

Thomas Boyle and *Comet* 11



Vigilant of Baltimore, 1802 - 1803



Thomas Boyle

Thomas Boyle settled in Fells' Point around 1794. Born in Marblehead, Massachusetts, little is known of his early life, but by age 17 he had earned the confidence of Baltimore merchant John Carrere and commanded several vessels for him, including *Vigilant*. By 1806 Boyle was regarded as a seasoned commander, and owned several vessels. By 1811, Boyle was fully engaged in the business, civic, and charitable activities of his adopted hometown and was a leader in the Fells' Point community.

On July 11, 1812, Boyle took command of *Comet*, a privateer schooner built in 1810 by Thomas Kemp. *Comet* measured 187 tons and 90'6" in length. She mounted ten 12-pounder carronades and 2 'long nines.' With a crew of 110 men, Boyle headed to sea.



There are no known images of *Comet*, but she was similar in size and rig to this unidentified schooner.

On July 25, 1812 he captured the ship *Henry*, 400 tons, carrying sugar and wine. Three weeks later he took *Hopewell*, 346 tons, bound for London with sugar, cotton, coffee, and cocoa. On September 2, *Industry* was taken, 175 tons and loaded with sugar, molasses, coffee, cocoa and wine. On September 18, Boyle captured the British Letter of Marque *John*, 372 tons bound for Liverpool with sugar, rum, coffee, cotton, hardwood and copper. Slipping past the British blockade, *Comet* returned to Baltimore on October 6. *The Weekly Register* reported:

“Comet overhauled every vessel she chased, and took every British vessel she saw, yet made only four prizes . . . but they are worth \$400,000 and have all arrived safely.”

On November 12, 1812 *Comet*, with Boyle as master and now a part owner, sailed for the coast of Brazil and the West Indies. Boyle evaded several British warships, fought a Portuguese brig-of-war escorting a convoy of English ships and took five prizes before he returned to Baltimore in March, 1813. Financially, the cruise was a total loss, as none of the prizes reached port. However, word spread quickly among British authorities and Caribbean ports about *Comet* and a persistent American privateersman who told the Portuguese naval officer:

“. . . if he did try to oppose me or fire on me while trying to take those English vessels, we must try our respective strengths as I was well prepared for such an event and would not shrink from it. “

- Boyle's report of the action with Portuguese brig-of-war, *Libra*

During the summer of 1813, with the British squadron blocking escape from the bay, *Comet* and three other Baltimore privateers, *Revenge*, *Patapsco* and *Wasp*, were chartered for service with the Navy. Warranted as sailing master, Boyle patrolled the lower Chesapeake Bay to monitor and report on British activities. By the end of August, all four were released from patrol duty.

Next: War on the Chesapeake

