

NATHANIEL TRACY

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decade later their remains were placed in Peter Oxenbridge Thacher's tomb in Milton.

Thacher kept a diary of which most of the years from 1772 to 1799 survive, partly at the Massachusetts Historical Society and partly in private hands, with photostats at the Society. Being concerned almost entirely with his ministerial duties, it is bitterly disappointing to the historian. His portrait is here reproduced from the plate opp. p. 46 in *Records of the Church in Brattle Square*, which was in turn from an engraving in the periodical *Polyanthos*. There is no modern record of the original oil. Presumably it is the portrait mentioned in the diary as being painted by Savage in July, 1785.

NATHANIEL TRACY

NATHANIEL TRACY, the Newburyport merchant, was born in that town on August 11, 1751, a son of Captain Patrick and Hannah (Gookin) Tracy. His mother had many connections with Harvard College, and his father, an Irish immigrant and a vestryman of St. Paul's, contributed to the rebuilding of Harvard Hall after the fire. Nathaniel prepared at Boston Latin, and when he arrived in Cambridge he was placed in Hollis 6 with Moulton '67. He was one of a group fined "for absenting themselves from their Chambers and Walking some Miles from the College, after nine o'Clock att Night to a Tavern, and not returning till after Midnight,"¹ but this did not cure him of taking leave in this manner. His testimony in regard to the student disorders of April, 1768, is simply factual.² In August, he became suspicious that his Freshman, Amos Windship (Class of 1771), was stealing from him, so, at a time when his roommate was away, he told Windship that he was taking a few days off, and left him in charge of the room, as was the custom. Returning a few hours later, he asked the Freshman if he had been out or if there had been any visitors. Being assured that Windship had been alone, he inspected his desk, found four guineas missing, and accused the Freshman of taking them. He denied it, but Tracy insisted that he would sue, and to avoid that Windship left college. Later the coins were found where he had hidden them.³ Tracy took his first degree with his class, and re-

¹ Faculty Records (Harvard University Archives), II, 245.

² Disorders Depositions (Harvard University Archives), No. 50.

³ Colonial Soc. Mass., *Publications*, XXV, 150.

turned for the second prepared to argue the affirmative of "An Possessio, Societatis civilis sit Fundamentum?" Being in Princeton on business at Commencement time, 1772, he took an *ad eundem* A.M. at the College of New Jersey.

Tracy settled in Newburyport where on February 28, 1775, he married Mary, daughter of Colonel Jeremiah and Martha (Swett) Lee; she was one of the girls said to be the greatest beauty of her day. The Captain built them a handsome brick mansion which still stands on State Street as the city library. In the preceding year, Nathaniel had formed a mercantile partnership with Jonathan Jackson (A.B. 1761) and brother John Tracy (A.B. 1771). Hardly had Jackson, Tracy & Tracy established their business connections in England, than the Congressional embargo compelled them to inform their agents that they must close out the business as rapidly as possible. With business at a standstill Nat sent out in August, 1775, the first American privateer, and the first of twenty-four letters of marque of which he was the principal owner. In addition to these, he was, during the war years, the principal owner of 110 merchant vessels with a total tonnage of 15,660, carrying cargoes valued at \$2,733,300.⁴

During these years Tracy was active in public affairs, impounding and arming ships for the State, serving as "commissary of the sea coast forces," and reaching into his own pocket to help finance the Arnold expedition against Quebec, and to help Commissary General Joseph Trumbull (A.B. 1756) over difficult places. He served his town as an Overseer of the Poor and as a member of the Committee of Correspondence. In 1779 it sent him to the Constitutional Convention, and thereafter to the House of Representatives until he was promoted to the Senate in 1784. This was all done to the accompaniment of the vicissitudes of privateering. After the capture of the *Yankee Hero* in 1776, Tracy sailed from New York in a flag of truce and boarded H.M.S. *Eagle*, where he gave Lord Howe a letter from Benjamin Franklin, and arranged an exchange of prisoners.⁵ By the end of 1777 all of the forty-one ships sent out by the Tracys up until then were captured or missing, and family tradition tells how Nathaniel and John were walking on the waterfront discussing means of feeding their families, when they looked up and saw the last of their privateers, long overdue, coming in with a prize which turned

⁴ For Tracy's trade see Kenneth Wiggins Porter, *The Jacksons and the Lees* (Cambridge, 1937), *passim*, and the *Harvard Graduates Magazine*, XXV, 193-197 (Dec., 1916).

