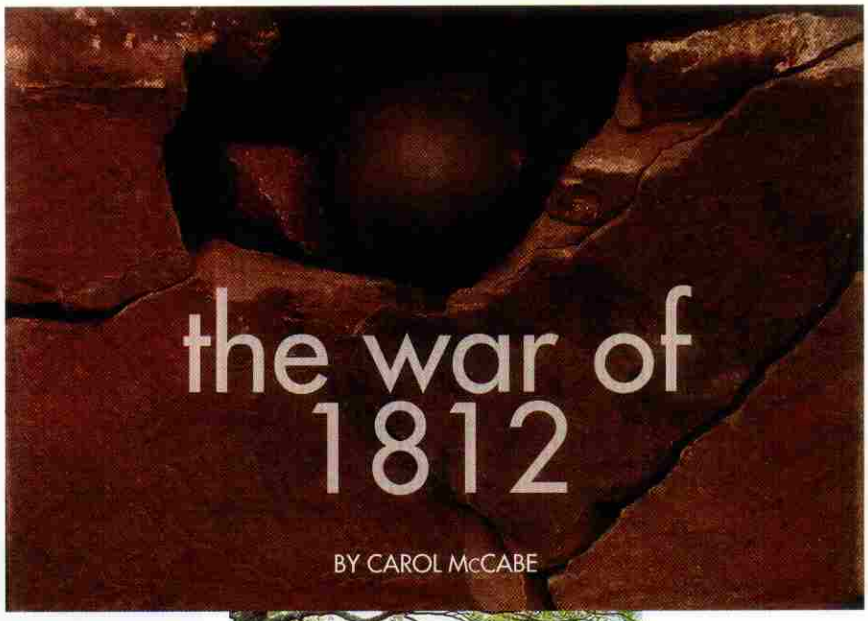
stonington remembers



the war of 1812

BY CAROL McCABE

On the wall of a bank in Stonington, Connecticut, a worn and faded American flag is displayed behind glass. This piece of Americana is a treasure, a flag with sixteen stars and sixteen stripes, a design never authorized by Congress. It was made sometime between 1796 and 1808 by the ladies of the sewing circle of Stonington's Congregational Church, for the Eighth Company of the Thirtieth Regiment of the Connecticut Militia. The ladies chose to make the flag of hand-woven cotton that they dyed in appropriate colors. When it came to pattern, the church ladies must have counted the states then in the Union to come up with, quite correctly, sixteen. They duly stitched together sixteen stripes and appliquéd sixteen stars in the upper corner.

But although Tennessee had become the sixteenth state in 1796, followed by Ohio in 1808, the American flag was not officially changed until 1818, when Congress mandated thirteen stripes and a star for each state. At the time the Stonington flag was made, the official flag still had just fifteen stars and fifteen stripes.

Even without its unique design, this flag would have deep meaning for the town of Stonington. For on August 9 and 10, 1814, it flew during a successful defense of this small coastal village against British warships armed with heavy guns. Visitors to Stonington today will find this appealing seaside village rich in artifacts of that battle as well as reminders of the colonial and Revolutionary eras. Historic houses, antiques shops, seafood restaurants, a museum in a lighthouse, and proximity to one of the country's best maritime museums are other reasons to visit. A small, pleasant beach attracts children in summer; rocky shores offer perches from which to watch sailboats and fishing vessels heading out to Fishers Island Sound.



The cannons that held off the British attack. Courtesy of Connecticut's Mystic & More! Convention & Visitors Bureau.

TOP:
Cannonball embedded in a hearthstone during the British siege of 1814. Photograph by Stephen Smith, courtesy of the Stonington Historical Society.

RIGHT:
A view from the Old Lighthouse Museum cupola. Photograph by Stephen Smith, courtesy of the Stonington Historical Society.

