

EXPLORING THE CITY

BY JIM MURPHY

Who is John Barry?

One of my warm-weather delights is to pick up a bagel and coffee about 8 a.m., sit on a bench at the south side of Independence Hall and read the morning papers.

As a side benefit, I hope to absorb a bit of the genius and creativity our Founding Fathers displayed here during our country's earliest and darkest days.

While sipping my coffee one fall day, I suddenly noticed a large bronze statue of a military man with just the word Barry on the front of it.

I don't know how I had missed this impressive statue before. I also wondered why a military man was honored here in a place known for political decisions? What was his contribution?

Little did I know that Commodore John Barry played an extraordinary role in our country's history. Without his heroism and leadership, we might well be swearing allegiance today to the Queen of England.

Yet, as local author Tim McGrath says in his interesting 2010 book, *John Barry: An American Hero in the Age of Sail*, Barry is less well known today than some of his contemporaries, like John Paul Jones — possibly because he was not a braggart. His nickname among naval historians? "Silent John."

Some remarkable accomplishments:

- Won both the first and last successful battles the Continental Navy fought with the British (plus many in between).
- Served on the ground with his sailors at the Battle of Princeton in January 1777, when the British threatened Philadelphia and the Commodore's next ship was still under construction.
- Captured two British transports and the schooner *Alert* in the Delaware River in March 1778, with just a small band of men and seven barges. The move infuriated the British, who had recently taken Philadelphia.
- Helped physically drag and carry two unwilling members of the Pennsylvania State Assembly from their lodgings to the nearby State House to ensure that a quorum was present — so Pennsylvania could ratify the U.S. Constitution. Physically imposing at 6 feet 4 inches tall, Barry was well-suited for this unique mission.

- Travelled 237 miles in a 24-hour period while piloting the *Black Prince*, the fastest known day of sailing in the 18th century.
- Was the first flag officer of the United States and is often considered the Father of the American Navy.

His statue, which dominates the middle of Independence Square, portrays Barry in uniform, defiant and aggressive.

In one arm he carries a naval spyglass, a sheathed sword by his side. With his right hand, he points strongly, possibly directing his men to fire another broadside ... or gesturing south towards the Delaware River and Bay, where so many of his important victories took place (and where a bridge in his honor was opened in 1974. The Commodore Barry Bridge spans the Delaware River from Chester, Pennsylvania to Bridgeport, New Jersey.)

How do others view Barry?

James Fenimore Cooper, the popular 19th-century American writer and a navy veteran himself, wrote "Perhaps of all the [Revolutionary period] naval Captains ... he was the one who possessed the greatest reputation for experience, conduct, and skill."

President John F. Kennedy was so awed by his skills that he kept Barry's sword in his office as a source of inspiration.

My advice: Walk over to Independence Square, look at the statue of John Barry, and think about the things this man did to help ensure our nation's success. He is a genuine American hero.

Cameras galore: While today's visitors to Independence Square may not know exactly who Commodore Barry was, the innate power of his statue still attracts hordes of photographers every day.

One friend, who lives at nearby Hopkinson House, says he can't recall ever walking through Independence Square without seeing someone taking photos of the Barry statue. "It's amazing," he says.

While John Barry may not be as popular as the Rocky statue near the Art Museum — almost 230 years after he helped defeat the British, he's still noticed. Perhaps that's another major victory for him after all.



This American hero is often photographed... and often overlooked.

FAST FACTS

Location:
Independence Square, 5th and Walnut Street

Dedication Date:
March 16, 1907

Donated by:
Friendly Sons of Saint Patrick, of which Barry was a member

Cost: \$10,300

Sculptor:
Samuel Murray

Dimensions:
Base: 12' square
Pedestal: 11' high
Statue: 9'6" high