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## Captain William Coit

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## CAPTAIN WILLIAM COIT

By P. H. WOODWARD

John Coit (e), the emigrant ancestor of most of the Coit family in America, is found in 1638 at Salem, Mass., whence he moved to Gloucester in 1644. He made one of the party that accompanied Rev. John Blinman from that seaport to New London, and to whom the townsmen granted lands Oct. 19, 1650. He was a ship carpenter. The business descended to his son Joseph, who, with his brother-in-law, Hugh Mould, built many "ships" ranging from twenty to one hundred tons. Daniel Coit, father of Capt. William, was town clerk of New London from 1736 till his death in 1773, at the age of seventy-five, with the exception of a single year. He married, second, Mchitable Hooker of Farmington, the mother of the subject of this sketch.

Capt. Wm. Coit was born in New London Nov. 26, 1742; graduated at Yale College in the class of 1761; studied law, and was admitted to the bar, his certificate bearing the signature of Gov. Saltonstall. He was a selectman in 1771, and in December, 1774, was added to the local committee of correspondence raised the previous June. Early in 1775 he organized and drilled a military company at New London, contributing generously from his own resources toward its equipment.

News of the fight at Lexington reached New London the night of April 20. A few hours later, Capt. Coit with a part of his command was on the road, hurrying to the scene of action. The first leaf of the orderly book bears the legend "Camp't at Cambridge, April 23d A. D. 1775." It is probable that the detachment consisted of about twenty men and rode on horseback. Like hundreds of others from

NOTE.—The writer is indebted to Miss M. E. S. Coit, granddaughter of Capt. Wm. Coit, for many facts contained in this sketch.

Eastern Connecticut, they started under a sudden, tumultuous impulse. After a short stay, finding that hostilities were not likely to be renewed by Gen. Gage in the near future, many of the minute-men, including the detachment from New London, returned home to put their affairs in order for the serious work of war.

May 25, the company (the Fourth of the Sixth Connecticut Regiment, Col. Samuel Holden Parsons commanding) started for Boston, marching *via* Norwich, Sterling, and Providence. Eight of the companies remained on duty at New London till June 17, when they were ordered to Boston and posted at Roxbury.

No entries are made in the orderly book between April 26 and June 1.

Capt. Coit with his company marched from Cambridge to Bunker Hill while the battle was in progress, and aided the other troops from Connecticut in covering the retreat of the provincials.

The last entry on the last page of the orderly book bears date "Roxbury 7th August, 1775," and at this point the record as preserved breaks off abruptly.

On the 5th of October, 1775, the Continental Congress authorized Gen. Washington to employ two armed vessels to intercept British store-ships, and before the close of the month made provisions for four additional cruisers. Acting under a broad construction of his commission, the commander-in-chief had anticipated Congressional action.

Capt. Coit was detailed from the army to take command of the armed schooner "Harrison," one of the first to be got ready for service. His instructions from Gen. Washington are dated Oct. 22, 1775, and are printed in this pamphlet. In brief, he is directed to seize supply ships bound to or from Boston; to send prizes to the nearest and safest port; to search diligently for papers tending to disclose the designs of the enemy; to treat prisoners kindly, allowing them to retain their money and apparel; to avoid any engagement with any vessel of equal or slightly inferior strength, "the design of this enterprise being to intercept the supplies of the enemy;" and to be extremely frugal of ammunition.

During the war no more daring service was performed than by the sailors of the nascent republic. King George regarded them as pirates, while his cruisers seemed sufficiently numerous to seal up the ports of New England. In putting out to sea they took not merely the ordinary risks of war, but, as they had reason to expect, of ignominious death in case of capture. Capt. Coit claimed to be the first American "to turn His Majesty's bunting upside down."

