

The USS *Peacock* (1813)

The USS *Peacock* was one of six sloops-of-war authorized by Congress in January 1813. During the War of 1812 she made three cruises, capturing nineteen prizes, including an eighteen-gun British warship. She also had the distinction of firing the last shot of the war, in an action in the Sunda Strait more than six months after the formal conclusion of peace in December 1814.

Designed by William Doughty, head of construction at the Washington Navy Yard, the *Peacock* was one of a three-ship class that also included the USS *Wasp* and USS *Frolic*. The building contract for the *Peacock* was assigned to Adam and Noah Brown, owners of a shipyard in New York and builders of several privateers, whose vessels were noted for their speed. In accordance with a contemporary custom in both the British and American navies, her name commemorated a victory over an enemy ship, in this case HMS *Peacock*, defeated and sunk by the USS *Hornet* on 24 February 1813.

After some modifications to the original plans, the *Peacock* as built was a ship-rigged craft with a length of 119', a beam of 31' 6", and a depth of 16' 4", to be manned by a crew of 140. Her intended armament was twenty 32-pound carronades and two long 28-pounders—more than sufficient firepower for her primary mission of commerce-raiding and enough to make her a formidable challenge for any likely naval opponent. The ship's construction order was placed on 3 March 1813, her keel was laid on 9 July, and she was launched on 19 September. After fitting out, she began her first cruise on 12 March 1814, sailing from New York under the command of Master Commandant Lewis Warrington, a thirty-one-year-old Virginian officer whose previous experience in the West Indies and Mediterranean included actions against the French, the Barbary pirates, and the British.

Evading the Royal Navy's blockade, Warrington had orders to deliver a cargo of military supplies to the naval station at St. Mary's, Georgia, and then make a rendezvous with one of the American heavy frigates, the USS *President*, which would follow from New York. While awaiting the *President* after leaving St. Mary's, Warrington took the *Peacock* toward the Bahamas in hopes of intercepting a British convoy sailing from Jamaica to Cuba, but upon hearing of the strength of the convoy's escorts, he turned north along the Florida coast. Off Cape Canaveral on the morning of 29 April he met a group of three merchantmen guarded by HMS *Epervier*, a brig-sloop mounting sixteen 32-pound and two 18-pound carronades, commanded by Commander Richard Wales.

Upon sighting the *Peacock*, Wales's flock scattered, and each warship immediately cleared for action. Battle began at 10:20 a.m. as the two closed on opposite courses. After the opening broadsides, the *Epervier* reversed course and sailed parallel to the *Peacock*, disabling the American's foresail and foretopsail. Warrington retained control of his ship, however, and within a short time his crew's superior ship-handling and gunnery had brought down the *Epervier*'s main topmast and damaged the foremast, mainmast, and bowsprit. An attempt by Wales to organize a boarding party failed when his sullen and poorly trained crew—two months earlier off Nova Scotia they would have probably mutinied but for the fortuitous arrival of a gale—refused to participate in what they deemed a lost cause. After three-quarters of an hour

the British ship struck her flag, her hull having been hit by forty-five shots, while in her hold the pumps struggled against water rising past five feet.

The battle's casualties included eight dead and fifteen wounded on the *Epervier* and no dead and only two wounded on the *Peacock*. By evening an American prize crew had made the *Epervier* seaworthy again, and Warrington had discovered an unexpected bonus in the form of \$118,000 in specie the ship was carrying. When two British frigates suddenly appeared, he sent the *Epervier* close inshore to Savannah, where she arrived on 1 May, and followed her there himself three days later.

After a month of repair and resupply, the *Peacock* sailed from Savannah on 4 June. The *President* remained blockaded in New York, and abandoning the idea of meeting her, Warrington embarked on the *Peacock*'s second cruise, a long, wandering voyage around the North Atlantic that resulted in the capture of fourteen prizes, making it one of the most productive cruises of the war. From Savannah he sailed north to the Grand Banks, and then southeast to the Azores. Turning north again, he passed along the west coast of Ireland and from there to the Shetlands. Still headed north, he reached the Faroe Islands and the 62nd parallel before steering south, back along the Irish coast and on through the Bay of Biscay to the Spanish and Portuguese shorelines. After crossing to the West Indies and cruising among the islands, he proceeded north along the American coast and reached New York on 30 October, completing a voyage of 147 days.

