Edmund Roberts of New Hampshire

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America's First Diplomat to Asia

By

Toby Finnegan

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To Brendan, taken from us before his time, his dear wife Kari,
and their beloved offspring Maeve and Rhys.

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CHAPTER 1

A RESTLESS SPIRIT

In 1784, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, one year after the end of the American War of Independence, was home to about 4300 inhabitants.[1] Nestled on the south shore of the swift-flowing Piscataqua River, the town and its environs, then known as the Port of Piscataqua, had grown steadily throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a locus of embarkation for New England timber used to build masts for the British Royal Navy.[2] As the decades passed, Piscataqua craftsmen ripened into the finest shipwrights.[3] Their vessels, manned by rugged seamen, sailed to Europe and the Caribbean, carrying lumber and cod to the West Indies, returning with rum, sugar, and molasses.[4]

When news of the provisional Treaty of Paris ending the Revolutionary War arrived in March 1783, the inhabitants of Portsmouth took to the streets to celebrate. Having endured years of deprivation, they looked forward to a revival of prosperity.[5] But to their great sorrow, the Port of Piscataqua sank into depression, leaving them enfeebled commerce, deadened shipbuilding, and worthless currency. Idle seamen and shipwrights, dockworkers, and clerks milled about. Destitute merchants lingered at home.[6] "Never before have I seen a town of this size in which there was greater sadness and loneliness," observed the Latin American revolutionary Francisco Miranda during a visit to Portsmouth in October 1784.[7]

During such doldrums, Edmund Roberts, Jr. was born in Portsmouth on June 29, 1784, the son of Captain Edmund Roberts, Sr., and Sarah (Sally) Griffith.[8] Here along the Piscataqua Roberts would spend most of his life. Endowed with high intelligence, restless curiosity, and determination, Roberts would overcome a failed business career, marked by blunders, indebtedness, and tragedy, and acquire knowledge and experience of foreign commerce and cultures that would win him the honor of serving as the first accredited diplomat of the United States to Asia and Arabia.

Edmund Roberts, though, was no exemplar of early American statecraft. He would not embark on his diplomatic career until five years before his death. He would spend most of his life in the brutish American shipping industry, where partnerships often turned to rivalries ending up in

courtrooms; where traders endured cheating or confiscation at foreign ports; where captains and seamen took to drink to ease the cruelties, tensions, and dangers of maritime life; where vessels were launched with great fanfare only to be lost at sea, their crews hopelessly mourned by grieving families; where insolvent merchants facing debtors prison, if they had not taken their own lives, helplessly stood by when the sheriff arrived to attach their household and evict their families.

Roberts would suffer many indignities during his shipping career, mostly brought on himself. Many of his actions would be marked by deception, a Christian self-righteous indignation, and a bias against some non-Western people that can only be judged as racist. Early in his career, he would undertake actions that, had they become known, would have brought disgrace, and ruined any chance to be appointed a diplomat representing the United States. In later years, he would neglect his wife, leaving her at home to suffer from ill health, poverty, and the fierce New Hampshire winters.

Yet Roberts brought abundant qualifications for his pioneering diplomatic mission. His knowledge of world trade and naval and nautical seamanship, excellent composition, and superb handwriting placed him squarely in the realm of envoys qualified to negotiate treaties with foreign governments. During his two missions, he would master his subject matter and display great courage, enduring hardships, dangers, and obstacles most Americans would never have tolerated. In so doing, he carried out one of the most pathbreaking diplomatic enterprises in American history.

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Edmund Roberts was very proud of his English heritage. His posthumously published memoir is dotted with praise for the Britons he encountered—naval officers, diplomats, royal governors, savants—during his diplomatic mission.[9] In late 1835, welcomed and feted by the British royal governor of Ceylon [Sri Lanka], he would exclaim to his eight daughters, "This John Bull," referring to a national symbol of Great Britain, "as I have always said, is a *noble animal*."[10] With great pleasure, he welcomed news from his daughter Sarah who, learning to play the piano after her impecunious childhood, was thrilled to report she could play "'*God Save the King'* with all the chords."[11]

Roberts inherited a restless spirit from his English ancestors, a desire to move beyond home and hearth, to regions offering greater opportunity. His earliest American forebear, Robert Roberts, arrived at Massachusetts Bay in 1635. Settling at Ipswich, twenty-five miles north of Boston, Robert Roberts married, raised at least seven children, and upon his death in 1663 left an estate of a house and barn, farm equipment, and cattle.[12] His son John Roberts, born about 1646, served in King Philip's War of 1675-76, moved

to Gloucester, married, and sired a large family before he died in 1714.[13] Thomas Roberts, the fourth son of John Roberts, born in August 1687, migrated north to Newbury, where the Merrimack River empties into the Atlantic.[14] In 1716, his wife gave birth to Samuel Roberts, grandfather to Edmund Roberts, his earliest known ancestor.[15]