The boundaries of Stonington enclose several villages, including that part of Mystic where the seventeen-acre Mystic Seaport Museum is located. Less than five miles from the museum is Stonington Borough or, as it's labeled on some signs, Stonington Village, site of that 1814 bombardment. "The Borough" occupies a narrow peninsula jutting into salt water. (The Seaport Museum is inland, on the Mystic River.)

With water glittering at the end of nearly every street, the peninsula presents the sights, sounds, and salt water smell of a New England island, Nantucket or Monhegan perhaps. Gulls convene on rooftops, rugosa roses bloom in sandy soil, and halyards ching against masts at dozens of docks and moorings. Two principal streets, Water and Main, travel the length of the peninsula with shorter cross streets running east and west. The narrow village streets are lined with old New England houses in every style, from gambrel-roofed cottage to Ionic-pilastered Federal to clapboarded and fanlighted Greek Revival. Dooryard gardens spill blossoms over picket and wrought-iron fences; window boxes overflow. As Water Street descends to the beach at its end, it passes a small square enclosing two cannons. These are the eighteen-pound guns that held off a British invasion.

Stonington was prosperous after the Revolution thanks to foreign trade with the West Indies. That trade suffered when an embargo



imposed by Congress in 1807 restricted American ships from trading with foreign ports. Then in 1813 came a British blockade of the Connecticut seacoast that almost ruined Stonington. Worse was to come, when a British fleet of four ships—the *Ramillies*, the *Pactolus*, the *Despatch*, and the "bomb-ship" *Terror*—sailed into Stonington Harbor on August 9, 1814.

The ships were under the command of Commodore Thomas Hardy, who had served with Horatio Nelson at Trafalgar (where Hardy held the dying Nelson, whose last words, once known to every English schoolchild, were "Kiss me, Hardy"). Hardy sent a message that he was about to destroy the town, giving women and children one hour to leave. The villagers decided to defend their homes and took their stand near the end of the peninsula. Stonington's cannons were turned against the ships, and musket-carrying men lined the shore. During the first night of the bombardment, "Shells from the bomb ship *Terror* rained on the village and barges near the shore dropped showers of rockets," according to historian Katharine B. Crandall's book, *The Fine Old Town of Stonington*. But the Stonington cannons sank one barge and forced the bomb ship to retreat.

By the time the attack resumed the next day, men from surrounding towns had arrived to help. Several barges attempting a landing were driven away. Next, the British moved the attack to the east side of the peninsula and soon after, the defenders' ammunition ran out. At that point, someone suggested surrender. Captain Jeremiah Holmes, speaking for the Americans, responded, "That flag shall never come down while I am alive." More ammunition arrived and the British were driven off, although bombardment of the town continued until midday on August 12. The battle ended in victory for Stonington, where not a single house burned down and only one person was seriously injured. There was damage, of course, most famously to the Captain Amos Palmer house. (See "The Captain Amos Palmer House," page 34.)

At Stonington's Old Lighthouse Museum, near the tip of the peninsula, visitors can examine tangible evidence of the 1814 battle. A twenty-four-pound ball that lodged in the hearthstone of a house at the corner of Water and Diving Streets is exhibited as it was found. The Lighthouse Museum is a pleasant place to follow Stonington's history from early settlement, which began in 1649, through the eras of shipbuilding, of whaling and sealing expeditions and China Trade voyages, into the period in the nineteenth century when Stonington was the busy connecting point between steamboat traffic from New York and rail trains to Boston.

In this former lighthouse, whose windows still frame seascapes, six rooms are devoted to exhibits. A ground floor showcase displays Oriental pieces—exquisite porcelains, ivory carvings, and other treasures brought home by local sea captains. An alcove contains an appealing arrangement of salt-glazed pottery jugs, crocks, and jars made in Stonington between 1785 and 1834. There are ship models and other reminders of the voyages once made by Stonington captains. Whaling days, for instance, are recalled by the quaintly painted stern board of the whale ship *Mary and Susan*, showing harpooners striking a vast whale. In one room, harpoons are displayed like pieces of sculpture. A roomful of antique toys awaits younger visitors, for

whom the climb up the metal staircase to the top of the thirty-foot lighthouse tower is high priority.

