

The British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

September 1775 to March 1783



Hostilities between Great Britain and some of her North American colonies began on April 19, 1775. In response, Great Britain issued a “seize and detain” order against rebel American shipping in September 1775, and then passed the Prohibitory Act, which banned all commerce with the rebel colonies and authorized the seizure of all American ships, effective March 1, 1776. Warships were sent to North America to enforce this undeclared commercial blockade, and four stages of the British blockade can be identified:

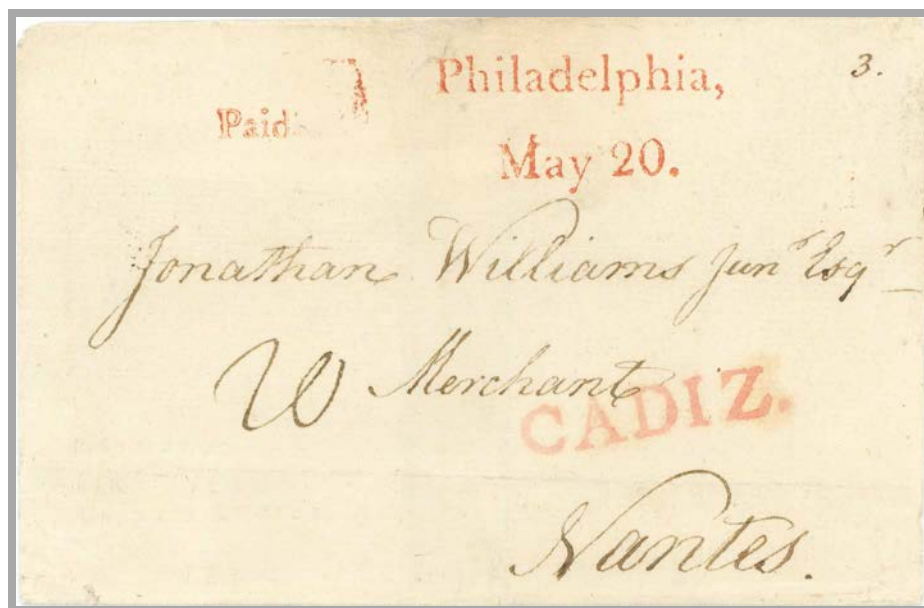
Partial Blockade: Under the “seize and detain” order, small British squadrons were sent to important American ports and enforced a partial blockade from September 1775 to March 1776.

First Phase of the Full Blockade: From March 1776 to June 1778, British naval forces in North America grew rapidly, but were mainly used to support army operations. Ships on blockade reached a peak of 32 warships.

Second Phase of the Full Blockade: The French entry into the war caused the British to withdraw ships from North America and virtually abandon the blockade from July 1778 to October 1781. Starting in September 1778, loyalist privateers were very effective in maintaining the blockade.

Third Phase of the Full Blockade: The end of British army actions and departure of the French fleet allowed the Royal Navy to re-assert a close blockade from November 1781 until peace was declared in March 1783.

Shown below is a letter which ran the British blockade during the third phase.



**Postmarked on May 20, 1782 in Philadelphia - marked “Paid” but amount not specified
Carried through Delaware Bay blockade in convoy escorted by Spanish warships to Cadiz
Postmarked in Cadiz, Spain and sent overland to France - rated for 20 sols due in Nantes**

British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

Partial Blockade - September 1775 to March 1776



The British Admiralty issued a “seize and detain” order on July 6, 1775. It was received in North America in mid-September, and was designed to prevent all commerce by the American rebels.