In 1741, Samuel Roberts joined a wave of migrants northward to "Sumersworth," of the "Township of Dover," in the Royal Province of New-Hampshire.[16] He purchased three acres from Nathaniel Perkins, along the Newichawannock, or Salmon Falls River, fourteen miles from Portsmouth. Settled in the late seventeenth century, the Roberts holding lay in the eastern part of the Dover colony that would become Somersworth in 1754 and Rollinsford in 1849.[17]

Nathaniel Perkins had a daughter, Abigail.[18] Around 1741, she and Samuel Roberts married. During the ensuing decade, Abigail would bear three children who survived to adulthood: Edmund Roberts, Sr., the father of Edmund Roberts, Jr., born September 1, probably in 1743; Sarah Roberts Pray, born April 4, 1747; and Josiah Roberts, born October 12, 1751.[19] Sometime after 1751, Abigail Roberts died.[20] Samuel later remarried, taking as his second wife Sarah Lord, with whom he would reside until he died in 1794.[21]

These were prosperous years in the Royal Province of New-Hampshire. Incomes were rising, farmers produced surpluses, shipbuilding augmented local wealth, and merchants at Portsmouth grew rich from the overseas trade.[22] Flourishing as a farmer and a joiner, Samuel Roberts added several acres to his estate. When late in life he divested himself of his property, he left twenty-six acres, including plows and yokes, farming utensils, oxen, heifers and hogs, joiner tools, feather beds, and household furniture.[23]

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Edmund Roberts, Sr., the eldest son of Samuel and Abigail Roberts, and father of Edmund Roberts, Jr., had no intention of spending his life on a farm. Not for him the rugged, endless, backbreaking toil, the loneliness and isolation of rural New Hampshire. Like his restless forebears, Edmund Roberts, Sr., would detach himself from his place of birth; unlike them, however, he would seek his fortune abroad, where no ancestor had ventured since Robert Roberts sailed from England in 1635.

In 1756, the French and Indian War [Seven Years War] broke out, ushering in a generation of political, social, and economic turmoil at Portsmouth. Although liable to service in the New Hampshire provincial militia, Roberts was never called up.[24] The war brought wealth to profiteers, but after peace arrived the Port of Piscataqua endured depressions in 1764 and 1767. By this time, Roberts's shipping career was taking off. In August

1769, when he was about twenty-six, Roberts captained the brig *Laurel* to Barnstable, on Cape Cod.[25] The following February, he was master of the same vessel in his first sail to the West Indies.[26] Subsequently, he sailed the *Laurel* across the Atlantic to Gallipoli, in today's Turkey. By September 1771, the *Laurel* had arrived at Gibraltar.[27]

The voyage of the *Laurel* took place as tensions were growing between Great Britain and her American colonies. There is no information Roberts agitated against the Stamp Act of 1765 or the Townshend Acts of 1767, which established a "board of customs commissioners," including at Portsmouth, hated for its corrupt and ruthless enforcement of British customs laws.[28] In March 1770, four weeks after the *Laurel* sailed for the West Indies, the Boston Massacre took place, provoking a call at Portsmouth for a boycott of British goods. Fortunately, by the time Roberts returned home, tensions had eased, and trade resumed.[29] In 1772, he established his residence in Portsmouth.[30]

From 1773 until early 1775, as the crisis worsened between Britain and America, little is known of Edmund Roberts, Sr. There is no evidence he engaged in smuggling, then rampant along the New England coast.[31] A family legend that he was a captain in the British Navy must be dismissed out of hand.[32] His only known association with British royal authority was a fourteen-day stint between April 1772 and April 1773, after he had returned from Europe, as a private soldier under John Cochran, commander of Fort William and Mary, guarding Portsmouth Harbor.[33]

In January 1775 Captain Roberts was back at sea, master of the ship *Lucretia*, carrying fish and spermaceti candles to Antigua. Cleared by British customs, the *Lucretia* sailed as tensions between Britain and America reached the breaking point.[34] Three weeks before, New Hampshire rebel leaders John Langdon, Thomas Pickering, and John Sullivan, Jr., led assaults on Fort William and Mary, detaining John Cochran, and seizing powder and arms destined for the British military.[35] It was a good time for Captain Roberts to leave the country.

Roberts sailed the *Lucretia* to Antigua, then to England, arriving at Plymouth on October 20, 1775.[36] As open warfare erupted at home, Roberts was in London, engaging in transactions with Lane Son and Fraser, a firm with extensive ties to New Hampshire merchants.[37] On April 11, 1776, Roberts and three associates signed a promissory note to Lane Son and Fraser to remit a letter of credit of "Six hundred Pounds Sterling," a transaction which probably took place at the New England Coffee House, a gathering place for New Hampshire captains and businessmen, as well as loyalists just arrived from America.[38] Whether Roberts had any association

with American émigrés is unknown; probably he kept silent on the crisis at home.

Roberts secured passage on the schooner *Sally*, fitted out at Gravesend on the River Thames, for the return voyage to America.[39] On April 14, the *Sally* sailed for Barbados, arriving in late May.[40] From there Roberts made his way to Portsmouth, avoiding capture by the Royal Navy. Never again would he set foot on British territory; whether he made good on his obligation to Lane Son and Fraser is highly unlikely.

