Capt. John Shaw – A Biography
Edited by Pam Keyes

The following is an original biographical article written in 1823 about Capt. John Shaw, who was in charge of the New Orleans Naval Station from late 1810-1813. Some minor editing has been made to improve sentence structure, and where warranted, some editorial notes inserted. Pam Keyes, editor

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Biography of Capt. John Shaw
Late of the Navy of the United States

Born in Ireland in 1773, of respectable parents, Captain John Shaw was educated at a country school in the neighborhood of Ballafin. At the age of seventeen years he emigrated to the United States, with an elder brother, and arrived at New York, December 31, 1790. After passing a short time in that city, he came to Philadelphia, where he remained until March, 1791, when he embarked for the East Indies, to which he made four voyages between 1791-97. In the last of these voyages, he was named first officer of the ship in which he sailed. He found time, in the same interval, to make himself master of the duties of a clerk in a merchant's counting house, and to march as a volunteer with "Macpherson's Blues," on the expedition against the Insurgents in the western part of Pennsylvania (Ed. note, "Whiskey Rebellion.")

During his second voyage to Canton, the ship Sampson in which Shaw sailed was attacked at night in the Straits of Banca, by a fleet of Malay prows. The Sampson beat them off, and Shaw displayed much bravery in the action.

In the latter part of the year 1797, on his return to Baltimore from a voyage to the West Indies, as master of a brig, he obtained through the interest of General Samuel Smith and others, a lieutenant's commission in the Navy of the United States, and joined the US ship Montezuma, Captain Alexander Murray. Having passed a year on board this ship in the West Indies seas, he returned to Baltimore. Shortly after, Captain Murray, who greatly esteemed Shaw's character, procured for him the command of the United States schooner Enterprize, a new vessel mounting 12 six pounders, with a crew of 76 men. (Ed. note, this was the same Enterprize that later went to Galveston in 1820)

In December, 1799, he sailed in the Enterprize for the Windward Island station, and there cruised against the French (during the Quasi-War). In February, 1800, returning from the Island of Curacoa, he fell in with the United States frigate Constellation, after her action with the French national ship La Vengeance. Commodore Truxton charged him with dispatches for the government, with which he returned home in fifteen days.

The Enterprize sailed again, in March 1800, from Philadelphia, with orders to join Commodore Truxton in Jamaica. When off the east end of that island, Captain Shaw learned that the frigate Constellation had sailed with convoy for the United States. In turning to windward to gain his station at St.
Christopher's, he discovered, off the Mona passage, a brig of war to the south-east, gave chase, and closed with her fast. At the distance of about a mile, the 18-gun brig showed Spanish colours and opened fire upon the Enterprize. The latter, showing her colors, still advanced under a press of sail, and when sufficiently near, took a position on the larboard quarter of the Spaniard, and returned her fire. A sharp contest ensued, which lasted 20 or 30 minutes. The two vessels then separated, both being considerably injured. The Enterprize continued, turning to windward, and anchored in the harbour of St. Thomas to refit. Here a circumstance occurred, that shows the impression which the character of the American navy, then in the dawn of its existence, had already made in the minds of the enemy.

Captain Shaw received a message from a large French lugger, that mounted 12 carriage guns, with a crew of about 160 men, inviting him to a trial of strength, which was accepted with three cheers by all hands on board the Enterprize. At the hour appointed, Shaw was under weigh, and when clear of the Danish limits, he hove to and fired a shot towards the harbor, and repeated the fire several times through the day, as a signal that the Enterprize was waiting for the challenger to sally out. But the French captain having, probably, reconsidered the matter, had come to the conclusion that it was better to keep his anchorage.

After a cruise of some days to leeward of the island of St. Croix, the Enterprize beat up to St. Kitts, took in provisions and water, and proceeded on another cruise. Soon afterward (May, 1800), she fell in with a French privateer, La Cigne, of four guns and fifty-seven men, and brought her to close action, which was short, but severe while it lasted. The captain of the privateer manifested great preserverance and personal bravery. He would not consent to surrender, until he had nearly one half of his crew cut down, and his rigging and sails much shattered. This prize was ordered to St. Kitts.