Dated at New York on January 6, 1776 - endorsed to the *Sampson* – left on January 10
Ran the blockade to Portsmouth, England on February 8 - 1d ship plus 3d inland postage due
The *Sampson* was captured under “seize and detain” order on February 19 at Portsmouth

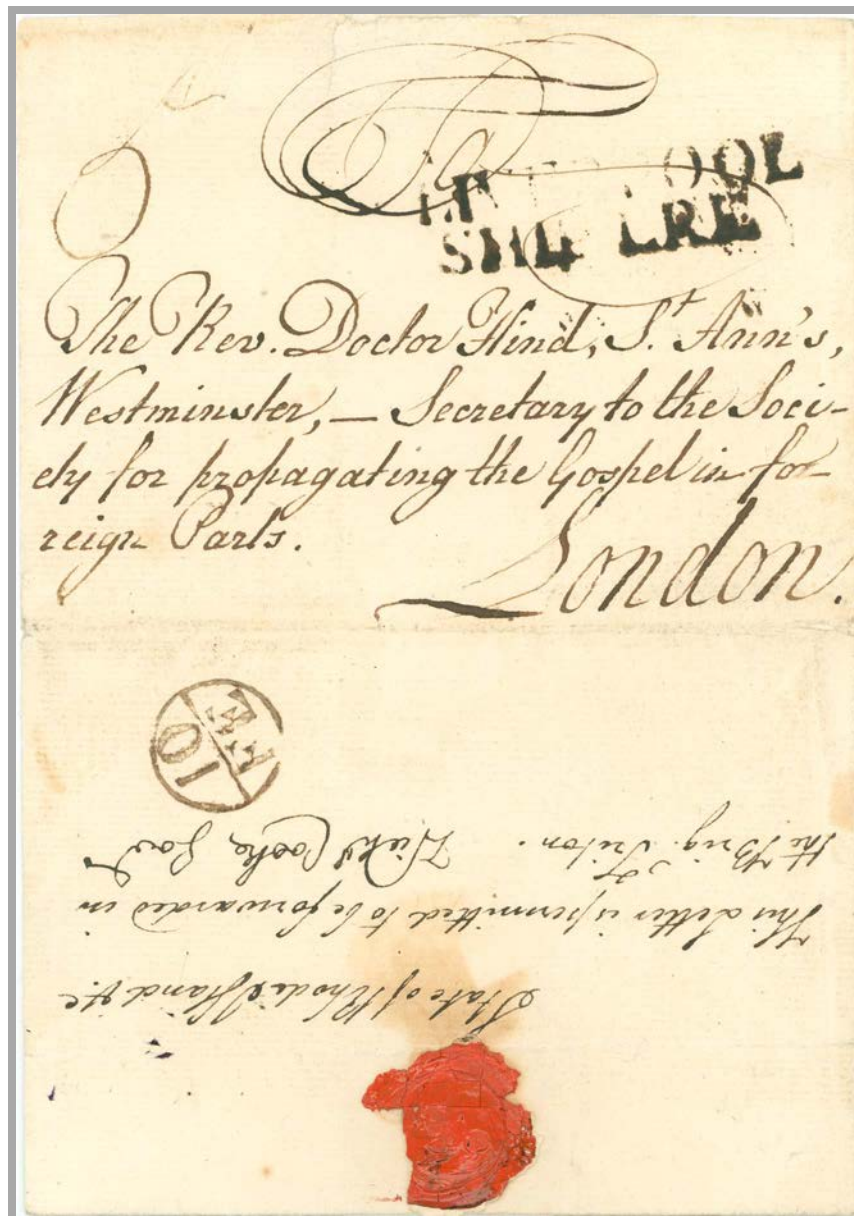


British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

1st Phase - March 1776 to June 1778



Parliament's December 22, 1775 "Prohibitory Act" began the first phase of the full British blockade on March 1, 1776. This phase ended when the French entered the war on the side of the Americans.