⁵ Ambrose Serle, *American Journal* (San Marino, 1940), p. 50; Colonial Soc. Mass., *Publications*, VIII, 316-317.

out to be worth £20,000 sterling. The letter of marque must have been the *Civil Usage*, which then captured such an elegant coach that Nathaniel presented it to John Hancock (A.B. 1754) as the only man who could carry it off.⁶

After this the partnership broke up, although the individuals from time to time used the firm name. Nathaniel was the most successful, and he pursued the hobby of collecting country estates with such enthusiasm that it was said that he could travel from Newburyport to Virginia, sleeping in his own house every night. At the sales of Cambridge Tory property, he picked up the Vassall-Longfellow house, the land between it and the Charles, and 300 acres of the Ten Hills Farm which had belonged to the Temple family. On the hill where the Observatory now stands he built an elegant summer house from which some visiting Southern gentlemen declared that they obtained "the most beautiful, extensive, and variegated landscape in the world" except that from Beacon Hill.⁷ Tracy entertained lavishly in the Cambridge mansion, once dining the French consul, L'Etombe, and the Admiral, and other officers of the French fleet. While Tracy was busy ladling the soup that evening, L'Etombe dipped into the plate which the servant had brought him, and came up with a large, green frog. Not recognizing it for what it was, he seized it by a hind leg and held it up for the inspection of the company. "Ah! mon Dieu!" he exclaimed, "un grenouille," and passed it around for general inspection. The company was convulsed with laughter, and those who had been served inspected their plates and discovered that each had a frog. The uproar was universal. "What's the matter?" asked Tracy, looking up from the ladle. "Why don't they eat them. If they knew the confounded trouble I had to catch them in order to treat them to a dish of their own country, they would find that with me, at least, it was no joking matter."⁸

This should not be taken as evidence that Tracy was an ignorant man. He had Nathaniel Hurd make a bookplate for his library, he was a charter member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Master of St. John's Lodge of Newbury, and trustee and treasurer of Dummer Academy. His vast fortune was used for good as well as for ostentation. His letters of marque had captured 120 vessels with a total tonnage of 23,360, and cargoes which sold for \$3,950,000 in specie. But the time

⁶ *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 29, 1777, 3/1.

⁷ *Mass. Hist. Soc., Proceedings*, XII, 61; *Am. Antiq. Soc., Proceedings*, XIII, 319.

⁸ Samuel Breck, *Recollections* (Philadelphia, 1877), p. 25.

came when he had lost twenty-three of his twenty-four cruisers, and all but thirteen of his 110 merchantmen. Gathering the remains, he sent them to Java, where they bought millions of pounds of coffee which he stored at Antwerp, waiting for a rise in the market.⁹ It did not come, and on September 22, 1780, he published a notice that he was retiring from business, and that John would carry on as Nathaniel & John Tracy.

The financial clouds were gathering, but in 1781 Nathaniel paid a tax of £6000 and loaned the State £5000 to buy uniforms,¹⁰ and the next year he was appointed a Justice of the Peace. In 1784 he decided to go to Europe to settle the Jackson, Tracy & Tracy claims against the Gardoqui firm. Unsuccessful in Portugal, he went to London, and in May, 1785, arrived in Boston with Jackson.

