

The Somer's Mutiny - Part II

Lead: In the fall of 1842, the sailing brig USS *Somers* with 121 officers and crew began its training voyage to the west coast of Africa. Within a week of sailing the seeds of mutiny were planted.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Midshipman Philip Spencer was the son of one of the finest families of New York. His father was Secretary of War under President John Tyler. Despite his genteel upbringing, Philip was a constant

source of annoyance. Bounced out of more than one college, through his father's political influence he had received a midshipman's warrant in the Navy. There he quickly established a reputation for insubordination and troublemaking. He twice struck a superior officer before being shipped out on USS *John Adams* bound for Brazil. During a month at Rio de Janeiro, Spencer spent most of his time in brothels and taverns often coming back to the ship completely drunk. Commodore Morris of the Brazil Squadron probably feared that if he properly punished the boy he would get himself in political trouble, so he had Spencer shipped back to New York.

The Navy re-assigned Spencer to the USS *Somers*, part of Commodore Matthew Perry's new experimental officer training program. The ship was getting ready to set sail for the coast of West Africa with 74 apprentices. Spencer's reputation caused Captain Mackenzie of the *Somers* to reject him but under pressure from Perry Mackenzie had to take on the nineteen year old midshipman. It was a fatal mistake.

The *Somers* left New York on September 13, 1842. The trip out was seemingly quiet but behind the scenes Spencer was at work. He neglected his duties, stayed away from his fellow midshipmen and fraternized with the apprentices, getting them cigars and

tobacco and occasionally suppling brandy to his favorites. He also was observed having extended conversations with the senior petty officer, Samuel Cromwell and Elisha Small, the sailor in charge of the main topsail crew. Both were good seamen but had served on slave ships and had bad reputations.

On the return leg of the journey, a week out of St. Thomas, Spencer approached James Wales, the purser's steward, and tried to recruit him for a mutiny. Next time: Mutiny and the Captain's dilemma.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Barrows, Edward M. *The Great Commodore*. New York, NY: Bobbs-Morrill, Company, 1935.

Morison, Samuel Eliot. *Old Bruin: Commodore Matthew C. Perry, 1794-1858*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1975.

Copyright by Dan Roberts Enterprises, Inc.