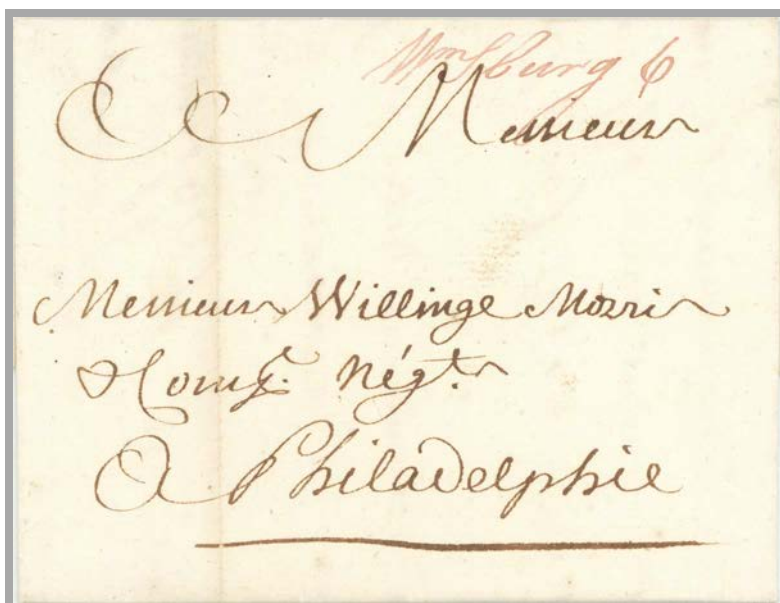
Dated September 19, 1776 from Providence, Rhode Island - **censored by the Governor Cartel Triton** left Newport on December 16 with 79 returning British POWs
Arrived in Cork on January 20 - mail carried to Liverpool on February 7 by the *William*
Postmarked in Liverpool and rated for 5d due - received in London on February 17

British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

1st Phase - March 1776 to June 1778



During the March 1776 to June 1778 first phase of the British blockade, the Royal Navy was mainly engaged in supporting army operations, and typically a quarter to a third of the force was on blockade duty.



Dated August 14, 1776 at Haiti - held over a year in Haiti
Blockade runner through Chesapeake Bay to Williamsburg, VA in early 1778
Rated for 6 dwt due (no ship fee) - October 1777 rate to Philadelphia



British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

1st Phase - March 1776 to June 1778



Postage due was expressed in a pennyweight (dwt) currency of exchange and had to be converted into local currency for collection. One dwt equaled 3d sterling, and local currency was inflated above sterling.



Dated November 15, 1776 in Nantes, France - blockade runner to New London
Postmarked and rated for 3 dwt 8 grains to Philadelphia (no ship fee assessed)
Re-rated in Philadelphia to 1/7 due ($10d * 1.667 = 1/5 + 2p$ carrier)



Philadelphia in 1776

British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

1st Phase - March 1776 to June 1778



"First Salute to the Flag at St. Eustatia" by Phillips Melville

Supplies and correspondence from Europe were often routed through the neutral West Indies island of St Eustatius, where they were transferred to smaller ships to run the British blockade of North America.



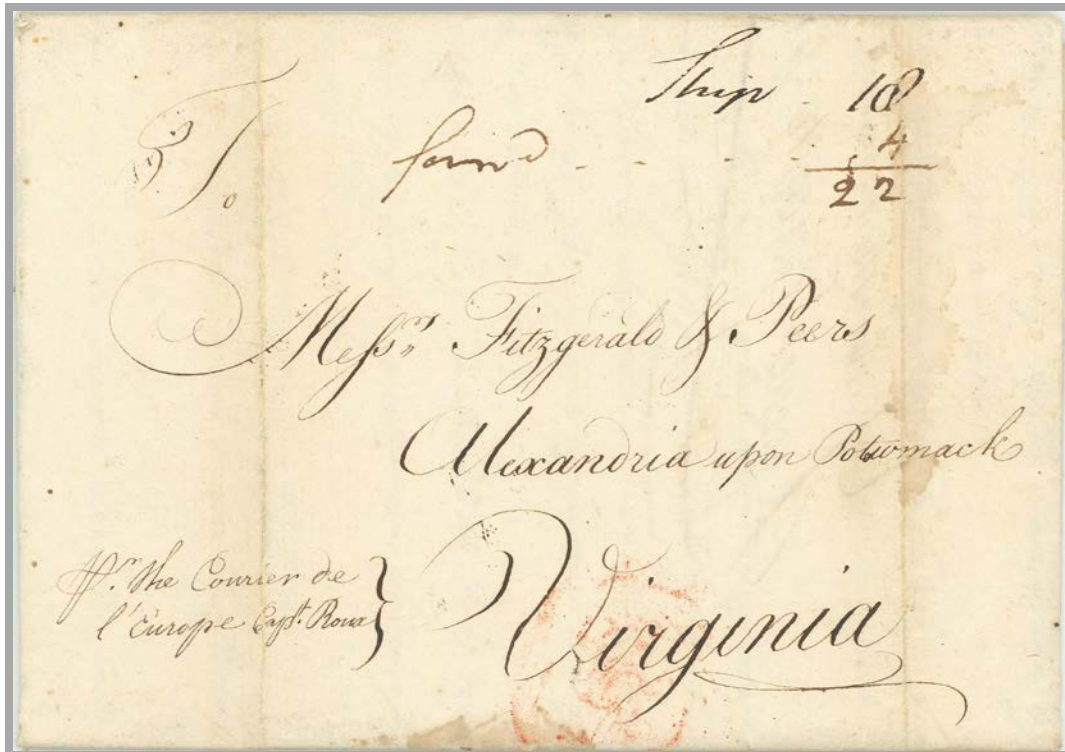
Dated December 20, 1776 - forwarded by Wm. Patterson from St Eustatius on December 22
Ran the Chesapeake Bay blockade into Baltimore - postmarked there on January 25, 1777
Rated for 2 dwt 16 grains to Philadelphia plus 16 grain ship fee - re-stated to 1/7 local postage

