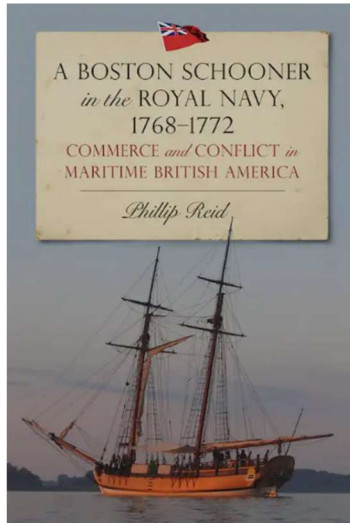




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## ***A Boston Schooner in the Royal Navy, 1768- 1772: Commerce and Conflict in Maritime British America***

**Phillip Reid**

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**Review by Stanley Carpenter, first published online 16 October 2023.**

Phillip Reid, an independent scholar specializing in maritime history has put his academic accomplishments to good use in *A Boston Schooner in the Royal Navy, 1768-1772: Commerce and Conflict in Maritime British America*. A graduate of the highly regarded program in maritime history and nautical archaeology at East Carolina University (MA, 1998), he focuses on Atlantic World history, maritime history, and nautical technology, especially British Atlantic merchant ships of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Accordingly, he is well-suited to produce a history of His Majesty's Schooner *Sultana*. Originally built as a trading vessel, she was commissioned into the Royal Navy (RN), reconfigured, and served on the North American customs and anti-smuggling patrol from 1768 to 1772 under the command of Philadelphia native Lieutenant John Inglis (retired as rear-admiral) and Master David Bruce.

Reid argues that considerable overlap existed in nautical technology and personnel between the merchant world and the military. Accordingly, that allowed the RN to purchase small merchant ships and convert them to anti-smuggling and customs patrol craft. Smuggling was rife in the 18th century in New England, especially Rhode Island and Narragansett Bay

where hundreds of protected inlets provided ready sanctuary. While larger warships such as frigates had difficulty navigating the inlets and bays, smaller vessels such as sloops and schooners proved ideal for customs enforcement. Such was the case of the Boston-built schooner *Sultana*. The ship's history provides a wealth of archival data on the nature of period civilian merchantmen and commissioned warships. *Sultana* is an excellent laboratory for analysis of the vessels that plied the British Atlantic and North American coastal trade just prior to the War of American Independence. *Sultana* thus "presents a rare opportunity to explore the intersection of naval and maritime history – of commerce and the conflict it generated – in the eighteenth-century British Atlantic" (xii). But the study of HMS *Sultana* provides a broader picture – that of the relationship of the North American trade, commercial, and shipping industry to the wider British mercantile economy. It highlights the technological aspects of period nautical science. And it provides an insight into how the use of such vessels illustrates the political and strategic aspects of British North American governance and trade relationships on the eve of the American War of Independence. Those features, besides the highly technical and engineering details, are the real value of this work.



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The passage of several acts in the 1760s designed to raise revenue from the American colonial trade such as the American Revenue Act required increased enforcement of customs laws and tamping down smuggling. Accordingly, British officials were authorized to purchase civilian merchant ships for conversion to what might be called “revenue cutters” today. *Sultana*, built in Boston in 1766 by Benjamin Hallowell, Boston’s most prominent ship builder, was typical of those purchases. Sailing to England, she was fitted out as a warship at Deptford in 1768 that included mounting swivel guns. The commissioning of such small, formerly commercial vessels as revenue patrol craft reflected the difficult conditions following the Seven Years’ War (1763) where the RN experienced dramatic downsizing in personnel and warship hulls, all complicated by decreasing budgets (naval estimates). *Sultana* was a “work around” as a method of providing coastal patrol forces while minimizing the impact on global and imperial warship requirements. It was, as Reid highlights: “an expedient that sprang from a post-war combination of new and unprecedented demands on the central government and the treasury, a maturing of the mostly autonomous British American maritime commerce economy, and the political instability of George III’s early reign” (142). He notes that *Sultana* was not a traditional naval vessel. As a conversion from merchantman to warship, she was “of necessity, improvisational technology serving improvisational policy” (143). In short, the Crown use of such non-traditional vessels represented a shortage of regular warships needed to enforce the new revenue and commercial regulatory policies.

The balance of the book highlights the ship’s journeys to and from America and service in the Chesapeake and Narragansett Bays and Delaware River before decommissioning in 1772. The work expresses Reid’s true love – maritime and nautical technology. Therein lies a potential trap for any author should they delve too deeply into the ins and outs of a highly technical subject. Fortunately, he has made the technology and details of period ship construction and sailing easily understandable to the general reader. He provides an excellent glossary. The one criticism is that the work would benefit from drawings and diagrams to illustrate the technological aspects visually. Modern readers are

increasingly visually oriented; good diagrams and figures would enhance the readers’ understanding of the Age of Sail’s complex technology.

Of equal value is the analysis of period RN dynamics. He addresses in depth: the technology and methodology of sailing small vessels on open ocean and inland waterways; navigation in the pre-Industrial Age; eighteenth-century naval discipline; procedures for revenue, customs, and anti-smuggling operations; and life in the RN, including desertion, impressment, discipline, personnel relations, and rank hierarchy.

Despite her limitations in size, speed, and weaponry, overall, *Sultana* succeeded in her mission. Yet, that factor proved ironic. Mission success only further aggravated colonial resentment of the new revenue and commercial policies. That anger sometimes led to outright open defiance as illustrated by the *Gaspee* Affair in June 1772 in Narragansett Bay. Another example was the sugar trade from the West Indies. Reid highlights that 75 per cent of the cargo intercepted was sugar products, a fact that no doubt agitated the New England rum distilling concerns!

As an historical scholarly work, the book is very solid. The primary sources are excellent ranging from the Admiralty Papers in the British National Archives to the commander’s notes and the master’s logbook. Lieutenant Inglis and Master Bruce kept copious notes, all of which give authority and authenticity to Reid’s analysis of the technical and day to day activities of the doughty little warship conducting a hazardous and unpopular mission. It is most highly recommended for naval historians, those looking at the dynamics and context of the American Revolutionary period, and the general reader fascinated by the Age of Sail.

**Stanley D.M. Carpenter** (Ph.D. British Military History) served as the Strategy and Policy Division Head for the College of Distance Education at the United States Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, and was a Professor of Strategy and Policy. Professor Carpenter retired from the US Navy in June 2009 with the rank of Captain after thirty years’ service. He authored *Southern Gambit: Cornwallis and the British March to Yorktown* (U Oklahoma Press, 2019) and was co-author of *The War of American Independence, 1763-1783: Falling Dominoes* (Routledge, 2023).