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By late 1776, Edmund Roberts, Sr. had returned to Portsmouth. He must have been astonished at the dramatic changes in his native port. The Piscataqua was an armed militia camp, privateers had replaced commercial vessels, and inflation and food shortages were taking their toll. More unsettling, it was dangerous to be seen as pro-British.[41] Whatever his previous links to British-owned firms, Captain Roberts now deemed it wise to join the patriot cause. In May 1777, he signed a petition demanding prompt and punitive action "against those abandon'd wretches well known by the names of Tories," persons with whom he certainly had had considerable interaction while in London. In signing, Roberts gave public assurance he was among "sundry Inhabitants of the Town of Portsmouth who are Zealous in the Grand Cause now in Contest with Great Britain."[42]

Three weeks later, Roberts joined a group sponsoring privateers at the nearby town of Exeter.[43] Such activity brought him into contact with John Langdon, New Hampshire's leading statesman, beginning a tie between the Roberts and Langdon families that would last well into the nineteenth century. Born in June 1741, Langdon by the 1770s was the principal leader of the revolution in New Hampshire. In June 1776 he was appointed Agent of Prizes for New Hampshire, giving him authority to issue letters of marque to Piscataqua shippers in their economic warfare against British shipping and oversee the disposition of prizes. Such control would make John Langdon a very wealthy man.[44]

In May 1777, Roberts signed as bonder for two privateers, the *Wilkes* and *Non Pareil,* giving him a financial interest should they make captures. Both vessels were Frenchmen-owned, beginning for Roberts a tie with France that would last until his death. Mendes Fils Cadet [Mendes Second Son], owner and master of the *Non Pareil*, a brig of ten guns and crew of eighty, was of West Indian Jewish ancestry. Flecher de Berruyer du Vanrouy, owner and master of the *Wilkes*, a sloop of ten guns and crew of sixty, named for John Wilkes, a British radical admired by American revolutionaries, was a French Army veteran from St. Domingue who, after many adventures, had made his way to the Port of Piscataqua.[45]

The *Wilkes* and *Non Pareil* never returned to Portsmouth. Where they cruised is a mystery, though the Caribbean was the likely venue, given the West Indian origins of both captains.[46] Privateering was a mammoth undertaking during the American Revolution, drawing over 3000 men from New Hampshire, but few privateers secured prizes and most were either captured, lost at sea, or returned home with nothing to show for their efforts.[47]

Roberts resumed employment as a merchant sea captain. In early April 1778, he was master of a coasting vessel, delivering green tea to the Boston firm of Bowdoin & Read. No doubt he clung to the coast, as sailing to the West Indies or Europe would have risked capture by a British warship.[48] Roberts earned little during these hard years; by 1779, Piscataqua shipping had declined to 800 tons from a prewar high of 12,000, unemployed roamed the streets, food was scarce, and merchants were destitute.[49]

By March 1779, Captain Roberts had married. His bride, Sarah (Sally) Griffith of Portsmouth, born in 1758, was the daughter of Sarah Bowles and David Griffith, a Portsmouth goldsmith and auctioneer [vendue] whose shop before the revolution was located at the "Goldsmith's Arms" on Queen [today's State] Street.[50] An honest, frugal Yankee, David Griffith once advertised he had come into possession of two "*Silver SPOONS, supposed to be stole, and intends the right OWNER shall have them again paying charges*."[51]

Neither the date nor venue of the marriage of Edmund Roberts, Sr. to Sally Griffith is known.[52] Surely Captain Roberts, fourteen years older, was smitten by Sally, said by family tradition "to have been one of the most beautiful women of her time."[53] No doubt Sally had found a match in Roberts, an aggressive, intelligent mariner with good prospects. Having grown up in Portsmouth, however, Sally knew the risks of marrying a sea captain. Alas, her husband would be away during most of their marriage.[54]

On July 8, 1779, Roberts was commissioned as first lieutenant on board the frigate *Hampden*, a twenty-two-gun converted privateer that had just returned from a raid off France and the Azores.[55] Roberts owed his commission to John Langdon, an owner of the *Hampden* and now Speaker of the New Hampshire House of Representatives, who had taken the measure of the newly married captain and determined him competent and loyal for such a command.[56]

Roberts's commission came about after the Massachusetts Bay authorities learned of a British fort at Bagaduce Harbor [Castine, Maine] on Penobscot Bay, the purpose of which was to create a permanent settlement for loyalists. Assembling a hodgepodge of privateers to reduce the nascent colony, Massachusetts assigned overall command to Dudley Saltonstall, with Paul

Revere serving as commander of the landing forces. John Langdon, strongly supporting the attack, arranged for the *Hampden*, captained by Titus Salter, to join the fleet as it sailed for the Penobscot. From July 25 to August 13, the joint Massachusetts/New Hampshire force, laboring under abysmal leadership, engaged the British in feckless attacks. On August 14, a British fleet from New York annihilated the American force. Attempting to escape, the *Hampden* was attacked and fired on by three British frigates. Forced to strike her colors, Captain Salter and all hands were taken prisoner. Two weeks later the crew was exchanged and conveyed to Portsmouth on a British warship.[57]

