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GREAT EVENTS IN *109*
NORTH CAROLINA HISTORY.



A North Carolina Naval Hero and His Daughter.

An Admiral & his Daughter

—BY—

DR. K. P. BATTLE.



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NORTH CAROLINA BOOKLET.

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and His Daughter.*

CAPTAIN JOHNSTON BLAKELY.

BY
DR. K. P. BATTLE.

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1902.

**“Carolina! Carolina! Heaven’s blessings attend her!
While we live we will cherish, protect and defend her.”**

A NORTH CAROLINA NAVAL HERO AND HIS DAUGHTER.

CAPTAIN JOHNSTON BLAKELY.

Johnston Blakely, cut off in the midst of a glorious career, by a mysterious fate, in the flower of his manhood and of his reputation, was one of those heroes of the seas in our war of 1812, whose character and deeds demonstrated to the world that a new nation of present strength and future potency had taken its place among the foremost of the civilized peoples of the earth.

He was born in October 1781. His birth-place, Seaforth, County Down, Ireland, and his first name, that of a great family of South Scotland and North England, suggest that he belonged to the Scotch-Irish race which has been conspicuous in the old world and the new for intelligence, pluck and all manly virtues. His father, John Blakely, emigrated to America at the close of the war of the Revolution, in the fall of 1783. His mother, with an infant son, died on the voyage, or soon after landing at Charleston, South Carolina. The father within a year removed to Wilmington with his two-year old boy. Here he was cordially received by a countryman, who was a descendant of the eminent Jeremy Taylor, Edward Jones, afterwards Solicitor General of North Carolina. A warm-hearted, generous man, Jones met his countryman at the wharf, and welcomed him to his home, carrying the motherless boy in his own arms.

John Blakely engaged in merchandise and, being successful, invested his gains in buildings in Wilmington. He sent young Johnston to a widely patronized school at Flatbush, on Long Island, New York, where he was prepared to enter the University of North Carolina. Before his matriculation the father died, in 1796, leaving Edward Jones executor of his will and guardian of his son, duties performed with conspicuous faithfulness. In fact the guardian and his excellent wife, born Mary Curtis Mallett, were second parents to the boy, took him as an inmate of their family, and treated him so kindly and cordially that their Chatham county home, Rock Rest, was likewise a home to him. Intimacy with this accomplished couple and their equally accomplished children, among whom were Mrs. Dr. Wm. Hooper, Mrs. Wm. H. Hardin, Mrs. Abram Rencher, and the late very able Dr. Johnston Blakely Jones, of Chapel Hill and Charlotte, N. C., had a marked effect in moulding his character.

Young Blakely entered the University in 1797 and was distinguished in all his studies, the chief of which were mathematics and its applications to navigation, surveying and the like. He refused to join in the riots and disorders so prevalent while he was a student that the Principal Professor, Gillespie, was forced to resign, yet lost no popularity with his fellows. In the Philanthropic Society, of which he was a member, he was elected to every office, from the Presidency down, and was placed on all the important committees. Like his father he was of a genial, agreeable temperament, and the only exception I find to his uniform faithfulness to duty, was laughing three times while the

Society was in session. For these offences, which certainly were not of a very serious nature, the future autocrat of the quarter deck was mulcted a grand total of fifteen cents. He was punctual in debating, on one occasion winning as a leader the question, "Is luxury always the cause of the downfall of nations?" the Society voting in his favor, the negative. He lamented in after life the paucity of good books in the University and Society libraries, and feelingly spoke of the injury he received in reading Paine's Age of Reason.

While Blakely was an exemplary student he was immovable in standing to his rights. Professors in his day and long afterwards in enforcing discipline felt it their duty to invade the rooms of students and question them rigidly in regard to their participation in disturbances. Once Presiding Professor Caldwell entered the room of Blakely, and when he denied any knowledge of the disorders then raging, questioned the veracity of his statement. This was resented with such heat as to provoke the Professor into threatening to throw him out of the window. With a manner, firm but respectful, the answer was, "I beg sir, you will not attempt it, as it will necessitate my putting you out." As Caldwell was never known to be intimidated when he deemed himself in the right, the presumption is that he recognized the impropriety of his language. Certainly he did not pursue the matter further. Ten years afterwards, during his last furlough from his active duties on the sea, having become from experience fully aware of the evil of want of respect by an inferior to his superior officer, the naval lieutenant asked the pardon of Dr. Caldwell for

his rudeness, which was freely granted, and cordial friendship thenceforward existed between the two.

