A portrait painting of an elderly man with grey hair, wearing a dark blue coat over a yellow waistcoat and a white cravat. The background is dark green with a lighter, textured area on the right. The entire image is framed by a brown border.

Captain Samuel Nicholson
A Monograph

J. Phillip London

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Our Good Name; A Company's Fight to Defend Its Honor and Get the Truth Told About Abu Ghraib Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2008

America the Beautiful: A Family History: The London, Phillips, Scott, and Mitchell families and their related connections in colonial America (1600s–1700s): With lines in England to Alfred the Great (846 A.D.) and William the Conqueror (1027 A.D.) and in France to King Hugh Capet (938 A.D.) (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1997)

Six Days in July 1944: The Story of Gordon Leigh Phillips, Second Lieutenant, USA: The Battle for Normandy, France in WWII (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1994)

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Cover Portrait of Captain Samuel Nicholson by Danish artist Christian Gullager, c.1789–1810.
Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society

Nicholson wears the badge of the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati
on the left breast of his dress coat.

Captain Samuel Nicholson
A Monograph

J. Phillip London



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DEDICATION

This history of an American Revolutionary patriot – our distant relative – is dedicated to my children and grandchildren; Phillip, Laura, Jackson, Jayson, Jonathon, Evan, Andrew, Charlotte, Riley, James, and Jasper.

Such men gave us our heritage of being
a free nation and a free people.





Captain Samuel Nicholson
1743–1811

“My Dear Sir You will Accept my hearty Acknowledgements for the Many Obligations I am under to You, & You may depend I shall never be Satisfyed till I have rendered myself deserving of them.”

—Samuel Nicholson to Silas Deane
Nantes, France
April 13, 1777

Captain Samuel Nicholson
c.1800–1810, artist unknown

Captain Samuel Nicholson had a distinguished career as a captain in the Continental Navy during the American Revolution. He made a notable contribution to the maritime success of the war, including the capture of valuable prizes at sea. During the war, he commanded the cutter *Dolphin* and later the frigate *Deane*. He was the first commanding officer of *Constitution* and took the ship out on its maiden voyage from Boston on July 22, 1798. Nicholson was the first commandant of Charlestown Navy Yard in Boston. He was the senior ranking officer in the U.S. Navy upon his death on December 29, 1811.

Captain Samuel Nicholson

Samuel Nicholson was born in Chestertown, Maryland, in 1743 to Joseph Nicholson, a colonel in the Kent County militia, and his first wife, Hannah Scott.¹ Samuel Nicholson was the fifth of eight children (seven brothers and one sister).² Even though the Nicholsons were considered to be a prestigious Maryland family, little is known about Samuel Nicholson's early years. Like his father before him, Samuel Nicholson took to the sea at an early age and captained several merchant ships engaged in English trade between 1767 and 1773. By 1772, Nicholson owned his own ship, *Molly & Betsy*.³

As the events leading up to the American Revolution escalated, Nicholson could still be found conducting business in Europe in 1775.⁴ His distant cousin and hometown friend, Lambert Wickes, a Continental Navy captain, reported that Nicholson was unemployed in London in 1776.⁵ While in Paris in late 1776, Nicholson met with Benjamin Franklin, one of the American Commissioners in France (ACF), about a possible commission in the Continental Navy.⁶ In addition to Wickes, Nicholson also came recommended by fellow Marylander, William Carmichael, who was the personal secretary to another commissioner, Silas Deane.⁷ Unbeknownst to both Franklin and Nicholson, the Continental Congress had already commissioned him as a captain in the Continental Navy in December 1776.⁸

Over the next two years, Nicholson conducted Continental Navy affairs in northwestern France as directed by the Paris-based American Commissioners in France.⁹ Nicholson arrived in Nantes, a French city along the Loire River, some 35 miles from the coast, on January 13, 1777.¹⁰ The ACF had originally tasked him with visiting and inspecting ships in the nearby port of L'Orient. Already having done so, Lambert Wickes thought it best to send Nicholson back to Paris to

¹ Edward C. Papenfuss, et al., *A Biographical Dictionary of the Maryland Legislature, 1635–1789*, Vol. 2: I–Z (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

² Samuel and his brothers, James and John, would all serve as captains in the Continental Navy during the American Revolution of 1775–1783. All are Original Members of the Society of the Cincinnati.

³ Maryland Historical Society, *Annapolis Port of Entry Record Books, MS. 21 (1756–1775)*.

⁴ John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, *American National Biography*, Vol. 16 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵ William B. Cox, ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. 23: *October 27, 1776 through April 30, 1777* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983). Lambert Wickes was captain of *Reprisal*, the first Continental Navy vessel to arrive in European waters (other than privateers).

⁶ John A. McManemin, *Captains of the Continental Navy* (Ho-Ho-Kus, NJ: self-published, 1981).

⁷ McManemin, op.cit.

⁸ John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, op. cit. The commission was likely signed by John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress. It cannot be determined, however, who proposed Nicholson for his commission.

⁹ As American Commissioners in Paris, Benjamin Franklin, Silas Deane, and Arthur Lee were instructed by the Continental Congress to establish trading relations with France and acquire military aid, as well as promote good relations with European delegates there.