British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

2nd Phase - July 1778 to October 1781



The French navy's entry into the war forced the British to reduce their blockade force during the July 1778 to October 1781 second phase of the blockade.



Dated May 15, 1779 in Nantes, France - endorsed to the *Courier de l'Europe*
French armed dispatch boat ran blockade into Boston - rated 18 dwt due to Alexandria
April 1779 rates were three times the 1775 rates - 16 dwt plus 2 dwt ship fee
Forwarded locally for 4 dwt - received on August 28



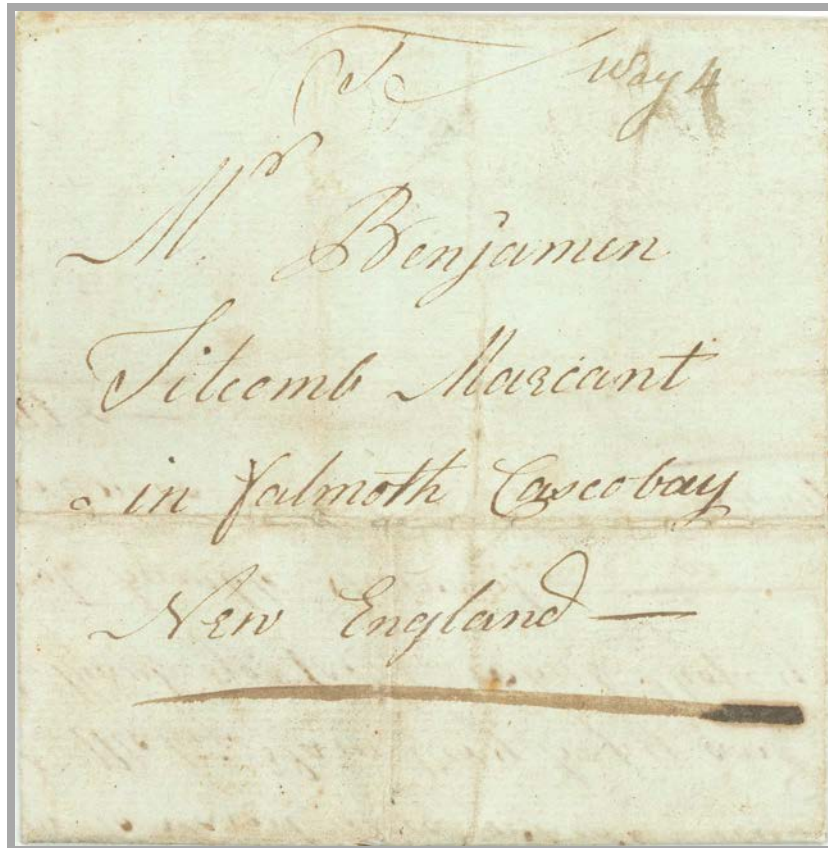
British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

2nd Phase - July 1778 to October 1781



“Combat de Martinique 1779” by Auguste de Rossel

Martinique was a French West Indies island used for the transshipment of supplies and mail to blockaded North America.