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Back at Portsmouth, Edmund Roberts, Sr. faced a dilemma; either return to his employment as a merchant sea captain, with its prospect of little reward, or resume privateering, with its risk of failure, capture, or death at sea. Such a decision was painful, but Roberts would take his chances in commerce raiding. Unlike most New Hampshire compatriots, however, he profited. Five months after his return from the Penobscot, Roberts was asking John Rogers, a Boston merchant and relative by marriage, to give him credit for prize money from a recent privateer mission. He asked for a shipment of coffee and quotations on West India rum, molasses, and sugar. With Christmas coming, he promised to send Rogers "a good Turkey as we have some a fatning" and asked that Rogers's daughter Nancy supply two hundred dollars of "small flowers" for Sally. "Please to let Nancy have the Money and Charge it to me," Roberts wrote.[58] Two months later, Roberts asked Rogers to find a market for "two Exceeding good" hogsheads of molasses and to invest the proceeds in coffee.[59] Such commodities could only have come from captured British merchant vessels.

But by late 1780 Roberts had run into hard times. In November, he advised Rogers that he had "met with so much repeated bad Luck that I am going…Privateering once more in the Ship *Alexander* Capt. Simpson."[60] Leaving his wife and newborn daughter at home, Roberts reported for duty. Again he would be fortunate; the *Alexander* would become one of the most successful New Hampshire commerce raiders of the War of Independence.[61] His rank on the *Alexander* is unknown; given his service as first lieutenant aboard the *Hampton*, however, he was certainly among the privateer's officers, entitling him to a higher percentage of prize money should the vessel make captures.[62]

The first cruise of the *Alexander*, beginning at Boston in January 1781, was unsuccessful. During her second mission, however, while returning from the French port of L'Orient, the *Alexander* captured three prizes, all of which were conveyed into Portsmouth, their cargoes condemned, and the

proceeds divided among the grateful crew. In May 1782, the *Alexander* sailed once again for L'Orient, capturing another prize, and in November returned to Boston, where she was put up for sale.[63] By this time, the Revolutionary War was almost over.

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In March 1783, news of the Provisional Treaty of Paris ending the War of Independence reached Portsmouth, provoking a day of thanksgiving.[64] In July the Port of Piscataqua was reopened for business.[65] Captain Roberts and the inhabitants of Portsmouth looked forward to a revival of commerce, but they would be greatly disappointed. A British order in council banned Yankee shippers from the British West Indies, depriving them of a critical market.[66] Then a series of crises, built up over eight years of war, appeared; Portsmouth was flooded with bankruptcies, inflation, worthless currency, and a ruined credit and banking system, aggravated by the ineffectual US Confederation Congress, which lacked the power to regulate commerce. Even the Piscataqua's vaunted shipbuilding lay prostrate.[67] The people of New Hampshire, according to John H. Flannagan, "found themselves trapped in the throes of total depression."[68]

How was Captain Roberts able to support his family during such hard times? The prize money from his service aboard the *Alexander* helped tide them through the early months of the post-war economic crisis. For a while Roberts appears to have been well off, having hard money—a rarity in New Hampshire—but times were getting worse.[69] In February 1783, he was back in touch with John Rogers, asking what prices flour, pork, tea, sugar, and rum, would fetch, but warning he did "not know how [he could] sell them by the Quantity to any Advantage."[70] In April, he complained Rogers had sent him a shipment of rye that he did not want, "for I can't make my own money." He added, "I could wish You would not send me any Thing Else without I send for it, as times are so precarious."[71]

In June 1783 Roberts purchased Marshalls Sail Loft, a combined residence and retail dwelling near Liberty Bridge [today's Prescott Park]. Here his family would reside for the next half-decade.[72] On June 29, 1784, probably at the sail loft, Sally Roberts gave birth to her son, Edmund Roberts, Jr.[73] Though certainly overjoyed, the father could do little celebrating. Like all Portsmouth mariners, he had to earn a living. With the British West Indies cut off, trade with France offered an alternative. Having spent time at L'Orient, sponsored French privateer captains, and arranged the sale of French West Indian sugar, Roberts was familiar with the French market.[74] Then in August 1784, the *New Hampshire Gazette* announced the French royal government had opened L'Orient and the southern port of Bayonne to foreign traders.[75] Seizing the opportunity, Roberts immediately sailed for

France as master of the ship *Lydia*. While there, he arranged with the American firm of Barton, Johnston and Barry of Bordeaux to convey 9218.4 livres [$115,666 today] of French goods back to America, signing an invoice on a joint account.[76] Arriving at Boston, Roberts signed over to Daniel Bigelow, a business associate of John Rogers, 124 cases and three barrels of French merchandise on Roberts's "Account & Risque."[77]

Roberts had made a grave mistake. When he returned home, he and his associates discovered little demand for French products. To their intense frustration, they found that Americans preferred to buy from their ex-enemy the British, whose commodities were being dumped on the US market.[78] "Our goods are so little known here," complained Jean Marie Toscan, the French consul at Portsmouth, "and the prejudice in favor of English goods is so strong, that our manufacturers alone cannot overcome it."[79]

By the autumn of 1785, the Piscataqua trade "had reached the vanishing point."[80] Captain Roberts was desperate. Daniel Bigelow had absconded, leaving him to deal with creditors. Roberts wrote Rogers demanding that Bigelow account for himself, but Bigelow never responded. In June Roberts wrote Rogers: "Please to Inform me if You Hear any thing of Bigelow."[81] In September, he wrote again: "You told me some time ago that You would see Bigelow, but never have wrote me Whether you did or no, Beg You will see him if Possible, & know what he means to do concerning my Interest and beg of him to write me, as the least favor he can grant me after he has ruined me, am Sure can never forgive such a Villian in this World."[82] Roberts never heard from Bigelow again.