¹⁰ William James Morgan, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, Vol. 8 (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1980). Nantes was one of the most important overseas ports for American representatives conducting naval business during the revolution.

advise the commissioners on ship inventories.¹¹ Wickes felt Nicholson could make these arrangements faster and cheaper than captains in the various ports, as well as out of the purview of British spies. This assignment would only last two weeks. On January 26th, the ACF directed Nicholson to purchase a new cutter for the Continental Navy. The commissioners advised Nicholson to go to Boulogne for the new ship, then to Calais, Dover, and Deal if none were available in the other ports.¹²

On January 28, 1777, Nicholson left Paris at three o'clock in the morning and made his way to Boulogne and then onto Calais by the next day.¹³ Unable to find a suitable ship in either town, Nicholson traveled from France to Dover on February 1st.¹⁴ Nicholson spent little time in these ports, and soon made his way to London to see his mistress, Elizabeth Carter. In Dover on February 5th, Nicholson wrote to an associate that no suitable ships had been found in Dover, Deal, or Folkstone, but that he may have found a cutter further north in Colchester.¹⁵ By the end of February, Nicholson finally purchased the cutter that would become his ship, *Dolphin*, and returned to France.¹⁶ Nicholson's commission as *Dolphin*'s captain was signed by John Hancock, President of the Continental Congress.



The Continental Navy had significant operations in northwestern France.

Nicholson spent the rest of February through mid-April in Paris while *Dolphin* was being

¹¹ Morgan, op.cit.

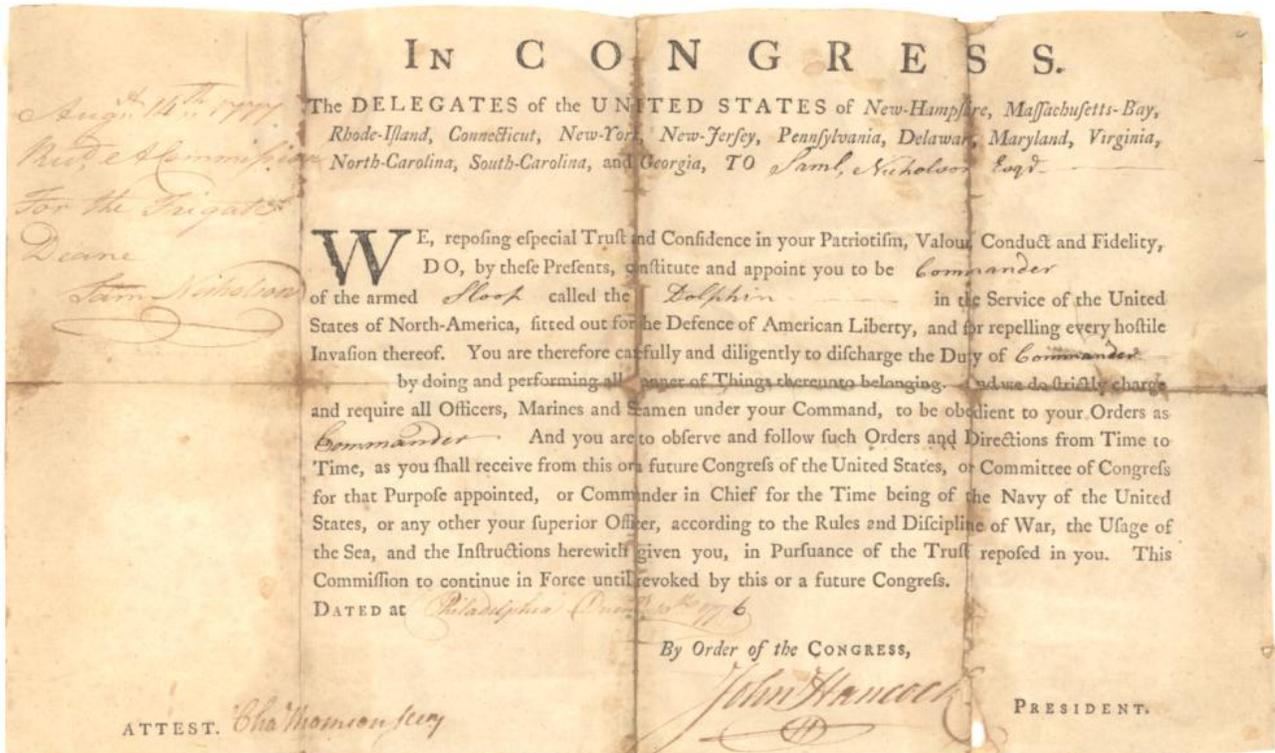
¹² Ibid.

¹³ McManemin, op.cit.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Morgan, op.cit.

¹⁶ Benjamin Franklin Stevens, *B. F. Stevens' Facsimiles of Manuscripts in European Archives Relating to America, 1773-1783* (London: Mellifont, 1970). The purchase of *Dolphin* was also surrounded with intrigue. Joseph Hynson, Wickes' step-brother, was with Nicholson in England during the covert search for a ship. Hynson, however, confided to his English landlady and another young woman about the task. The landlady, in turn, informed local officials spying on Americans in London. Hynson was subsequently blackmailed to help the British obtain secret American dispatches that Nicholson was to take to America on the new ship. A string of events led to the dispatches being sent on another American ship before Hynson could put the treasonous plan into action.



Nicholson's commission as captain of *Dolphin* signed by John Hancock.
Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society

refitted.¹⁷ During this time, he enjoyed the company of Silas Deane, William Carmichael, and friends, making a name for himself in Parisian society. Wickes wrote to the ACF not only to commend Nicholson but also to have him sent to L'Orient if he could be spared in Paris. On the other hand, British spies in France observed in their reports that Nicholson was "of a very inferior capacity, but is thought a good Seaman & has the good Wishes of Carmichael, because their mistresses ... lived much together when in London & now lodge together in Paris."¹⁸

On April 8, 1777, Nicholson and Lambert Wickes left Paris for Nantes. Nicholson had been tasked by the ACF to command *Dolphin* and sail with Wickes (on board the Continental brig *Reprisal*) in the Irish Sea to intercept linen fleets sailing out of Dublin. It would be a challenge just to leave port, as preparing the ship and getting a crew proved much more difficult than anticipated. *Dolphin* was a well-equipped, but slow sloop-rigged ship, with ten 3-pounders and 12 swivels, but the swivels had to be junked. At one point in May, *Dolphin* had a crew of only 28 men, half of which were French and not very adept sailors. Nicholson, afraid to use harsher discipline in fear of losing crew, noted he could trust only his 2nd lieutenant and a first mate—both of whom had never been on a warship.¹⁹

¹⁷ Morgan, op.cit.