On his return, Tracy found that his Essex and Middlesex property had been attached for debt. In 1786 his bankruptcy became official, and his real estate was sold on a ruinous market, leaving him only the Newburyport mansion and a small stone farmhouse in Newbury. To the latter he retired, but the town of Newburyport continued to elect him to public office, and chose him to a committee with whom it hoped to impress the Governor with the value of its support.¹¹ John Quincy Adams visited him and spoke kindly of him:

This gentleman was in the course of the war peculiarly fortunate and accumulated an immense fortune; but he has since been equally unlucky and is now very much reduced. The generosity of his heart is equal to any estate whatever; and although he has not been so prudent as might be wish'd, yet every one who is acquainted with him must lament his misfortunes, and heartily wish he may retrieve his affairs.¹²

This was not to be, for just about this time the final blow fell. John Tracy had contracted to supply the French navy with masts, but was outrageously cheated, either by the lumbermen who loaded the timbers, or by the Havre agents who condemned them for firewood.¹³

French refugees who passed through Newbury visited Tracy and described him with understanding sympathy, but none of them pictured his final retreat quite as well as a neighbor lady did:

Just at dusk, I took a walk to Mr. Nat. Tracy's. This antique building is

⁹ Lowell *Old Residents' Historical Association*, I, 225-227.

¹⁰ Essex Institute, *Historical Collections*, XXV, 15-16.

¹¹ Newburyport *Essex Journal*, July 27, 1785, 4/3.

¹² Mass. Hist. Soc., *Proceedings*, 2nd Ser., XVI, 397.

¹³ Jacques Pierre Brissot de Warville, *Nouveau Voyage* (Paris, 1791), II, 311-313.

situated in the very bosom of retirement, and is surrounded by well cultivated fields and gardens. You have in view a thick wood, and a pretty water prospect completes the landscape. I found Mrs Tracy, dress'd genteelly, sitting at her tea table with her children about her. She is a very handsome accomplished woman, and knows very well how to keep up her dignity. . . . Our repast was slender; two cups of tea, and one small piece of biscuit.¹⁴

When Washington made his presidential tour, Jackson was living in one side of the Tracy mansion at Newburyport, and he opened the other to accommodate the President and his party. Nat had a different plan for the occasion, and had built a barge to ferry Washington across the Merrimack; he "never allowed it to be used afterward."¹⁵ He had high hopes of the new government, and petitioned the First Congress for relief by means of a bankruptcy law, but it was not to be.¹⁶

Tracy died on September 20, 1796. The Boston papers, particularly, praised his generosity in laying out immense sums to feed and clothe the soldiers, the distressed, and the indigent during the Revolution, and bewailed the lack of an adequate sketch of his character.¹⁷ It is still lacking. As expected, his estate was found to be very insolvent, and his widow lived on in her frugal dignity until October 31, 1819. Their children had no Harvard connection.¹⁸ The portrait which is here reproduced from K. W. Porter's *Jacksons and Lees*, p. 318, is the oil by Mather Brown hanging in the Newburyport Public Library. There are also said to be Stuart and Trumbull portraits, and one by an unknown artist at the Historical Society of Old Newbury.

¹⁴ Mass. Hist. Soc., *Proceedings*, 2nd Ser., XVI, 397.

¹⁵ J. L. Sibley, Ms. Colls. (Harvard University Archives), II, 577.

¹⁶ Paine Wingate to Timothy Pickering, Mar. 25, 1790, in Pickering Mss. (Mass. Hist. Soc.), XIX, 189.

¹⁷ For example, in the *Boston Independent Chronicle*, Oct. 6, 1796.

¹⁸ For the children see the Essex Institute, *Historical Collections*, LVII, 66-67.



NATHANIEL TRACY

JOHN TRACY

JOHN TRACY, a merchant of Newburyport, was born in that town on April 19, 1753, a son of Captain Patrick and Hannah (Gookin) Tracy. He prepared at Dummer, and at Harvard was assigned to Hollis 6 with his brother Nathaniel '69, but was soon given permission to go home to be cured of the itch. In Junior year he was degraded six places for his part in hanging a Tutor in effigy, and

aiding and assisting in removing the said Effigy from place to place in a Riotous and insulting Manner, with indecent and tumultuous Noise to the great Dishonor and Disturbance of the College and in Contempt of the Government thereof.¹

He was heavily fined for wanton mutilation of library books, and in Senior year he was degraded twelve places for throwing a "Riotous and tumultuous" party in his chamber for other Essex men, and for failing to break it up when ordered to do so. But he took both degrees in course.