While Captain Roberts struggled with his business affairs, his wife Sally relished the benefits of his voyage to France. Sporting "elegant brocade dresses" and "paste hairpins and buckles of silver," she drew much attention from the impoverished congregation at the Portsmouth North Church.[83] An inventory of the Roberts household taken in May 1788 revealed a comfortable existence: kitchen and rooms stocked with mahogany tables, chests of drawers, leather-bottom chairs, China tea sets and crockery, pewter dishes, silver, cotton sheets, and muskets; an "East Chamber" obviously meant for the young Edmund Roberts, Jr., with a dressing table, diaper table cloths, cotton sheets, and towels, a bureau and mahogany chest of drawers; and a shop offering for sale varieties of cloth, women's gloves, sewing implements, fans, and French glass.[84]

An excellent sea captain, Roberts had overextended himself as a businessman. In his precarious state, he decided to return to France. A month later, as master of the brig *Sophia*, Roberts sailed to L'Orient.[85] There, he engaged in transactions with E. J. Solomon & Co., another American firm to which he would become indebted.[86] Barton, Johnston and

Barry, learning Roberts was present, confronted him demanding he meet his obligations. Roberts convinced them of his "firm intentions" to repay his debt and sailed back to Portsmouth.[87] After only four months at home, Roberts returned to L'Orient.[88] This time, Barton, Johnston and Barry, suspecting Roberts could not redeem his debts, arranged for the *Sophia* to be detained, but Roberts managed anyway to sail home. They would never hear from him again.[89]

The return of the *Sophia* to Portsmouth in June 1787 concluded the final voyage of Captain Edmund Roberts, Sr.[90] When he arrived home, a week before his son's third birthday, he had only four months to live. Perhaps sensing his end, and to leave a tangible estate for Sally, he purchased property in Portsmouth and arranged the transfer to himself of his father Samuel's holdings in Rollinsford.[91] His death came on November 15, 1787. The cause is unknown; perhaps it was hastened by worries over his inability to redeem his obligations.[92] His funeral took place two days later at the North Church; no doubt his son and daughter, clinging to their widowed mother, followed the bier to the Portsmouth North Burying Ground [today's North Cemetery] and saw him laid to rest.[93] Edmund Roberts, Jr. would be left with little, if any, memory of his father.[94]

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Captain Roberts could not have died at a more unpropitious time. The economic crisis in Portsmouth, not to mention the entire United States, had worsened, the most severe until the Great Depression of the 1930s.[95] In December 1786, when Roberts was at L'Orient, children were begging and stealing along the Portsmouth streets and wharves.[96] Alarming news arrived of Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts and an armed demonstration at Exeter of aggrieved New Hampshire citizens demanding paper money.[97] In 1787, French Consul Jean Marie Toscan reported that American captains were obliged to bring "silver money" from overseas, "in order to be able to pay the wages of the crews." He added, "It has been impossible for me to negotiate in Portsmouth the drafts for my salary, and I am obliged to make trips to Boston where money is just as scarce."[98] By June 1788, vessels were "rotting" along the Piscataqua docks, "seamen starving," and "tradesmen" unemployed.[99] In October, the future French revolutionary J. P. Brissot de Warville, visiting Portsmouth, was shocked; "There is little appearance of activity in this town. A thin population, many houses in ruins, women and children in rags; every thing announces decline."[100]

What was widow Sally Roberts to do in such circumstances? In those days opportunities for women were limited. Under common law, Sally was entitled to manage the estate of her late husband, who had died intestate.[101] In January 1788, appointed administratrix, she began placing advertisements in

the local newspaper requesting that obligations to her husband be met.[102] Such matters would take years to resolve. Unfortunately, they were complicated by the debts Captain Roberts had left from his French business dealings.[103]

In mid-1790, John Langdon received a letter from Barton, Johnston and Barry, laying out their claim against Captain Roberts, enclosing a copy of the invoice he had signed in 1784, and asking Langdon's assistance in securing access to the Roberts estate, which they understood included property "in and about Portsmouth."[104] No doubt sympathetic to Sally, the widow of one of his former captains, Langdon arranged an investigation. When the inquiry revealed that the estate of Edmund Roberts, Sr., would fall well short in meeting the demands of his creditors, Langdon informed the firm that they had "But little to expect from his Estate." The agents for Barton, Johnston and Barry were forced eventually to accept only half of what was due them.[105]