¹⁸ Morgan, op.cit.

¹⁹ McManemin, op.cit.

After more delays, some from ship preparations and some from contrary winds, Nicholson and the rest of an American squadron that included *Reprisal* and the Continental brig *Lexington* finally set sail from Nantes (via St. Nazaire) on May 28, 1777.²⁰ Within two days, the squadron saw action. British ships chased the Americans and *Dolphin* received heavy damage. Nicholson was able to make some repairs en route to the Irish Channel.²¹ By mid-June the American squadron was in northern Atlantic waters, sailing as far north as Northern Ireland.²² Nicholson even intended go to Dublin if the winds had been in his favor.²³ Overall, the cruise had mixed results. The squadron took 18 prizes; eight were sent into port, three were released, and seven were sunk.²⁴ The prizes included an Irish brig; the sloop *Jason* from White Haven (U.K.); a Scottish sloop sailing from Prussia carrying wheat; *John & Thomas* sailing from Norway with deals; three Irish brigs with coal; *Grace* sailing from Jamaica carrying sugar, rum, cotton, tobacco; the brig *Peggy* sailing from Cork carrying butter and hides; and the snow *Friendship* from Gibraltar.²⁵ *Jenny & Sally* and the brig *Crawford*, both from Glasgow, were in ballast. A French prize master absconded with another prize, the brig *Betsey*. He brought the ship in and attempted to cash her in under Nicholson's name, but his ruse was soon discovered.

On the morning of June 26th, Nicholson and *Dolphin* were chased by the 74-gun British ship *Burford* east of Ushant, before finally finding safety in the port of St. Malo, France, on the Fourth of July, 1777.²⁶ *Dolphin* was heavily damaged in the chase. In July 1777, Nicholson and Wickes convinced the American Commissioners in France that *Dolphin* was beyond repair and that a new ship was needed. The frigate *Lyon* in Nantes, purchased by the ACF, was a good fit for Nicholson's needs. Nicholson traveled to St. Malo where he stayed while the ship was refitted in Nantes. The relocation was also in part to keep the new Continental Navy ship a secret from British spies. This frigate would soon be renamed *Deane*, after Silas Deane. He spent the next several months keeping track of the ship's progress, making personnel arrangements, and communicating with the American Commissioners in Paris about other naval affairs. It is during this time that Nicholson learned that his older brother, John, was among prisoners taken by the British.²⁷

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Gardner W. Allen, *A Naval History of the American Revolution* (Boston: Houghton, 1913).

²³ McManemin, op.cit.

²⁴ Ibid; Allen op.cit.

²⁵ "Deals" refer to boards or planks, especially of fir or pine, cut to any of various standard sizes. A "snow," or "snaw," was a two-masted sailing vessel. Primarily used as merchant ships, these brigs saw war service as well.

²⁶ William James Morgan, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, Vol. 9 (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1986).

²⁷ Morgan, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, Vol. 9, op.cit.; McManemin, op.cit.; William B. Willcox, ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. 24: *May 1 through September 30, 1777* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984).

The new frigate *Deane*, with twenty-four 12-pounders, eight 4-pounders, and two 6-pounders, was finally ready in December 1777.²⁸ However, Nicholson and his crew did not board the ship for several weeks, possibly suspecting that there were British ships nearby.²⁹ Nicholson spent most of January 1778 resolving issues with American and French sailors, as well as with other preparations.³⁰ Among the more important issues, Nicholson was concerned that the other ships sailing with him would not be ready in time. His correspondence also noted that fellow Continental Navy Captain John Paul Jones deserved better than the command and crew of *Ranger*. (Two years later Jones would assume command of the Continental ship *Bonhomme Richard* and engage the 44-gun ship HMS *Serapis* in the famous naval battle between the two ships.)

Nicholson's instructions directed him to sail to Boston, Massachusetts, or the first safe port in New England. By February 1778, Nicholson was on board *Deane* in Quiberon Bay, France, but problems persisted. *Deane* was still waiting for further provisions and the other ships with which she was supposed to sail. Quarreling sailors and a disgruntled French lieutenant, whom Nicholson tried repeatedly to accommodate, added to his problems. On the bright side, Nicholson learned on February 11th that his brother John had escaped from prison, had already arrived safely in Dunkirk, and was en route to Paris.³¹

With Samuel Nicholson commanding, *Deane* finally set sail for the United States in April 1778, with valuable supplies that included clothes for the army, copper, and tin. *Deane* arrived in Boston in early May.³² At this point Nicholson had been away from the United States for at least three years. Although his career at sea was far from over, Nicholson would never again see Europe.

The cost of maintaining the Continental Navy strained the new American government in 1778. The Continental Congress' Marine Committee's and Eastern Navy Board's shortage of funds prevented the proper outfitting and repairing of her frigates. Nicholson and *Deane* would be forced to spend the rest of the year in Boston. In fact, most of the Continental Navy was in Boston Harbor in December 1778.³³

²⁸ Michael Crawford, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, Vol. 10 (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1996).

²⁹ William B. Willcox, ed., *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. 25: *October 1, 1777 through February 28, 1778* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986).