About a fortnight after the capture of La Cigne, Captain Shaw fell in with the La Citoyenne, of six guns and forty-seven men. This vessel was also brought to close action. Her captain and crew fought desperately, and yielded only when all hopes of success or escape had vanished. She also was dispatched to St. Kitts. In the two actions, the Enterprize had one marine killed, and six or seven men wounded.

It was not long before she was engaged in another contest. Cruising near Antigua, she fell in with a large French three masted lugger, bound to France, which Captain Shaw recognized to be the same which had challenged him to fight at the Island of St. Thomas. After exchanging a few shots, the lugger hauled he colours down. Among her passengers were a Major General and several other officers who were made prisoners.

In June 1800, Captain Shaw fell in with the French privateer, La Eagle, of 10 guns and 78 men, a fast sailor and fortunate cruiser. He brought her to a very close action. Each vessel discharged her first broadside on the opposite tack and close on board the other. The Enterprize tacked as she passed and fired 4 guns in La Eagle's stern; in 15 minutes afterwards, she ran alongside and boarded, without meeting the smallest opposition. In consequence of the well-directed broadside of the Enterprize, the crew of the privateer had fled the deck and taken shelter in the hold. The French captain, with a high reputation for skill and bravery, was struck on the top of his forehead with a round shot, which knocked him down, tore off his scalp, and left him for dead on the deck. The first lieutenant was struck in the breast by a round shot, and killed. The second officer was hit by a cannon shot, which took off a part of one
ear and all the skin on the same side of his head. He also appeared to be dead. The privateer became a prize, and had three killed and 9 wounded, while the Enterprize had only two or three men wounded. The prize was taken into St. Kitts.

In July 1800, being to leeward of the Island of Dominica, Captain Shaw discovered early one morning a French vessel called Le Flambeau, mounting 12 guns, with a crew of a hundred persons, officers included, pulling with all her sweeps on the Enterprize. About 10 o'clock A.M., the sea-breeze struck the Enterprize and she immediately made all sail for the enemy. But the latter, as the Enterprize neared, made all sail from her. At two o'clock P.M. she was within the range of the Enterprize's shot, but Captain Shaw had determined not to fire until close on board. The French vessel maneuvered well, with great quickness. As soon as the Enterprize closed with her, she commenced a heavy fire of musquetry on her antagonist, until the two vessels were close on board each other. Then the Enterprize, shortening sail, edged off, received a broadside, and immediately gave one in return. The action became warm, and was maintained with much spirit by the enemy for about twenty minutes, when she trimmed all her sheets and tacked. The Enterprize attempted to tack also, but missed stays and lost ground. On discovering that the other vessel wished to avoid the fight, Captain Shaw trimmed ship again in order to get alongside. The batteries of the two vessels were again opened on each other. The enemy's foremost, which had been wounded being struck with a heavy flow of wind, went overboard with 6 men on it. These were immediately taken up by the boat of the Enterprize. By this time she ranged alongside, and the French vessel quickly struck her colors. The action lasted 40 minutes, during which time the Enterprize fired fourteen round shot through the hull of the other. On the ship of the French, seven men were killed, and thirty-three wounded on that of the Enterprize, five men were wounded, all of them recovered. The prize was taken to St. Kitts. Her force was superior in the action. She had a crew of 110 men, the Enterprize but eighty-three.

Again, while cruising in the Antigua passage, in August, the Enterprize took, after a chase of five hours, the French privateer La Polina, of six guns and 40 men; and, in September, in the same passage, after exchanging a few shots, the French letter of marque Guadaloupien, of 7 guns and 45 men, bound to France with a cargo of coffee and sugar.

During these various cruises of the Enterprize, the average of her recaptures of American vessels in possession of the enemy was nearly a month.