Blakely's career as a student was cut short by the burning of his uninsured buildings in Wilmington, the rents of which were his income. His guardian urged him to accept a loan, to be repaid only when convenient, and thus continue his education. This he declined, left the University in the fall of 1799 and the next year joined the United States navy, as midshipman, owing his appointment doubtless to the influence of his guardian, then very influential. His acceptance was dated March 5th, 1800, and two months thereafter he was ordered to the frigate, the President, the flagship of Commodore Richard Dale, in the Mediterranean. This gallant old seaman, who as Lieutenant on the Bonhomme Richard, and a favorite of Paul Jones, had helped gain the desperate battle with the Serapis, then about to engage in the Tripolitan war, was an excellent instructor of aspiring youths.

Two years afterwards Blakely was assigned to the John Adams under the able command of Capt. John Rodgers, who was likewise fighting against Tripoli. He was afterwards in the brig Congress under the same commander, and then under Commodore Decatur. Returning from the Mediterranean on the President, he was in 1805 attached to the Hornet, which was used mainly as a transport, under Lieutenant S. Evans. His next service was in the Argus in 1806 along the Atlantic coast, under Captain Jacob Jones, an experienced officer, afterwards to become famous. On the 10th of February, 1807, he received his Lieutenant's commission. He was then for two years in service at

the Navy Yard at Norfolk, and then was attached successively to the Essex and John Adams. On March 4th, 1811, he was placed in command of the small but lucky vessel, the *Enterprise*, and so well acquitted himself that on July 24th, 1813, he was commissioned a Master Commandant.

The foregoing statement shows that Blakely had the best practical instruction in seamanship under able and distinguished officers, in times of peace enforcing the blockade declared by Congress, together with a short war with the insolent Tripoli. He acquired thoroughly the knowledge how to handle a vessel in the calms and storms of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. He learned the potency of strict discipline and rapid and accurate firing.

Mrs. Charlotte Hardin, a daughter of Col. Jones, from her own recollection and that of her mother, has left a description of the person of Blakely, which enables us to look on him with the eyes of our mind. "His face was handsome and kindly; his eyes black and sparkling, his teeth, when displayed by his frequent winning smiles, of exceeding whiteness. His hair was coal black in youth, but even at the age of twenty-six turning rapidly gray. His person was small but strong and active, and his motions easy and graceful. He was grave and gentlemanly in his deportment, but at the same time cheerful and easy when at home; among strangers rather reserved." Considerate of and polite to old and young, equals and inferiors, he had the respect and affection of all. When a boy he often preferred the study of books and conversation with his adopted mother to the sports of those of his own age. There is no tradition to show that he ever indulged in gambling and

drinking and other vices and practices so fashionable among students and naval officers, in fact among all classes, in his day. On the contrary, it is known that he spent his time on sea and on shore in diligent study and preparation for the duties of his calling, and the instruction and rigid discipline of the men under his charge. His reputation as a skilled officer gained by the manner in which, as Lieutenant, he handled the petty cruisers engaged in enforcing the Embargo and Non-intercourse regulations, marked him as an expert, fit to be entrusted with vessels of war on independent cruises.

Before war was declared however, he became thoroughly dissatisfied with the disposition of the government to submit to any grievance and insult rather than resort to hostilities. Nothing but the hope of a firmer stand and the triumph of the war party prevented his throwing up his commission in disgust. When it was resolved to fight, such had been the want of preparation, that against one thousand and sixty vessels, over eight hundred effective, which sailed the British flag, the United States had only seventeen effective cruisers, of which nine were of a class less than frigates. And yet the skill and bravery of their officers and men gained victories which filled Americans with newborn enthusiasm, intensified their patriotism and taught England that the young nation of the West must thenceforth be treated as an equal.

Among these commanders none had a greater combination of daring, prudence and skill than Johnston Blakely. It has been mentioned that he commanded the fourteen-gun brig, the *Enterprise*. Before sailing, many months were

spent in superintending alterations in the vessel, supplying its armament and drilling and disciplining his men. After sailing he was vigilant and efficient in cruising along the Atlantic coast in search of British privateers. On August 20th, 1813, he reported the capture of the privateer schooner, the *Fly*, and on the same day was promoted to the command of the new *Wasp*, then being built at Portsmouth, N. H., to replace a first vessel of the same name, which had gallantly under Captain Jacob Jones, captured the *Frolic*, and then herself been taken by a line-of-battle ship. Sixteen days after he left the *Enterprise*, his successor, Captain Burrows, captured the *Boxer*, a victory largely due to the excellent crew trained by Blakely.