³⁰ Michael Crawford, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, Vol. 11 (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 2005).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² McManemin, *op.cit.*

³³ *Ibid.*

The new year brought new adventures. On January 14, 1779, Nicholson led *Deane* out of Boston on a four-month cruise.³⁴ The first few days were spent cruising with the Continental frigate *Alliance* on her way to France. Shortly after parting ways with *Alliance*, Nicholson captured a worthy prize, the British privateer *Viper* out of Liverpool, with 16 guns and 75 men.³⁵ *Deane* arrived in Martinique in mid-February for careening and refitting.³⁶ Here Nicholson found many other ships of the Continental Navy, including the sloop-of-war *General Gates*. By March, however, resources were running out. Despite the capture of six other prizes in the West Indies, Nicholson couldn't afford to maintain the many prisoners on board *Deane*, nor did he have the funds to pay for supplies for the two other American ships. A new resolution adopted by the Continental Congress that allowed Continental agents to pay naval officers finally forced the local agent to hand over some 80,000 livres for *Deane* alone.³⁷

Deane returned to America in April 1779. This time Nicholson headed to Philadelphia, after being briefly delayed on the Delaware River by poor weather.³⁸ By June, Nicholson and *Deane* were in Delaware Bay with instructions to cruise along the Atlantic coast.³⁹ The Continental frigates *Boston* and *Confederacy* were also put under Nicholson's command, but *Confederacy* was soon ordered elsewhere. *Deane* and *Boston* sailed out of the Chesapeake Bay at the end of July 1779, at times sailing



Boston, Philadelphia, and Charles Town were important ports during the American Revolution.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Allen, op.cit.

³⁶ McManemin, op.cit.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Library of Congress, *Naval Records of the American Revolution 1775–1788* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1906).

with two Virginia State navy ships. The squadron was tasked with getting intelligence on privateers and intercepting England-bound ships coming out of New York. They were successful in these efforts, capturing four British ships and four privateers (including the packet *Sandwich* and HMS *Thorn*), over 250 prisoners, and numerous cargo, including supplies for counterfeiting Continental currency.⁴⁰

Deane and *Boston* returned to Boston Harbor along with their prizes on September 6, 1779. A week after their arrival, Nicholson presided over the court-martial of Captain Dudley Saltonstall on board *Deane*. Saltonstall was being charged over an ill-fated expedition off of Penobscot, Maine. Two weeks later, Nicholson reported to the Massachusetts General Court that Saltonstall, deserving a fair proceeding, needed time and help in retaining evidence. Witnesses could not be retained, and the court-martial never reconvened.⁴¹

Between September 19 and 22, 1779, the Navy's Marine Committee congratulated Nicholson on *Deane's* recent success, urged Nicholson to speed up the ship's refitting, and issued new orders for *Deane*, *Boston*, and the Continental frigate *Queen of France* to sail to Charlestown, South Carolina. However, the squadron sailed in November without *Deane*, as it was still being refitted.⁴²

On January 31, 1780, the Board of Admiralty directed Nicholson to obtain supplies for *Deane*, while the Marine Committee ordered *Deane* to the Chesapeake Bay to bring back a full supply of bread.⁴³ In February, however, records show that the Continental Congress doubted that Nicholson and *Deane* were en route. Whatever the delays were, they allowed Nicholson time to marry Mary Dowse on February 9, 1780.⁴⁴ That same month, *Deane* left on an eight-week easterly cruise and returned with four valuable prizes.⁴⁵ In May, the Board of Admiralty sent instructions for the disposition of cargo from one of *Deane's* prizes sent into port. It also re-issued its call for a speedy refitting of *Deane* to cruise with *Confederacy*, the sloop-of-war *Saratoga*, and the frigate *Trumbull*, the latter captained by none other than Nicholson's younger brother, James.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Library of Congress, op.cit; McManenim, op.cit.; Allen op.cit.

⁴¹ McManenim, op.cit.; Saltonstall was dismissed from the Continental Navy without a trial.

⁴² Library of Congress, op.cit; McManenim, op.cit.

⁴³ McManenim, op.cit.

⁴⁴ Bradford Adams Whittemore, *Memorials of the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati* (Boston: Society of the Cincinnati, 1964). The couple had eight children between 1781 and 1795: Anne, Samuel Jr., twins Robert and Joseph, Edward, Nathaniel, Maria, and James. Four of Nicholson's sons followed in his footsteps. Samuel Jr. a midshipman, died during a voyage with his father in 1798. Edward, a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy, died at sea while serving on USS *Vesuvius* en route from Mississippi to Washington, D.C. in 1807. Nathaniel served in the War of 1812 and was stationed in New Orleans. The youngest son James, also a lieutenant in the U.S. Navy, died in Venezuela.

⁴⁵ McManenim, op.cit.

⁴⁶ Library of Congress, op.cit; McManenim, op.cit.

After having difficulty finding able-bodied seamen and marines, Nicholson took his undermanned *Deane* and set sail from Boston to Delaware with his brother on *Trumbull* on July 27, 1780. They arrived in the Delaware River on August 15th, but were immediately ordered on a two week cruise off the coast. A week later, however, the Eastern Navy Board reported that both ships were in need of many small repairs and articles, but the board didn't have enough money to fund them. The two ships captured only one small schooner carrying fruit, unable to find more valuable prizes the Navy desperately needed. On September 2nd, both ships embarked on a three-week cruise off the South Carolina coast, but also came up empty handed.⁴⁷

The Nicholson brothers and their ships then returned to Philadelphia. In November, Samuel Nicholson would be called to Boston to sit on a court-martial held on board *Alliance*. During his leave of absence, his brother James took command of *Deane* until the end of its current cruise. The court-martial lasted until January 6, 1781, but James Nicholson's cruise with *Deane* lasted until April 16th.⁴⁸

