphia. The united voices of the other officers and seamen employed, highly extol their conduct on the occasion. The latter has been promoted. It is said the frigate had been completely refitted, was moored under the guns of the castle, and had between two and three hundred men on board.

The Constitution was preparing for a cruise of six months off Tripoli; and the commodore intended to bombard the place unless a favorable peace should be agreed to.

All the letters from on board the United States vessels in the Mediterranean, speak in high terms of the superior skill and indefatigable vigilance of commodore Preble. The letters which mentioned the pacific proposals of the bashaw were dated at Syracuse, Jan. 17 and 18. The letters announcing the burning of the Philadelphia, are dated Feb. 20 and 22—and as preparation were then making for the bombardment of Tripoli, it is evident there had been a "rupture of the negotiation."

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