The building and equipment of the *Wasp* and the drilling the crew required Blakey's residence on land until she was thoroughly sea-worthy. This required several months. While engaged in this work of preparation he found time to marry in Boston, Jane Ann Hooper, (one authority has this name *Hoope*) daughter of a former merchant of New York, who had been a friend and correspondent of his father while residing in Wilmington.

Captain Blakely set sail on May 1st, 1814. He had a crew of 173, officers, men and boys included, most of them acquainted with the sea in fishing voyages and trading with the West Indies, and some having smelt gunpowder in encounters with privateers, and pirates, Spanish, Frenchmen, British or Malays. They were all cool-headed and resourceful New Englanders. Roosevelt truly says in his "Naval War of 1812" that "during the whole war no vessel was ever better manned and commanded than this

daring and resolute cruiser." In a letter to the Secretary of War, written at sea May 1st, 1814, Blakely says of his vessel, "From the speed of this ship since leaving port I entertain most favorable presages of her future performances." The prediction was justified.

His cruising area was near the western entrance of the English Channel in the track of English commerce. On July 28th he encountered the brig-sloop, Reindeer, commanded by one of the most gallant seamen England had, Captain William Manners, a scion of the Ducal house of Rutland. The Reindeer was able to fire her shifting 12 pound carronade five times at the distance of sixty yards before the Wasp could bring a gun to bear, an ordeal which her sailors bore for nine minutes without flinching. When Blakely put his vessel in proper position for returning the fire, in nineteen minutes her adversary was cut to pieces. Captain Manners, after a grape-shot had passed through both thighs, gave the order to board and sprang to lead his men in person. A ball through the brain brought him down, the effort was repulsed and the Americans swarmed over the Englishman's bulwarks. After a fierce fight the Captain's clerk, the highest officer left, surrendered the brig. Of her crew of 118, 33 were slain and 34 wounded. The Wasp lost 11 killed and 15 wounded.

Cooper says "It is difficult to say which vessel behaved the best in this short but gallant combat. The officers and people of the Wasp displayed the utmost steadiness, a cool activity, and an admirable discipline. * * Throughout the whole affair, the ship was conspicuous for the qualities that most denote a perfect man-of-war, and the results of

her efforts were in proportion." "On the other hand the attack of the Reindeer has usually been considered the most creditable to the enemy of any that occurred in this war." Roosevelt is equally emphatic. "I doubt if the war produced two better single-ship commanders than Captain Blakely and Captain Manners, and equal degree of praise attaches to both crews."

On the day after the victory the prize was found to be so damaged that it was necessary to burn her, the crew being carefully removed.

Blakely in his official report, while saying nothing in praise of himself, pays this tribute to his officers and crew, "The cool and patient conduct of every officer and man, while exposed to the fire of the shifting gun of the enemy, and without an opportunity of returning it, could only be equalled by the animation and ardor exhibited when actually engaged, or by the promptitude and firmness with which every attempt of the enemy to board was met and successfully repelled."

The victorious Captain took his battered ship to L'Orient in France, and having thoroughly repaired her and filled out his crew, sailed again on August 27th. Within three days two prizes were taken, and he then cut out from a convoy, protected by a 74 line-of-battleship, a very valuable transport laden with cannon and military supplies. On the same day he attacked the British sloop, Avon, of 18 guns and captured her after a furious fight of thirty-one minutes. A second brig of the enemy coming up, the Wasp was again cleared for action, but the vessel, the Castilian, although showing her willingness to engage, was

obliged to rescue the people of the Avon, which began to sink. Seeing other enemy ships of vastly superior force approaching Blakely sailed away. As Cooper says of this day's work, "The steady, officerlike way in which the Avon was destroyed, and the coolness with which he prepared to engage the Castilian within ten minutes after his first antagonist had struck, are the best encomiums on this officer's character and spirit, as well as on the school in which he had been trained."