Sally, meanwhile, was on her own. Since securing employment was almost impossible, her only alternative was to find another husband, very difficult in Portsmouth, where women outnumbered men.[106] For two years Sally struggled. Fortunately, she and her children remained at the sail loft, but they felt the sting of poverty.[107] For much of this time, Sally was obliged to employ childcare for Edmund, Jr.[108] The earliest memories of Edmund Roberts, Jr., were of these hard times, witnessing the humiliations faced by his mother, as she labored to support her children; they left a scar on the young boy, compelling him to keep his emotions under control and avoid all discussion of tragedy or loss.[109]

Then on March 31, 1789, the *New Hampshire Spy* announced the death of "Mrs. Eunice Woodward, the amiable consort of Capt. Moses Woodward."[110] Moses Woodward, seventeen years older than Sally Roberts, was a leading figure in Portsmouth.[111] A baker before the Revolution, Woodward was an early adherent to the patriot cause.[112] During 1781-83, he served as New Hampshire commissary of prisoners, arranging the repatriation of British prisoners of war to Halifax.[113] Such thankless duty earned him an appointment after the war as a captain of the New Hampshire Militia. In April 1787, according to the *New Hampshire Spy*, Woodward and his comrades "made a very brilliant and martial appearance" during military exercises at Portsmouth, and in 1788 "provided a federal salute" at the Fourth of July celebrations.[114]

Sally Roberts was known to Moses Woodward, a former associate of her brother-in-law Josiah Roberts.[115] No correspondence between Moses and Sally has survived, but their courtship, if it ever was such, was short and businesslike.[116] Both having families to support, they were drawn to

each other out of necessity. On September 2, 1789, five months after Eunice Woodward's funeral, Moses Woodward and Sally Roberts were married at the North Church.[117]

Their marriage would fail; Sally would spend her final years living away from her second husband.[118] As a former commissary of prisoners, and later a member of the Portsmouth police force, Woodward was a hard man.[119] When he assumed responsibility for the estate of Edmund Roberts, Sr., as required by law, he adopted a menacing tone in advertisements, threatening lawsuits to "all who neglect" to pay their outstanding debts and even had one defendant, Samuel Ham, jailed for failure to make good on his obligation.[120] In 1793, he publicly threatened "disagreeable…consequence" to anyone harboring James Reed, a fifteen-year-old apprentice who had fled the Woodward household.[121]

Whatever misgivings they held, Sally Roberts and her two children joined the Woodward household. Already a large family, the census of 1790 indicated that seven males and six females resided there.[122] At least two of Woodward's children, Ann, born 1771 and John Warren, born 1775, were of an age to benefit from a stepmother.[123] A third, Moses Woodward, Jr., would soon begin a career as a sea captain.[124]

After years of suffering, things were looking up for the inhabitants of Portsmouth. In October 1787, the new Federal Constitution was celebrated with great fanfare.[125] Ratified by a convention at Exeter in June of the following year, the Federal Government was established in New York in 1789 with George Washington as President.[126] New Hampshire and her sister States could look forward to political stability and improved economic conditions. In late October/early November 1789, two months after Sally Roberts and Moses Woodward were married, President Washington visited Portsmouth. In his remarks to dignitaries, Washington said, "I sincerely condole with you for the loss which you have sustained in navigation and commerce; but I trust that industry and economy, those fruitful and never failing sources of private and public opulence, will, under our present system of government, restore you to your former flourishing state."[127] No doubt the five-year-old Edmund Roberts, Jr., standing by his mother, watched as Captain Moses Woodward led a New Hampshire artillery company on the Parade [today's Market Square] firing salutes to the Father of the Country.[128]

Sally Griffith Roberts Woodward and the inhabitants of Portsmouth had reason to feel hopeful, that prosperity, not seen in their port for a generation, would return. Political stability would play a role. But an even greater stimulus was about to appear, from across the sea from France, where Sally's late husband Captain Edmund Roberts, Sr., had conducted business.

Soon Portsmouth would be caught up in the spillover from the greatest political and social upheaval in modern history.

CHAPTER 2

THE APPRENTICE

On September 22, 1789, three weeks after the marriage of Sally Roberts to Moses Woodward, sensational news appeared in the *New Hampshire Spy*. Citing accounts from Boston, the paper, under the heading "Revolution in France," reported how "armed citizens" of Paris had seized the Bastille.[1] When President Washington arrived five weeks later, the French Revolution was in full swing, with vivid accounts appearing in the newspapers.[2] Portsmouth inhabitants could only applaud the heroic attempt of the French to fashion a government founded on the ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity."[3]

The people of Portsmouth held favorable memories of French King Louis XVI, whose fleets and armies provided crucial assistance to the American struggle for independence. From August to December 1782, the Piscataqua hosted warships, with more than 2000 sailors and marines, from the French fleet. New Hampshire dignitaries held a ball for its ranking officers, celebrating the birthday of the French dauphin with "ringing of bells" and "firing of guns."[4] The French were gratified by a thirteen-gun salute from Fort Constitution (the former William and Mary) and a warm welcome from the people of Portsmouth. "I have not seen," recorded a French officer, "people more friendly, even inhabitants of the countryside, down to little children who came before us to greet us."[5]