The *Peacock*'s final cruise against the British was technically not a wartime affair since the conflict had ended on 24 December 1814 with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent. However, this news did not reach the United States until 11 February 1815, and additional weeks or even months passed before ships at sea could be informed. In the meantime, hostilities continued unabated, including major engagements such as Andrew Jackson's victory at New Orleans on 8 January 1815, the loss of the *President* to a British squadron off New York on 15 January, and the USS *Constitution*'s capture of HMS *Cyane* and HMS *Levant* near Madeira on 20 February.

Warrington and the *Peacock* sailed from New York on 23 January 1815 in company with the *Hornet* and two supply schooners. Their orders were to rendezvous with the *President* at Tristan da Cunha in the South Atlantic and then proceed around the Cape of Good Hope for operations against British shipping in the Indian Ocean. The mission fell into disarray from its outset. Unknown to Warrington and his fellow captains, the *President* had been captured before they even left New York, and storms soon separated the *Hornet* from the other ships. Sailing independently, the *Hornet* and *Peacock* reached Tristan da Cunha a few hours apart on 23 March, with the *Peacock* and one of the supply schooners arriving just as the *Hornet* had completed a victorious battle with a British sloop, HMS *Penguin*.

The *Penguin* proved too heavily damaged to join the flotilla, and after waiting vainly for the appearance of the *President*, on 13 April the *Hornet* and *Peacock* sailed for eastern waters. They separated again on 28 April after encountering the seventy-four-gun HMS *Cornwallis*, which chose to pursue the *Hornet* as a slower prey. Jettisoning all her guns and much other equipment and stores to gain speed, the *Hornet* escaped and sailed for the United States, learning

along the way that peace had been concluded. The *Peacock*, meanwhile, headed for Java and what would become the final episodes of the war.

The voyage across the Indian Ocean was not especially fruitful, with only three small ships taken as prizes. Two of these had information about the Treaty of Ghent which the Americans did not consider credible, and by the end of June the *Peacock* was in the Sunda Strait, off Anjer near the western end of Java. On 1 July she was approached by the *Nautilus*, an East India Company brig mounting sixteen guns. Hailed with news that peace had been settled, Warrington suspected a ruse and demanded the *Nautilus* strike her flag. When this was refused, the *Peacock* fired a broadside, seriously damaging the other ship, killing seven, including the first lieutenant, and wounding the commanding officer and seven more.

Upon boarding the *Nautilus*, delighted Americans found her to be carrying \$30,000 in specie and copper worth \$100,000, but to their chagrin they were quickly presented with indisputable written proof that the war was over—"thus are our bright prospects blighted," a *Peacock* midshipman lamented. Whether from frustration or negligence, Warrington did nothing to assist the *Nautilus*'s casualties, an omission for which he subsequently came under severe criticism from the British and even from that most sympathetic of American historians of the war, Theodore Roosevelt. In 1816, however, a court of inquiry absolved Warrington of any wrongdoing in the *Nautilus* affair, clearing the way for him to enjoy a distinguished career which carried him to the rank of commodore and the Navy's highest administrative levels before his death in 1851.

On 30 October 1815 the *Peacock* returned to New York. Like the cruise of the USS *Essex* along the eastern and western coasts of South America in 1813 and 1814, her Atlantic and Indian Ocean exploits had demonstrated the U. S. Navy's ability to project itself on a global scale, even when its home ports were closely blockaded. Over the next twelve years the *Peacock* served in the Mediterranean, the West Indies, and the Pacific before once more entering her home port of New York in October 1827, to be decommissioned and broken up. In 1828-1829, however, she was ostensibly "rebuilt"—a term artfully concealing that she was really being replaced by a similar but new vessel, also named *Peacock*, even though Congress had appropriated no funds for such construction. The "reincarnated" *Peacock* served until 1841, when she was wrecked on the bar of the Columbia River in Oregon.

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