Captain Tracy was a very wealthy merchant, and John found the business congenial. When the war was impending he was courting Peggy, daughter of Henry Laughton of Boston. Local tradition tells of his slipping into the town to court her, and how while there he heard news of a ship load of gunpowder, bade his sweetheart a hasty adieu, leaped on his horse and galloped to Newburyport.² John and Peggy were married at Newburyport on May 12, 1775. Three years later the Captain gave them the John Lowell (A.B. 1760) mansion which still stands at 203 High Street.

In 1774 John had joined with his brother Nathaniel and Jonathan Jackson (A.B. 1761) in forming the firm of Jackson, Tracy and Tracy, which prepared to do extensive business in European goods. The war put an end to that, and John on his own was soon advertising "Choice Malaga wine, by the quarter Cask, Lemmons by the Box, Cocoa, and a few cases of Gin."³ It was, however, as owners of privateers that the Tracys made their fame and fortune. It was very fickle fortune, and tradition tells that there came a day in 1777 when they had lost all but

¹ Faculty Records (Harvard University Archives), III, 132.

² Sarah Anna Emery, *Reminiscences of a Nonagenarian* (Newburyport, 1879), p. 277.

³ Newburyport *Essex Journal*, Jan. 5, 1776, 3/3.

one of their fleet of forty-two ships, and that one only an eight-gun letter of marque. One day when the brothers were walking in dejection by the wharves they saw a strange sail coming in. John said, joking, "Perhaps it is a prize for me." And so it was, and worth £25,000 sterling. This prize must have been the *Civil Usage*, which had in its hold a coach so rich that it was presented to John Hancock (A.B. 1754) as the only man elegant enough to befit it.⁴

The older brother gradually dropped out of the business, and on September 22, 1780, John announced that he was the firm of "Nathaniel and John Tracy." He diversified, building a ropewalk on Quaker Hill in the North End, and exporting masts from Maine to France under convoy. During the Rhode Island campaigns he served General Sullivan (Class of 1758) as an adjutant, and General Glover as an aide-de-camp. In 1779 he lost vessels in the Penobscot naval disaster, but a passing Frenchman was much impressed by him:

He is a sensible, polite man, and a good patriot. He has always assisted his country in time of need. In 1781 he lent five thousand pounds, to the State of Massachusetts for the clothing of their troops, and this on the mere receipt of the Treasurer. Yet his quota of taxes in that very year amounted to six thousand pounds.⁵

He likewise served the town as Moderator, Overseer of the Poor, school committeeman, and Fireward, in the last capacity acting as clerk of the company when he became too old to run after the engine. He was Master of St. John's Lodge, and at times the Grand Lodge met at his house. For thirty-five years he was a vestryman of St. Paul's, and long its senior warden. He served on the commission to collect the Continental tax for the support of the army, was appointed a Justice of the Peace in 1783, and Deputy Adjutant General of the Massachusetts Militia in 1787.

Of the several accounts of the Tracy household in the days of its greatness the fullest is that of Chastellux:

This house stands a mile from the town in a very beautiful situation. . . . I went . . . by moonlight, to see the garden, which is composed of different terraces. There is likewise a hothouse, and a number of young trees. The house is very handsome and perfectly furnished, and everything breathes that

⁴ *Boston Gazette*, Dec. 29, 1777, 3/1.