As time passed, however, the inhabitants of Portsmouth became alarmed by the mounting violence of the French Revolution. By late 1792, when Edmund Roberts, Jr. was eight years old, news began to arrive of horrific acts by the Paris mobs, including the September massacres, the storming of the Tuileries palace, and the imprisonment and trial of the King. Soon names permanently etched in the memory of the Revolution—Robespierre, Marat, Brissot (who had visited Portsmouth), and others—began to dominate the news.[6] In late March and early April 1793, the *New Hampshire Gazette*, under the headings "King of France BEHEADED!," and "Horrid, Bloody News!," reported the shocking execution of "our late worthy ally Louis XVI."[7] Two weeks later, the *Gazette* reported even more ominous news: the Revolutionary French Republic had declared war on

Great Britain and Holland.[8] Discerning Americans could only fear their country would become involved. Little could they know the wars of the French Revolution would last a generation.

In early May 1793, news arrived of President Washington's Neutrality Proclamation.[9] The wisdom of the president's decree soon became clear. The Piscataqua carrying trade and shipbuilding enterprises, aided by the currency stabilization and improved investment climate brought about by Washington's Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, would enter an unprecedented boom period as the belligerent powers of Europe, their merchant marines swept from the seas by the British Royal Navy, would be forced to rely on America for succor.[10] Soon the Port of Piscataqua was enjoying a rising tide, her vessels sailing the high seas, especially to the West Indies, bringing home great profits.[11] Writing half a century later, the Portsmouth newspaper editor Charles Brewster described Portsmouth during these years:

> "At the present day [1859] we do not see the busy wharves, the fleets of West Indiamen, the great piles of bags of coffee, and the acres of hogsheads of molasses which we used to see; nor do we see Water street [today's Marcy Street] crowded with sailors, and the piles of lumber and cases of fish going on board the West Indiamen for uses in the Tropics…This trade was a great advantage to the laboring classes, also to coopers, and fishermen. Our wharves from the North End to the Pier, and even to the Point of Graves, were lined with vessels, and our community busy and happy."[12]

The transformation from a depression-ridden to a flourishing port was astonishing.

To be sure, such good fortune came at a price. In late 1793, the British, alarmed by the desertion of Royal Navy sailors to the American merchant fleet and America's role in replacing French commercial shipping with the West Indies, began seizing American ships and impressing their seamen into the British Navy, five from Portsmouth alone in 1796. Jay's Treaty of 1794, which compelled the British to compensate American traders for their losses, reduced tensions between the United States and Great Britain but alienated the French Revolutionary government. Piscataqua shippers were not to be deterred; profits outweighed risks, and everyone prospered.[13]

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The news from Europe doubtless meant little to young Edmund Roberts, Jr., growing up in the Moses Woodward household. Almost nothing is known of his childhood. Judging from his intellectual curiosity, facile writing, and high-quality handwriting, he received a first-rate primary education, probably at the Brick School House on Buck Street [today's State Street],

whose master, the "severe disciplinarian" Deacon Amos Tappan, taught there from about 1790 to 1801. Here Roberts learned his superb handwriting from Tappan, who is reported to have "written in a beautiful hand." No doubt Roberts, who often spiced his correspondence with quotes from English literature, took part in theatrical productions, featuring the work of Shakespeare and other playwrights.[14]

Growing up in Portsmouth, Roberts became intimately familiar with the busy port. Doubtless, he followed with interest the career of his stepbrother, Moses Woodward, Jr., who began his captaincy of vessels about 1793, as master of the schooner *Industry*.[15] It is unlikely Roberts took part in any voyages, given his youth and the restrictions imposed by his mother Sally. His locus of activity instead would be the Port of Piscataqua, with its countinghouses, towering three-masted vessels, exotic products from distant lands, drunken and unruly seamen milling about, and babel of languages spoken around town.[16]

Sometime after 1795, when he was eleven, Roberts began to work as an apprentice to Martin Parry, a former associate of his father and one of Portsmouth's leading shipowners, whose countinghouse at Portsmouth Pier, a gigantic emporium abutting the Piscataqua, featured wares from all over the world. While working at the Pier, unfortunately, the young clerk almost met a violent end when a foolish co-worker poked his fingers into his armpit, catapulting Roberts from an upper loft through an open trapdoor into a room below; thankfully, someone on the lower floor, grabbing Roberts by his coat-skirt, was able to deflect his fall, saving him from serious or fatal injury.[17]

The earliest account we have of Roberts took place during May-June 1797 when he and his sister Sarah spent four weeks on Shapleigh's [Shapley's] Island, downriver on the Piscataqua, as part of the quarantine program against smallpox, run by Dr. Hall Jackson, a pioneer advocate of vaccination who had ministered to their father during his final illness. According to Roberts's nephew J. Henry Bowles, his mother Sarah recalled this early American summer camp as "the happiest period of her life," her brother Edmund no doubt sharing the sentiments. According to Bowles, "The flower of the youth and beauty of Portsmouth were congregated there, and as nothing more unpleasant was experienced than the ordinary results from vaccination, a majority of them were perfectly well, and remembered the affair as little else than a holiday festival of the gayest description." Young Edmund thoroughly enjoyed frolicking with the young females and was not above engaging in youthful pranks, such as when he left a bowl of molasses underneath a roof eave, upon which a cat alighted, leaving the unhappy feline licking its fur for several days.[18]