When Samuel Nicholson later resumed command, *Deane's* spar and mast were in desperate need of repair. Despite lacking the funds, the Eastern Navy Board started the refitting. It would be a long process. Nicholson had to pay and discharge *Deane's* 215-man crew. When the ship was finally ready for service in the fall of 1781, Nicholson and *Alliance* captain John Barry went on a recruitment drive. Despite being authorized to offer higher pay and prize money than paid by privateers, both captains still had a difficult time getting new recruits.⁴⁹

Letters and papers from Robert Morris, the newly appointed Superintendent of Finance of the United States, in September and October 1781 show that Nicholson was again assigned command of *Deane*. Morris wrote that he had been told that Nicholson might decline going on *Deane*, remarking that Nicholson was a "Valuable Officer and it would give me pain that he should forfeit his station in the American Service, by a Breach of Order."⁵⁰ There is no record of why Nicholson would have declined it. There was concern that if Samuel had declined the command, Navy leadership would have passed it on to the other Nicholson brother, John (thus causing more problems with other captains who felt they were next in line for a command).⁵¹

⁴⁷ McManenim, op.cit.

⁴⁸ Library of Congress, op.cit; McManenim, op.cit.; E. James Ferguson, ed., *The Papers of Robert Morris 1781–1784*, Vol. 2: *August–September 1781* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1975). James Nicholson's cruise with *Deane* around the West Indies lasted eight fruitless weeks. Their return to Boston was in escort of several merchantmen. Two other ships in the squadron were also lost—*Saratoga* was never heard from again, and *Confederacy* was captured by the British.

⁴⁹ McManenim, op.cit.

⁵⁰ Ferguson, op.cit.

⁵¹ Ferguson, *The Papers of Robert Morris*, Vol. 2, op.cit.; E. James Ferguson, ed., *The Papers of Robert Morris 1781–1784*, Vol. 3: *October 1, 1781–January 10, 1782* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977).

The Continental Navy's constant resource issues were an ongoing challenge for Nicholson. In December 1781, Captain John Barry and *Alliance* received orders to sail to France with the Marquis de Lafayette. Always short of sailors, Barry wanted to draft men from *Deane*, which was in port. Nicholson was also told to send 11 of his marines to *Alliance*. However, Nicholson refused. After learning about the possibility of being sent to *Alliance*, some of *Deane*'s crew became alarmed. Claiming that they had signed up to sail specifically on *Deane*, the crew asked their captain to not allow the transfer to *Alliance*. Nicholson told Barry that he didn't have authority to make such an unprecedented request. To be fair, Nicholson did allow Barry on board to ask for volunteers, but only a few signed up. An incensed Barry wrote to Robert Morris that had there been a proper mode of court-martial, as the senior captain in port he would have put Nicholson under arrest. Instead Barry ordered Nicholson and *Deane* on a short cruise.⁵² Nicholson was ordered back to sea in February 1782 to cruise off the West Indies. He was directed to exchange prisoners and send rum and salt prizes to Charleston, South Carolina.⁵³ Ironically, Nicholson had to man the short-handed *Deane*. The General Court of Massachusetts allowed Nicholson to enlist up to 12 men from the garrison in the castle in Boston Harbor because he had to unwillingly give up some of his crew to *Alliance*.⁵⁴

Deane left Boston on March 10, 1782, and would not return until May 17th. In those two months, *Deane* cruised the West Indies, capturing *Mary* going to Barbados with cargo worth five thousand sterling, the American brig *Elizabeth* going to St. Thomas with tobacco and stores, HMS *Jackal*, and two British privateers named *Swallow* and *Regulator*. Along with the prizes, Nicholson returned with a damaged ship full of sick crewmen and prisoners. *Deane* had to remain in Boston Harbor for over four months for repairs.⁵⁵

It would not be a quiet stay in port, however. By June 1782, Lieutenant Michael Knies of *Deane* filed a complaint against Nicholson, enrolling Robert Morris in the situation. Knies claimed that Nicholson, along with insulting him, confined Knies to the ship (even when off duty), without arresting or suspending him. In addition to this arbitrary behavior, Knies further claimed that since Nicholson first took command, his behavior was unbecoming an officer and of material injury. Morale on board *Deane* was already declining when the Knies incident happened. Nicholson had also appointed Samuel Smith as a lieutenant and gave him the watch stood by Knies. Knies asked for a court of enquiry.⁵⁶

In a July response to Morris, Nicholson said it was Knies' behavior that had been unsupportable. Nicholson wrote that as he approached *Deane* from one of the ship's boats, Knies—at that point

⁵² McManemin, op.cit.; Ferguson, *The Papers of Robert Morris*, Vols.2 & 3, op.cit.

⁵³ E. James Ferguson, ed., *The Papers of Robert Morris 1781–1784*, Vol. 4: *January 11–April 15, 1782* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1978).

⁵⁴ Allen, op.cit.

⁵⁵ McManemin, op.cit.; Allen, op.cit.; E. James Ferguson and John Catanzariti, eds., *The Papers of Robert Morris 1781–1784*, Vol. 5: *April 16–July 20, 1782* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980).

⁵⁶ Ferguson and John Catanzariti, op.cit.

the senior watch officer on board—saw and ignored Nicholson as he sat close to one of the cabin ports smoking his pipe. Nicholson claimed that no one had been there to man the side or give the ship's captain a rope. Nicholson said Knies did the same to another superior officer, 1st Lieutenant Benjamin Page, when he was trying to board the ship.⁵⁷

The Nicholson-Knies dispute would take a circuitous route over the next year. In August 1782, a court of enquiry was held on Knies' charges against Nicholson. While the enquiry found Nicholson guilty, it was also a flawed proceeding that would be voided some months later.⁵⁸ Based on Nicholson's charges, Morris was compelled to order Knies to go before a court-martial. A warrant for Knies was served on August 14, 1782, and his court-martial was held one month later. Knies successfully conducted his own defense. He was acquitted after several of *Deane's* officers and midshipmen corroborated Knies' claim that he had not been informed of Nicholson's arrival and that Nicholson had undeservingly berated him.⁵⁹