The Wasp next steered to the South-West and captured, besides one or two prizes, the brig Atlanta, eight guns, which was sent to Savannah, with his oldest midshipman, Geisinger, as prize-master. She next spoke the Swedish brig, Adonis, on October 9th, in lat. $18^{\circ} 35' N.$ and long. $30^{\circ} 10' W.$ Finding on board as passengers Lieut. McKnight and Mr. Lyman, a Masters mate, both captured by the British with the Essex and exchanged, they were induced to throw in their lot with the ship of their own flag.

This is the last authentic intelligence of the victorious Wasp and of her gallant commander and crew. Their fate is one of the dark mysteries of the devouring ocean. Various rumors and conjectures are extant in regard to it. One is that an English frigate, much crippled, reported at Cadiz that in a severe fight with a large American at night, the latter suddenly disappeared; another that the Wasp was wrecked on the African coast and that her crew were prisoners among the Arabs; a third that she reached the coast of South Carolina and on the 21st of November was attacked by an English frigate of superior strength, beat

off her adversary but was herself sunk. The English records do not sustain the first of these stories and there is no evidence at all of the second. With regard to the third it is certain that an engagement between two vessels occurred at the time designated off the South Carolina coast, but the Raleigh Register of that date states that it had been ascertained that it was between a British brig and an American privateer. Dr. Wm. Johnson in the N. C. University Magazine of February 1854, contends that one of the combatants was the Wasp, but it is generally thought that the noble ship went down in a tornado, or by the accidental explosion of her magazine, or other casualty, always threatening those who go down to the seas.

The foregoing sketch of a worthy life amply corroborates the judgment of Fenimore Cooper, that "this gentleman enjoyed a high reputation in the service, which his short career as a commander fully justified. There is little doubt, had he survived, that Capt. Blakely would have risen to the highest consideration in his profession. As it was, few officers have left better names behind them." This high praise was won in a life of thirty-three years.

While the fate of her father was still in doubt, when her mother was listening anxiously for reports brought by homeward bound cruisers and privateers of tidings of the gallant Wasp and her crew, in January, 1815, the little daughter of the lost hero was born, and named Maria Udney* Probably no child in all America was the centre of so much interest and sympathy as she. Nor did this

*I have endeavored in vain to find the origin of this singular name.

sympathy evaporate in empty words and fruitless tears. The representatives of the people of North Carolina, in those days economical to the verge of parsimony, not from personal stinginess, but because they were as a rule Jeffersonian Democrats and believed that governments should not engage in any work except protection of life, liberty and property, departed from their rule and resolved that she should be the ward of the State.

The General Assembly of North Carolina, and the United States Congress, both voted swords to Blakely as soon as the tidings of the capture of the Reindeer was officially reported. Two years afterwards on motion of Senator Archibald D. Murphey, the General Assembly unanimously passed a resolution requesting the Governor to forward to Mrs. Blakely the sword, and to express to her the deep interest which the legislature would always take in her happiness and welfare. It was further resolved that Captain Blakely's child be educated at the expense of the State, and that his wife be requested to draw on the Treasurer of the State for the required sums. Six hundred dollars per annum was agreed on as a reasonable sum and it was regularly paid until 1829 inclusive. No reason is given for the withdrawal but it was probably because the mother married a second time, and became a resident and probably a citizen of a Danish island.

Mrs. Blakely in addition to this annuity, and as guardian of her child, received for the share of her husband in the prize money for his captures, \$7,500, and also his share of the Atlanta. Besides, there was paid to her, \$900 his uncollected pay.

There is a good portrait of Captain Blakely belonging to the Philanthropic Society of the University of North Carolina. There was once a miniature of his daughter but it has been lost, and I cannot find anyone who remembers seeing her. Tradition has it that she was rather petite, with black eyes and hair, very pretty, pleasing and vivacious.

In the course of time Mrs. Blakely married Dr. Abbott, of Christiansted, the capital of the island of St. Croix, in the West Indies, belonging to Denmark. Her daughter accompanied and resided with her until 1841. Then she was wooed and won by a member of the Danish nobility. On the Marriage Register of St. John's Episcopal Church of the island, is the following entry:

"May 19, 1841, Barron Joseph von Bretton (M. D.) and Maria Udney Blakely, both of this jurisdiction, by license."

The union was of short duration. On the Burial Register of the same Church is the following.

"March 2nd, 1842. The body of Maria Udney Von Bretton. Aged— Parish C. [Church] yard. Childbirth." The blank should have been filled with "twenty seven." The child did not live and the blood of the famous sea captain became extinct.



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