⁵ François Jean de Chastellux, *Travels in North America* (Chapel Hill, [1963]), p. 492.

air of magnificence accompanied with simplicity, which is only to be found among merchants. . . . Mrs. Tracy has an agreeable and a sensible countenance, and her manners are in keeping with her appearance. At ten o'clock an excellent supper was served; we drank some very good wine, Miss Lee sang, and prevailed on Messieurs de Vaudreuil and Talleyrand to sing also; towards midnight the ladies withdrew, but we continued drinking Madeira and sherry. Mr. Tracy, according to the custom of the country, offered us pipes, which were accepted by M. de Talleyrand and M. de Montesquieu, the consequence of which was that they became intoxicated, lost their supper, and were led home, where they were very happy to get into bed.⁶

On a Saturday morning two years later Miranda appeared in Newburyport with a letter of introduction to Tracy, whom he found measuring out salt in his store. The merchant walked him a quarter of a mile to his elegant house, where they enjoyed an equally elegant dinner and conversation about French philosophy and literature until the party suddenly broke up and "everyone went forth to do some business before the Sabbath came, for I doubt that the Jews observe more restrictions in the matter than these people."⁷

In 1782 it was bruited about that John Tracy was worth £120,000, but three years later his fortune was brought down by the naval inspectors at Le Havre who condemned for firewood the masts which he had supplied for the French navy.⁸ Obviously bankrupt, he kept alive by what he described as the versatility of the sixty-day note. According to a tradition which obviously has one thing the matter with it, he sought the solution of the problem in getting himself elected State Treasurer, and to that end badgered every member of the House of Representatives, from each of whom he received at least an encouraging nod. But when the day for the choice came, but one vote was cast for John Tracy, and that was his own.⁹

In these days young men described Tracy as something of a character, but a man of dignity, and a very good companion until he got onto his theory that as a Justice of the Peace it was his duty to see every man in the county once a year, and to keep the militia in order.¹⁰ This attachment to Essex did not prevent his visiting Marietta on the Ohio, where he hoped that his classmate Winthrop Sargent would help him

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 491.

⁷ Francisco de Miranda, *The New Democracy in America* (Norman, 1963), pp. 185, 186.

⁸ Jean P. Brissot, *Nouveau Voyage* (Paris, 1791), II, 311-313.

⁹ Samuel Breck, *Recollections* (Philadelphia, 1877), p. 29.

¹⁰ John Quincy Adams, *Journal* (Mass. Hist. Soc.), Jan. 14, 1788.

to obtain a job or some business. Sargent sent him back to Pittsburgh with an Indian guide, whence he reported:

We arrived at this Place at 6 o'clock the Evening of the 30th Ulto. — we had a very uncomfortable Passage but we enjoyed ourselves as much as any Persons in our Situation could possibly expect — The Indians were as little Trouble as possible — The Scoundrels from Wheeling to the upper Part of Mingo Bottom were for giving us Trouble on Account of the Indians but we out maneuvred them, and got through without any lives being lost.¹¹

With General St. Clair he proceeded to Philadelphia and New York, in each of which he watched the reception of "the President General."

Back in Newburyport, Tracy announced that he now considered himself an inhabitant of "the Western Territories," and to the newspapers he contributed letters describing them.¹² However, as a bankrupt he was now barred from active business, and because of the confused situation of the probate of his father's estate he could not leave Essex. The supervision of the militia was taking all of his time, making the question of his support for a couple of years a serious one. So he wrote to several leading officeholders, like Secretary Knox, explaining that during the war he had sacrificed his great fortune for the good of his country, which therefore owed him something, such as the Federal Inspectorship for the Northern District. His Federalist friends were not inclined to lend an ear, but beginning in 1801 he appears as inspector of tobacco, beef, butter, and lard.

After the death of Margaret Tracy in November, 1806, John relinquished these duties, and, paralyzed and feeble, spent much of his time in Mrs. David Emery's tavern, often accompanied by his old friend Samuel Allyne Otis (A.B. 1759).¹³ He died at Newburyport on May 1, 1815.¹⁴

¹¹ Winthrop Sargent Mss. (Mass. Hist. Soc.), Apr. 1, 1789.

¹² Boston *Massachusetts Centinel*, May 27, 1789, 81/1-2; Boston *Independent Chronicle*, May 14, 1789.

¹³ Emery, p. 277.

¹⁴ For the children see *New England Hist. Gen. Reg.*, LVII, 68-69.