At this time, the decline of his health compelled Capt. Shaw to resign the command of the Enterprize, and return to the United States. He arrived in the Delaware late in November, 1800. At Washington, which he visited the next month, he received in person the compliments and thanks of President John Adams and the Secretary of the Navy, for his valuable services abroad. Verbal orders were given to him to hold himself in readiness to proceed to Boston, and take command of the French national ship Berceau, of 26 guns, captured by the frigate Boston. The peace with France was succeeded by a navy peace-establishment, in which he was retained as a lieutenant, and placed in the command of the frigate George Washington, that carried out the tributary stores to the Dey of Algiers. In this ship, he remained in the Mediterranean for a year, convoying the American trade. He returned with her, in 1802, to Philadelphia, where she was sold. The new regulations putting him on
half-pay, he asked and obtained a furlough, and made a voyage to the Isle of France and Canton. During his absence, a term of eighteen months, he was promoted (on the 22d May, 1801) to the rank of master commander.

The war then waged against Tripoli was actively prosecuted by that intrepid and alert officer, Commander Preble; but his dispatches announced that he was in great want of gun boats. This information induced Capt. Shaw to address a letter to the Navy Department, in which he tendered his services to conduct an expedition of gun-boats to the Mediterranean, and suggested the manner in which it should be equipped and dispatched. The arrival of Commodore Preble in the United States, and his personal representations to government, determined the adoption of Captain Shaw's offer and plan. Accordingly, eight sail of gun-boats were got ready in different ports and dispatched for the Mediterranean from the port of New York. Three sail proceeded (May, 1805), under convoy of Captain Shaw, who had then the command of the frigate John Adams, with 300 seamen on board, in addition to her crew, for the Mediterranean squadron, but in consequence of the peace with the Barbary powers, the frigate returned in December, to Washington, where her crew were discharged, and she was placed in dock. In the same month, Capt. Shaw was ordered to New Orleans to equip a division of gun-boats then building on the western waters.

On the arrival of General Wilkinson from Nacogdoches, in the winter of 1806-7, Captain Shaw was first apprised of the traitorous designs of Colonel Burr, and at a time when his force in the Mississippi River was very inadequate to meet an invading foe. Two bomb-ketches arriving about this period, added, however, much to his strength; and by great exertions, he was enabled to equip a fleet of eleven sail of gunboats and barges, mounting sixty-one guns, and manned with 148 seamen and troops of the line doing duty as marines. The whole of this squadron arrived off Natchez, early in February, 1807, and were moored in close order, to oppose any force that should descend the river with hostile views to New Orleans. Colonel Burr having fled, and his adherents being dispersed, Captain Shaw returned to New Orleans, where he received orders to repair to Washington. Thither he went, and on his arrival, was summoned to Richmond, as a witness on the trial of Col. Burr. In December, 1807, he was ordered to Norfolk, as a member of the court-martial in the case of Commodore Barron. In the same year, he was promoted to the rank of Post Captain.

After the dissolution of the court-martial, he was invested with the command of the navy yard at that place, and held it until August, 1810, when he received orders to repair to New Orleans. He arrived at Natchez in November, and found there Governor Claiborne, prepared to wrest from the Spanish patriots the post of Baton Rouge. An immediate movement of a body of troops in its vicinity, in conjunction with a division of gun-boats which had been lying at anchor off Natchez for many months, and which covered the landing of the troops, secured the capture of the fort and garrison.

In 1811, Captain Shaw, anticipating the rupture with England, made a particular examination of the eastern passes leading to the city of New Orleans. In July, 1812, the declaration of war reached him, and incited him to renewed exertions for the increase and better organization of the small force under his command. In 1813, his attention was directed to the construction of a large block-ship, laid down by order of the government on a secluded stream.
leading into lake Ponchartrain, and distant from New Orleans about 15 leagues. The main deck of this ship was calculated to mount 26 long 32 pounders, and her draft of water with all her armament and stores on board, would not have exceeded eight feet.