By September 1782, Nicholson had been relieved of command of *Deane*. That same month, *Deane* was renamed *Hague*, as Silas Deane had fallen out of favor with the Continental Congress.⁶⁰

In the meantime, Nicholson was determined to right the wrong done to him in his court of enquiry. On October 3, 1782, Nicholson paid the sympathetic Robert Morris a visit. Nicholson explained the proceedings, describing the court as biased and predetermined to convict him. Morris reassured Nicholson that he, too, wanted impartial justice in this matter and would soon issue his determination. The next few weeks would be trying for Nicholson. While he waited for Morris' determination, the now unemployed Nicholson also had to ask Morris for financial help.⁶¹

Morris issued his determination on Nicholson's court of enquiry on October 17, 1782. First explaining how a court of enquiry should work, Morris determined that in Nicholson's case there had been many improper procedures that were prejudicial in nature. Furthermore, he found the court mistook their task, instead acting as a court-martial and inappropriately finding Nicholson guilty. Morris declared the court of enquiry void and called for a legitimate court-martial to either clear or convict Nicholson. Morris clarified the four charges: Nicholson took from Knies his rightful command on board by appointing Samuel Smith as a lieutenant on *Deane* (March 9, 1782); wasted provisions by ordering two pounds of beef to each man every day late in *Deane's* cruise; exhibited bad behavior in violating promises to prisoners on a previous cruise; and

⁵⁷ John Catanzariti and E. James Ferguson, eds., *The Papers of Robert Morris 1781–1784*, Vol. 6: *July 22–October 31, 1782* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1984).

⁵⁸ Stephen Tallichet Powers, "Robert Morris and the Courts-Martial of Captains Samuel Nicholson and John Manley of the Continental Navy," *Military Affairs* 44, no. 1 (February 1980).

⁵⁹ Catanzariti and Ferguson, *op.cit.*; Powers, *op.cit.*

⁶⁰ McManemin, *op.cit.*

⁶¹ Catanzariti and Ferguson, *op.cit.*

neglected his duty by leaving the ship at a single anchor in open road, endangering *Deane* at sea with many prisoners and not enough officers for proper security.⁶²

Nicholson, worried about the damage to his character and honor, was obviously anxious to find out Morris' determination. Although Morris had yet to officially submit his findings, he allowed Nicholson to read his papers first.⁶³ Morris also told Nicholson that a court-martial was in his best interest and assured him that the matter would be quickly resolved. Unfortunately, the court-martial would not begin until September 1783.

In May 1783, Captain John Paul Jones was one of three Continental Navy officers called to serve on the court-martial. However, Jones, who had asked to be excused when originally selected, had fallen ill from a tropical fever in July, causing further delays.⁶⁴

In late August 1783, Robert Morris replaced Jones with Captain John Green. With Captains Green, Thomas Read, and Silas Talbot present, Nicholson's court-martial was finally held in Boston from September 12th through 19th. Unfortunately, no records have been found about this proceeding. Other records do show that Nicholson was honorably acquitted, but his career was already tainted.⁶⁵ Nicholson's accomplishments, however, allowed him to become an Original Member of the Society of the Cincinnati, formed in 1783 by officers of the Continental Line and Continental Navy who served honorably for three or more years during the American Revolution (1775–1783).

Over the rest of the decade, Captain Samuel Nicholson transitioned into civilian life. By now, the new bureaucracies of the United States and its armed forces were becoming evident. Nicholson spent parts of 1787 and 1788 in New York City trying to obtain payment of his share of the prize money due to him from cruises in 1777. In July 1788, a Continental Congress committee granted Nicholson a commission on sales of prizes taken in 1777 by the three ships on which he sailed, including *Dolphin*.⁶⁶ Nicholson and his family are known to be firmly settled in Boston by 1790. (Three of his eight children would be born between 1790 and 1795.)⁶⁷

In the early 1790s, the need to revive a naval force became apparent as American merchant fleets needed protection from attacks by Algerian (Barbary) pirates and from harassment by British and French forces. In response, the Continental Congress passed the Naval Armament Act of 1794, calling for the construction of six frigates at shipyards along the Eastern Seaboard. Samuel Nicholson also returned to service in 1794 and was appointed a captain—and the second highest

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Nuxoll and Mary A. Gallagher, eds., *The Papers of Robert Morris 1781–1784, Volume 8: May–December 31, 1783* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995); Powers, op.cit.