The most famous of Stonington's captains was Nathaniel Brown Palmer, born in 1799. He and his younger brother Alexander went to sea as teenagers; Nat was fourteen when he sailed on a blockade runner during the War of 1812, was second mate on a sealing expedition to the South Atlantic at nineteen, and the same year became master of his own schooner, the *Galena*. He was twenty-one when, during a voyage to the South Atlantic in search of new seal rookeries, he observed "land not yet laid down on my chart." He had discovered Antarctica.

Captain Nat's life was worthy of an adventure novel or a miniseries. According to author Norman F. Boas, whose own informative booklet about the Palmer brothers is available in Stonington, Nathaniel went on to transport troops for Simon Bolivar during his fight with the Spaniards and to sail to Europe, the Caribbean, South America, and China. During the mid-nineteenth century, he became a leading designer of packet and clipper ships, some of which he owned, and grew rich as a merchant trading in Liverpool, New Orleans, and China. Over six feet tall and weighing 200 pounds, he loomed large in many corners of the world.

One of Stonington's most important houses is the Captain Nathaniel B. Palmer House, now owned by the Stonington Historical Society and open to the public. This Victorian mansion was built in 1852 by Captain Nat and his brother Alexander, who became a Connecticut legislator after his retirement from the sea. Alexander's wife died in 1850, leaving four children; Nat and his wife, Eliza, who had no children, invited Alexander to live with them. "We have enough of the world's goods to educate your children & to make us comfortable the rest of our days," Nat wrote to his bereaved brother. The Pine Point house, on a hill above the upper end of the harbor, was built by shipwrights who created unusual baseboards, moldings, and an elegant staircase. The house has a number of built-in features including a desk in the library with storage deep enough for ship's charts. Original features include the ten-foot front doors based on some the brothers had seen in New Orleans, a molded plaster medallion and gesso work moldings in the parlor, and, in a small, sunny front room, the hook that once held the cage of a ship's parrot.

Stonington Borough is a pedestrian paradise. A one-page "Historic Walking Tour of Stonington," available at local shops, shows the location of the fishing docks, home of Connecticut's last commercial dragger fleet; of the single-story Arcade Building with eight columns across its façade, an early version of today's strip mall, built in 1836 for a row of shops. The map cites the empty factory buildings on lower Water Street, built for a company that made horseshoe nails. During the Civil War, the complex housed the Joslyn Firearms Company, maker of breech-loading carbines used by the Union Army. Later, machinery for textile manufacture was made in these buildings. Other points of interest include the 1823 Customs House on Main Street, now privately owned, and the building of the Holy Ghost Society, a center for Stonington's Portuguese community.

But it is not only individual buildings that make a walk through the village such a delight. It is the visual pleasure of entire blocks of houses whose faces are as different as the flowers in their gardens. These serendipitous streets are filled with surprises, not the least of them a dozen small antiques shops, each offering its own specialty, from nineteenth-century American painted furniture at Ironwood Antiques to the marine paintings and antique boat models at Boathouse Antiques. As Michael Davis, president of the Stonington Historical Society, says, "The great thing about Stonington is that you are just immersed in history here. It is all around you." ★



The Old Lighthouse Museum. Photograph by Stephen Smith, courtesy of the Stonington Historical Society.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE: Looking out over the Atlantic. Photograph by Carl Socolow.

Pine Point, the home of Captain Nathaniel B. Palmer. Courtesy of Connecticut's Mystic & More! Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Stonington's 16-star/16-stripe flag at Ocean Bank. Photograph by Stephen Smith, courtesy of the Stonington Historical Society.

The exterior of Ocean Bank at Cannon Square. Courtesy of Connecticut's Mystic & More! Convention & Visitors Bureau.

The stern board of the whale ship *Mary and Susan*. Photograph by Stephen Smith, courtesy of the Stonington Historical Society.