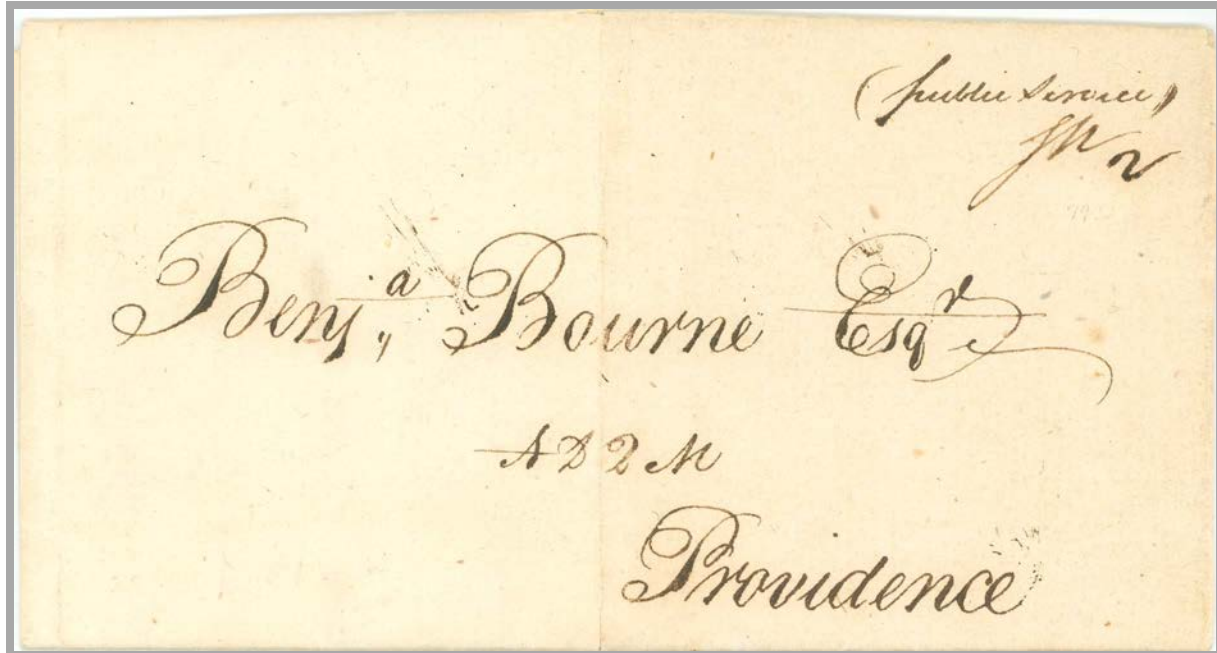
Dated July 19, 1778 in Martinique - carried by the brig *Favourite* to Boston on August 11
Left Martinique July 19 - given directly to post rider at Boston - “Way 4” dwt due to Falmouth

British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

2nd Phase - July 1778 to October 1781



Lower draft coastal vessels could evade the larger British warships on blockade duty. Even so, Boston was tightly guarded in June 1781 because the USS *Alliance* was there.



Dated June 25, 1781 in Boston - carried by coastal ship to Providence, Rhode Island
Endorsed "public service" and rated for 2 pence ship fee (local currency)
To the Quartermaster of the Rhode Island Regiment - about to leave for Yorktown



British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

2nd Phase - July 1778 to October 1781



The French navy and an army under Général Rochambeau occupied Newport, Rhode Island from July 10, 1780 to July 10, 1781. The British maintained a close blockade there.

A handwritten letter in French, written in a cursive script. The text is as follows:

A Monsieur
Monsieur le chevalier
Doyre Capitaine
des Corps Royal
de l'artillerie et du genie
à Newport en Rhode Island

Dated October 1, 1780 at Sedan, France - carried out of the mails by French warship
Addressed to military engineer at French-held Newport, Rhode Island

A handwritten letter in French, written in a cursive script. The text is as follows:

Monsieur
Monsieur Doyre
Capitaine en premier au Corps
Royal du Genie à l'armée
de Mons. de Rochambeau à
Newport Rhode Island en Amérique
Continentale
à Newport.