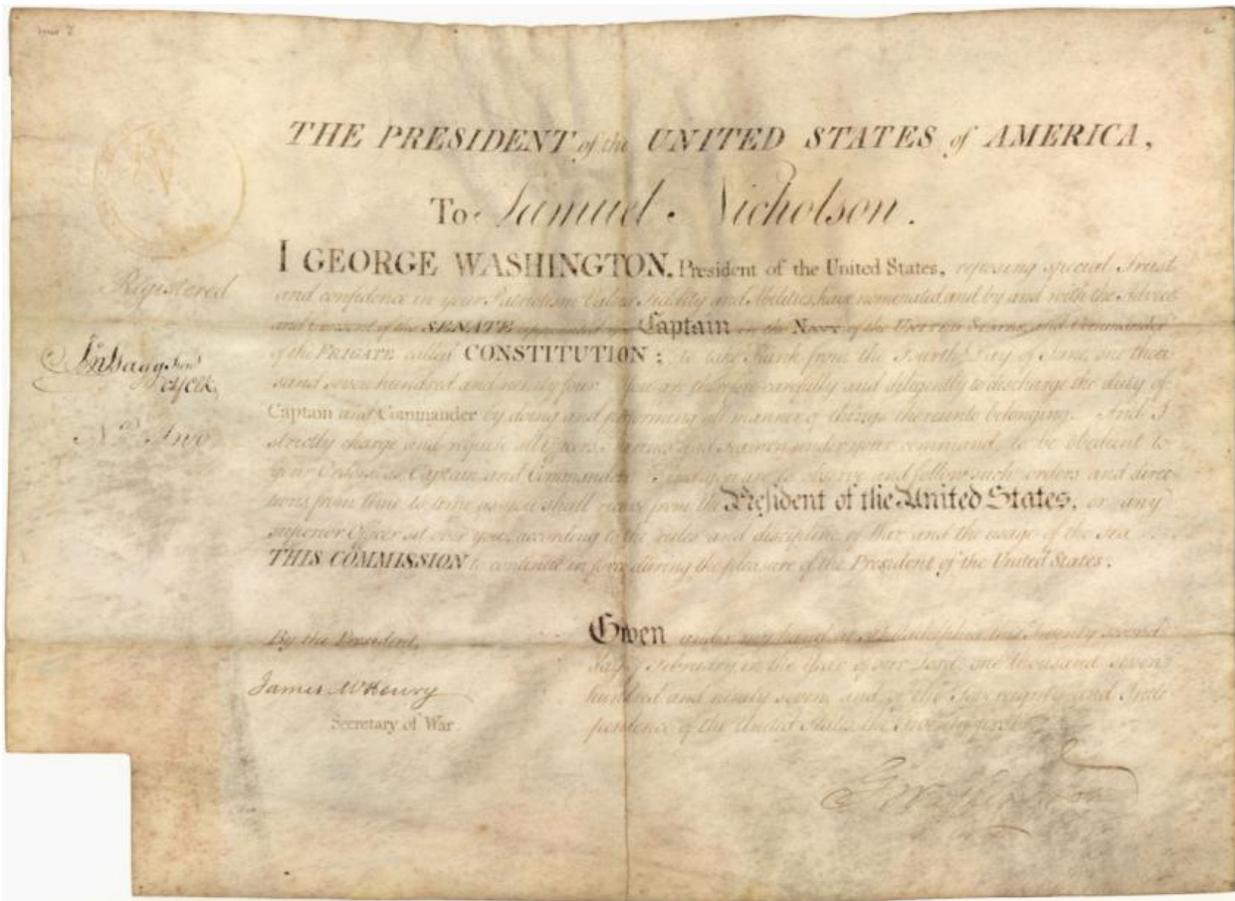
⁶⁵ McManemin, op.cit.; Nuxoll and Gallagher, op.cit.; Powers, op.cit.

⁶⁶ Library of Congress, op.cit.

⁶⁷ Whittemore, op.cit.

ranking officer—in the newly reorganized U.S. Navy.⁶⁸ Nicholson's first assignment was to serve as superintendent for the construction of the U.S. frigate *Constitution* in Boston Harbor. It would take four years for the ship to be built. Paul Revere's brass and iron foundry produced many of the brass fittings for the ship.⁶⁹ George Washington, who had ordered the six frigates and given *Constitution* her name, also signed Nicholson's commission as her captain. *Constitution* was launched in Boston on October 21, 1797.⁷⁰

Nine months later, on July 22, 1798, Nicholson, as captain and first commanding officer, took *Constitution* out of Boston Harbor for her maiden voyage.⁷¹ The ship's historic first cruise off the Atlantic coast was not an easy one. It was beset with personnel problems, and Nicholson captured the British privateer *Niger*, which he mistook for a French ship because of its French



Nicholson's commission as captain of *Constitution* signed by President George Washington.
Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society

⁶⁸ McManemin, op.cit.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ *Constitution* was initially launched on September 20, 1797, with President John Adams and Massachusetts Governor Increase Sumner present. However, her weight was too much for the ways and she moved only 27 feet. A second try two days later only moved the ship another 31 feet. After the ways were rebuilt, *Constitution* was finally launched in October.

⁷¹ Garraty and Carnes, op.cit.



**USS *Constitution* by Marshall Johnson, c.19th century.
Courtesy of the USS *Constitution* Museum**

crew (that had been sailing under British orders).⁷² Unfortunately, personal tragedy also marred this cruise, when Nicholson's son, Samuel Jr., died serving under his father's command at sea.⁷³

Nicholson's next cruise on *Constitution* was in 1799 under Captain John Barry in his flagship, the frigate *United States*.⁷⁴ They were tasked with protecting American ships from French privateers in the West Indies. On this second cruise, Nicholson regrettably repeated his mistake from *Constitution*'s first outing, this time intercepting *Spencer*, an English merchant ship, which recently had been taken prize by the French frigate *L'Insurgente*. Perhaps apprehensive after the mix-up with *Niger*, Nicholson released the ship and her crew the next morning, despite the fact that *Spencer* was now technically a French ship operated by a French prize crew. This mistake and other problems on board would make this cruise Nicholson's last and end his career at sea.⁷⁵

Under naval reforms made by President Thomas Jefferson's administration, Nicholson was retained in 1803 to serve as the first superintendent of the Charlestown Naval Yard outside Boston.⁷⁶ Some reports note that Nicholson was given the rank of commodore around this time. Nicholson served in this role until his death on December 29, 1811, in Charlestown, Massachusetts. At the time of his death, Nicholson was the senior officer in the U.S. Navy. He is buried in the crypt of the Old North Church in Boston.⁷⁷



⁷² *Niger* was later verified as a British ship, and the U.S. had to release the ship and her crew and pay \$11,000 restitution to Britain.

⁷³ Garraty and Carnes, op.cit.

⁷⁴ Garraty and Carnes, op.cit.; McManemin, op.cit.

⁷⁵ A notable fact is that Nicholson was never captured, nor did he lose a ship as had many others of his day.