In January, 1776, the Council of Safety of Connecticut authorized the construction by Uriah Hayden, at his yard in Saybrook, of a war ship, "to be 80 feet keel, 27 feet beam, and 12 feet hold," and of about 260 tons. July 11 Wm. Coit was appointed captain of this craft, which had been christened the "Oliver Cromwell." Being in Lebanon the same day, Capt. Coit was called before the Council, when Gov. Trumbull with Homeric simplicity "gave him advice, instruction, and admonition as to his conduct, etc."

Early in August the masts were damaged by lightning; but on the 18th of the month she sailed out of the Connecticut River, and reached New London the 20th. On the 23d of October the Council ordered her to sail on a cruise of about two months, but she was not ready. Jan. 28, 1777, she was ordered to proceed to sea immediately, but the crew deserted. In March, Melally, the First Lieutenant, was dismissed, and Capt. Coit reported that he would sail as soon as supplies were received. As the result of various complications, however, he was retired from the State service April 14. Later he commanded the "America," and perhaps other privateers.

When Benedict Arnold burned New London, Sept. 6, 1781, Capt. Coit was captured, and detained for a time on a prison ship near New York.

Capt. Coit was tall, portly, soldierly in bearing, frank, jovial, somewhat eccentric, and very liberal. Among his peculiarities he wore a scarlet cloak, and hence was familiarly known as "The Great Red Dragon." Dec. 18, 1763, Capt. Coit married Sarah, daughter of Capt. John Prentiss, commander of the armed sloop "Defence," which convoyed five hundred Connecticut troops under Gen. Roger Wolcott from

New London to Cape Breton in 1745. He died in London, England, in February, 1747. They had eight children,—three sons and five daughters; the latter celebrated for beauty. Samuel Waldo said that Esther (Mrs. Clapp) had the handsomest face he ever painted.

The eldest, Sarah, born in 1764, married George Lillington of North Carolina, grandson of Col. Alexander Lillington of the British Army. Gen. Lillington distinguished himself at the battle of Moore's Creek, N. C., where in February, 1776, about one thousand militia routed over fifteen hundred Tories, composed in large part of Scotch Highlanders.

Esther, born Jan. 3, 1767, married Samuel Clapp in March, 1792. They lived under the shadow of Trinity Church, New York city, and the remains of both rest in the adjoining cemetery.

Ann, born March 30, 1770, died March 30, 1792, on the day fixed for her marriage to the eldest son of Bishop Seabury.

Elizabeth, the youngest daughter, married Joseph Bocage, a French exile, to whom Louis Philippe paid a lengthy visit while in this country. Mr. Bocage died in St. Lucia, where he owned a large estate. His widow died in Pine Bluff, Ark., at the residence of her grandson, Hon. G. W. Bocage.

Of the sons, Daniel died at sea and Leonidas in childhood.

William, Jr., born Nov. 19, 1771, married in 1800 Frances Murdock, daughter of Rev. Jonathan Murdock (Yale College, 1766). He sailed out of New York as master for twenty-six years. During the war of 1812, at the solicitation of Commodore Decatur, he took command of the armed boats that watched the enemy from the mouth of the Thames. He advanced, too, a large sum to pay the bounties demanded by the sailors who enlisted to man the fleet of Commodore O. H. Perry on Lake Erie. His vouchers were destroyed by fire in 1818. As he had no duplicates, and as Commodores Perry and Decatur died in 1820, and the chaplain of the squadron about the same time,—the only

officers having knowledge of the facts,—no part of the money was ever refunded either to him or to his heirs.

In 1797, Capt. Wm. Coit, Sr., broken in health, left New London to visit his daughter in North Carolina, where he died in 1802. His dust rests in the family cemetery of the Lillingtons, on the banks of the Cape Fear river, thirty-five miles from Wilmington. His widow died in New York city in 1813, and was buried in Trinity churchyard beside her daughter, Mrs. Clapp.

Both father and son made generous sacrifices for their country. No descendant of theirs has ever received pension or bounty land, or asked for either.