In the year last mentioned, Capt. Shaw co-operated with General Wilkinson in taking possession of Fort Charlotte, Mobile, and all the country west of Perdido river. He transported to Mobile point, in his division of gunboats, all the cannon and munitions of war captured on the occasion. Various other arrangements and measures for the security of that region, devolved on him. He was indefatigable in devising plans and collecting materials for the purpose. He caused to be well mounted on mahogany, forty of the heaviest pieces of the cannon at the Navy Yard of New Orleans, which were afterwards distributed along the lines of General Jackson's defense, and found to be signally useful. It was in consequence of his representations that the Secretary of the Navy determined to have six schooners built and sent to New Orleans, for the suppression of pirates and smugglers about the island.

Leaving, besides a fine train of artillery, a full magazine of powder, and plenty of cannon and grape shot, he returned to Washington by land, and remained there until the 15th June, 1814, in order to settle some accounts. (Ed. note, Daniel Todd Patterson took over Commodore Shaw's duties at the New Orleans station in November 1813.) Thence Shaw proceeded to New London and assumed the command of the frigate United States, which, with the frigate Macedonian and sloop Hornet, continued to be closely blockaded by the enemy until the termination of the war. When released, she was ordered to Boston, to be fitted out for the Mediterranean. In 1815, Capt. Shaw joined, in her, the American squadron at Malaga. The peace signed with Algiers caused a return of a part of the squadron to the United States. The forces remaining, as well as the instructions of the government, were then transferred to Capt. Shaw by his predecessor Commodore Bainbridge. In this charge he was earnestly employed, and he was relieved, in 1816, by Commodore Chauncey; but the frigate United States remained on the station, under his command, as late as November, 1817. He soon afterwards obtained permission to visit his family in Philadelphia, from which he had been absent, on duty, upwards of four years. Unhappily his constitution was so much impaired as to require for several months the unremitting care of an eminent physician, and to compel him to spent 14 months in travelling for the recovery of health.

In November, 1819, he took the command of the Boston Station, and retained it until he was suspended from duty, for six months, in April 1822. This suspension was caused by an unfortunate controversy with Capt. Hull, the commandant of the Navy Yard at Charlestown (Ms), who preferred against him, before a Court Martial, various charges of contemptuous and hostile treatment. The Court adjudged that he was guilty of "unofficer-like conduct" but not guilty of "ungentlemanly-like conduct." In fact, the conduct pronounced to be "unofficer-like" consisted only in measures which he deemed as self-defence, and necessary for the honor of the navy and the interests of the national treasury. The record of his trial detracts nothing from his character; and his appointment to the command of the Naval station at Charleston, S.C., soon after the expiration of the sentence of suspension, proves that he suffered not at all in the estimation of the government. But his career was about to be closed, by the hand of death. In the beginning of the
summer of 1823, he had again to seek medical aid in Pennsylvania, and appeared to be recovering under skillful treatment, when he was seized with Dysentery, which terminated his existence in little more than a week on the 17th September. He was fifty years of age at the time of his decease. He left a widow and two children, the eldest of whom is married to Lieut. F.H. Gregory of the U.S. Navy.

The funeral of Commodore Shaw took place at Philadelphia, from the house of his particular friend Robert Kid, Esq., in which he had been nursed for several weeks with the utmost kindness and attention. The colours of the shipping in the harbour were lowered half-mast on the occasion, and his remains were interred with martial honors. The Corporation of the Militia, and a large body of citizens, attended city, a number of officers of the Navy, Army & c. to testify their respect for his memory. The pallbearers were captains Nicholson, Brown, Dallas, Read, Deacon and Gen. Cadwaladar.

The foregoing simple detail of the most prominent incidents of the life of Commodore Shaw, is sufficient to produce a just impression of his services and value as a naval commander, to his adopted country. He was fearless, alert, and distinguished for seamanship and professional sagacity. His letters, written from New Orleans before the last war, prove that he foresaw the dangers to which that great mart would be exposed, and indicated the means by which it could be rendered secure. Generosity, candor, probity, were leading traits in his disposition his demeanor was always frank and manly. He acquired the esteem and affection of all who knew him well. His family and intimate friends loved him ardently, and deeply deplore his loss.