⁷⁶ Garraty and Carnes, op.cit.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

USS *CONSTITUTION*

“Old Ironsides”

USS *Constitution* is a wooden-hulled, three-masted heavy frigate. Its construction was ordered as part of the Naval Armament Act of 1794. Construction on the ship began in 1794 in Boston, Massachusetts, at Edmund Hartt’s shipyard. Paul Revere supplied copper bolts and spikes. Timbers came from states from Maine to Georgia. The frigate cost \$302,718 to build.

Launched in 1797, *Constitution* was 204 feet long, and the mainmast reached 220 feet high. The ship’s top speed was 13 knots, and its displacement was 2,200 tons. The frigate was armed with thirty 24-pounders (long gun), twenty 32-pounders (carronade), and two 24-pounders (bow chasers). *Constitution* had a complement of 450 officers and enlisted men, including 55 Marines and 30 boys.

USS *Constitution* remains in commission today, is the oldest ship on the U.S. Navy’s active list, and is the longest serving warship in the world.

On August 27, 2010, Captain J. Phillip London embarked upon USS *Constitution* for a half-day ceremonial “turnaround” cruise from the Boston Navy Yard.

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Finally, I thank my family ancestors for the remarkable lives they lived, helping to create America's rich history that I am now able to write about and share.

THE NICHOLSONS AND THE SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI

Samuel Nicholson had two brothers, James and John, who also served as captains in the Continental Navy. All three are Original Members of the Society of the Cincinnati, an organization comprising officers of the American Revolution who had served at least three years in the Continental Army or Navy, including officers of the French Army and Navy above certain ranks. Today, the Society is a nonprofit historical and educational organization that promotes public interest in the American Revolution through its library and museum collections, exhibitions, programs, publications, and other activities. Membership in the Society is hereditary. The author is a member of the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati and serves as Samuel Nicholson's representative in that body.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. J. Phillip “Jack” London is Executive Chairman and Chairman of the Board of CACI International Inc, a \$3.8 billion information technology (IT) and professional services company. Founded in 1962, CACI is a public corporation listed on the New York Stock Exchange, employing over 14,000 people in more than 120 offices worldwide. Dr. London served as President and Chief Executive Officer from 1984 to 2007. He joined CACI in 1972 as its 35th employee. Dr. London is considered the founder of the modern-era CACI.

Dr. London was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, on April 30, 1937. He is the son of Harry Riles “Jack” London and Laura Evalyn (Phillips) London, born respectively on September 3, 1903, in Haileyville, Oklahoma, and July 29, 1913, in Yukon, Oklahoma. He graduated from Classen High School, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in 1955.

Dr. London is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy (1959) in Annapolis, Maryland, where he earned a Bachelor of Science in naval engineering. He also earned a Master of Science in operations research from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School (1967) in Monterey, California. He holds a doctorate in business administration, conferred “with distinction,” from George Washington University (1971).

Dr. London holds the rank of Captain, U.S. Navy (Ret.). During his 12 years of active duty as a regular officer (1959–1971), Dr. London served as a naval aviator and saw service during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. He was with the airborne recovery team for Colonel John Glenn’s Mercury Program space flight in *Freedom 7* in the Caribbean on February 20, 1962, on board USS *Randolph* (CVS 15). At the height of the Vietnam War, he served as Aide and Administrative Assistant to the Vice Chief of the Naval Material Command. Leaving active duty in 1971, London joined the U.S. Navy Reserve and served as commanding officer of aeronautical engineering units with the Naval Air Systems Command, Washington, D.C. He retired from the U.S. Navy in 1983.

Dr. London has been the recipient of numerous awards, including Ernst & Young’s Entrepreneur of the Year for Government IT Services (2003), the Albert Einstein Award for Technology Achievement in the Defense Field (2004), and the inaugural *Cornerstone of Freedom* award from the Cincinnatus Foundation (2009). Since 2002, the Human Resources Leadership Awards of Greater Washington has annually given the Ethics in Business Award, named in Dr. London’s honor. Dr. London received the prestigious John W. Dixon award from the Association of the United States Army (2003) for his industry support to the Army war fighter. He received the Navy League’s distinguished Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz Award (2007) for his industry leadership in serving the U.S. Navy. In 2010, Dr. London was inducted into the Washington Business Hall of Fame. In 2011, he was inducted into the Halls of Fame of the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School and the Arlington, Virginia Chamber of Commerce.

Dr. London serves on the board of directors for the U.S. Naval Institute, U.S. Navy Memorial Fund, Naval Historical Foundation, Center for Security Policy, and CAUSE (Comfort for America’s Uniformed Services).

Captain J. Phillip London is a member of the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati representing his propositus, Captain Samuel Nicholson. He is a member of the Society of the Sons of the Revolution, the Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, the Sons of Confederate Veterans, the Society of Colonial Wars, Descendants of Washington's Army at Valley Forge, the 1889er Society of Oklahoma, the St. Andrew's Society of Washington, D.C., the Baronial Order of the Magna Charta, the National Society of Americans of Royal Descent, the Order of the Crown of Charlemagne in the United States of America, the Order of the Three Crusades 1096–1192, the Military Order of the Crusades, the Order of the Merovingian Dynasty, the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem in the United States, and the Sovereign Military Order of the Temple of Jerusalem (Knights Templar) in the United States of America. He is also a 32° Scottish Rite Mason (KCCH).

Dr. London lives in McLean, Virginia, with his wife, Dr. Jennifer Burkhart London, and their three young sons, Jackson, Jayson, and Jonathon. Dr. London's grandchildren through his son, Phillip, and daughter, Laura, are Evan, Andrew, Charlotte, Riley, James, and Jasper.



Captain Samuel Nicholson
A Monograph

J. Phillip London

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