While Edmund and Sarah were enjoying their stay at Shapley's, news from Europe took a turn for the worse. The previous year, the French Revolutionary Directory, angered by Jay's Treaty, had severed diplomatic relations with the United States and declared economic warfare, launching attacks against Yankee shipping, especially in the West Indies. French privateers and warships were seizing American vessels, confiscating their cargoes, and leaving their crews stranded or even murdered. When John Adams became president in March 1797, he dispatched a mission to France to end the crisis. However, French Minister of Foreign Affairs Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord insulted the American delegation by demanding enormous bribes before negotiations began. Conveying the messages from Talleyrand were three intermediaries referred to in diplomatic documents as "X, Y, and Z." When in March 1798 President Adams received the dispatches from Paris, he shared them with Congress; soon they were publicized, provoking a huge outcry. In response, Congress annulled the treaties with France, established the Navy Department, and appropriated funds to build warships. The resulting Quasi-War would include significant American naval victories against French warships and privateers.[19]

The publication of the XYZ correspondence by an "Extraordinary" edition of the *New Hampshire Gazette* had an electrifying effect at Portsmouth.[20] Nine days later the town fathers issued a "Patriotic Address" to President Adams pledging to defend "Dear-Brought, Sacred and Inalienable Rights."[21] On July 7, the "Young Men of Portsmouth, N. H." followed with a manifesto to Adams expressing outrage at the events coming from the "imperious unprincipled European Power," and pledging to defend the nation to "the last drop and particle of our own." The president honored the manifesto with a grateful reply.[22]

Edmund Roberts was surely one of the "Young Men" who signed the manifesto to President Adams. Only thirteen when the crisis began, he was eager to play a role in the ensuing hostilities.[23] On July 7, the day the manifesto appeared, a bulletin was published in the *Oracle of the Day* announcing that a recruiting officer from the frigate *Constitution* had arrived at Portsmouth hoping "to obtain a number of valuable recruits" for service "on board of one of the finest Ships."[24] Rather than enlist, Roberts applied for a midshipman's warrant. His stepfather Moses Woodward, whose permission was necessary, was able to help, having been promoted to lieutenant colonel and commandant of the New Hampshire First Regiment of Militia. Probably through Woodward, Roberts secured the support of John McClintock, a well-connected Portsmouth shipper who had served with Edmund Roberts, Sr., on the *Alexander* during the Revolutionary

War. Following established procedures, McClintock sent a letter of recommendation to the Navy Department in Philadelphia. Once approved, Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert and President Adams would have signed the warrant.[25]

Unfortunately for Roberts, when his mother Sally found out, she raised strong objections, begging Edmund that he "promise with a solemn oath that he would never leave her as long as she lived."[26] The emotion behind Sally's plea is understandable; she had spent the previous decade in the shadow of her second husband Moses Woodward; no doubt this event helped cement their estrangement. By this time, the only things that mattered to Sally were the well-being of her two children, Sarah and Edmund, and her younger sister Polly. Having experienced the long absences of her first husband on dangerous cruises during the Revolutionary War and the dreadful years after his death, Sally opposed her only son taking on a naval career during wartime, before he had even reached maturity. There is no question Edmund was qualified to be a successful naval officer, possessing high intelligence, good education, articulate expression, and impressive knowledge of maritime operations. But at his age, he had no choice but to obey his mother.[27]

Subsequent events would bear out Sally's fears. During the XYZ crisis, New England was enduring an unprecedented heat wave, with areas reporting temperatures over one hundred degrees, leaving crops wilting.[28] Then on July 22, the merchant ship *Mentor*, John Flagg master, arrived at Portsmouth from the French West Indian Island of Martinique, via St. Kitts, under US Navy escort.[29] In addition to her cargo of "sugar, molasses and coffee," the *Mentor* brought yellow fever in her hold. The ship's owner Thomas Sheafe, making no effort to quarantine his vessel, arranged for her to be unloaded at the Piscataqua docks. Soon the contagion spread, taking the lives of three of Sheafe's children.[30] Making matters worse, the Portsmouth selectmen, including Moses Woodward, chose to play down the epidemic, hoping it would not spread. Despite unmistakable contrary evidence, they promoted an optimistic outlook. On August 14, three weeks after the arrival of the *Mentor*, the *New Hampshire Gazette*, praising, "the happy state of health enjoyed by the inhabitants of this town," announced that "the Selectmen have not thought it necessary to make any statement on the subject. The town never was healthier in August, than it now is."[31]

Such confidence was tragically misplaced. The remainder of summer would witness hundreds at Portsmouth taken sick under horrible circumstances, fifty-five of whom died. According to Charles Brewster,

> "None or few were seen in the street where the fever raged. Nothing was heard there but the groans of the sick and the awful shrieks of the dying. If