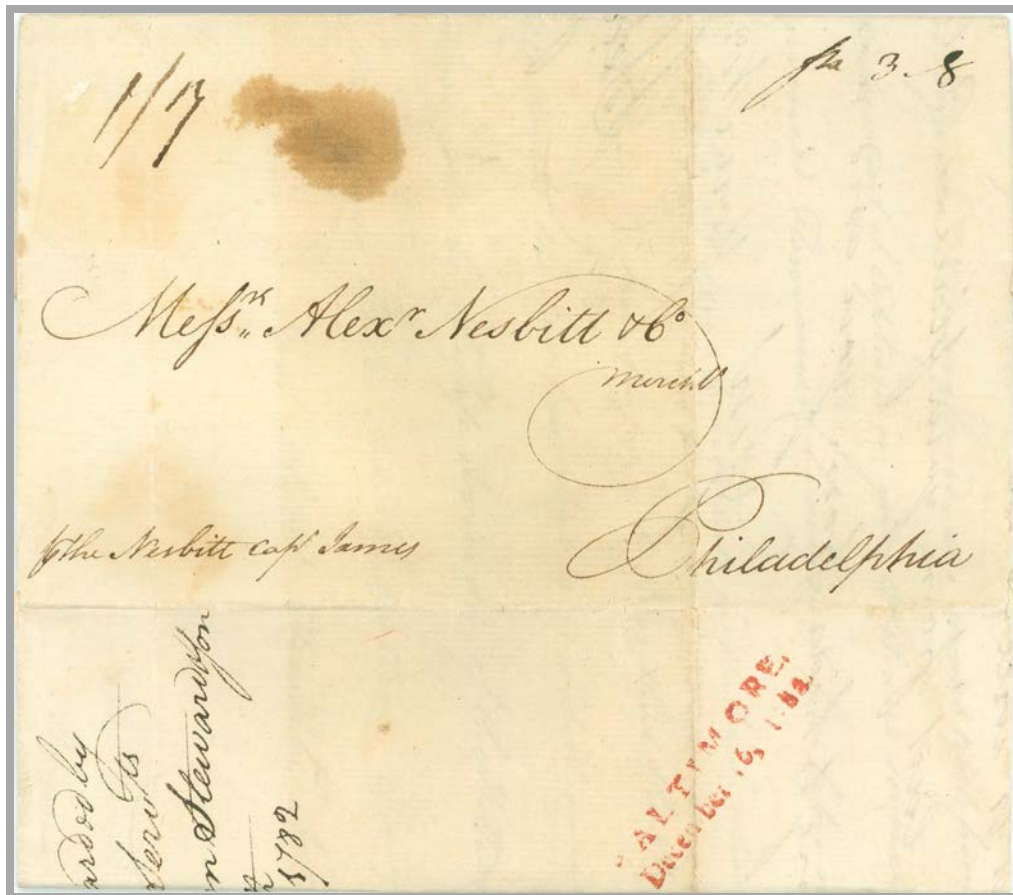
Dated February 25, 1781 at Bordeaux, France - addressed to Captain in Rochambeau's army
Carried by ship *Venus* in French squadron that sailed for Newport in March 1781

British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

3rd Phase - November 1781 to March 1783



The November 1781 withdrawal of the French fleet after the British defeat at Yorktown began the third phase of the British blockade. This phase ended with the lifting of the blockade in March 1783.



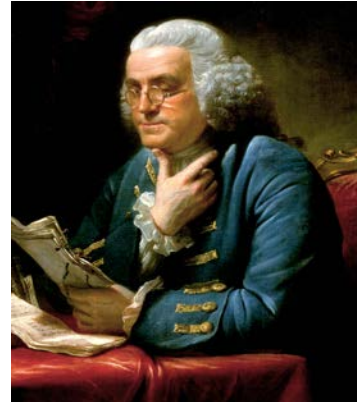
Dated November 25, 1782 in Havana, Cuba – endorsed to the brig *Nesbitt*
Delivered December 13 to Baltimore forwarder Stephen Stewart & Son
Red December 16 Baltimore straight-line postmark – latest use known
3.8 dwt due (2.16 to Philadelphia plus .16 ship fee) – 1/7 in local currency due

British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

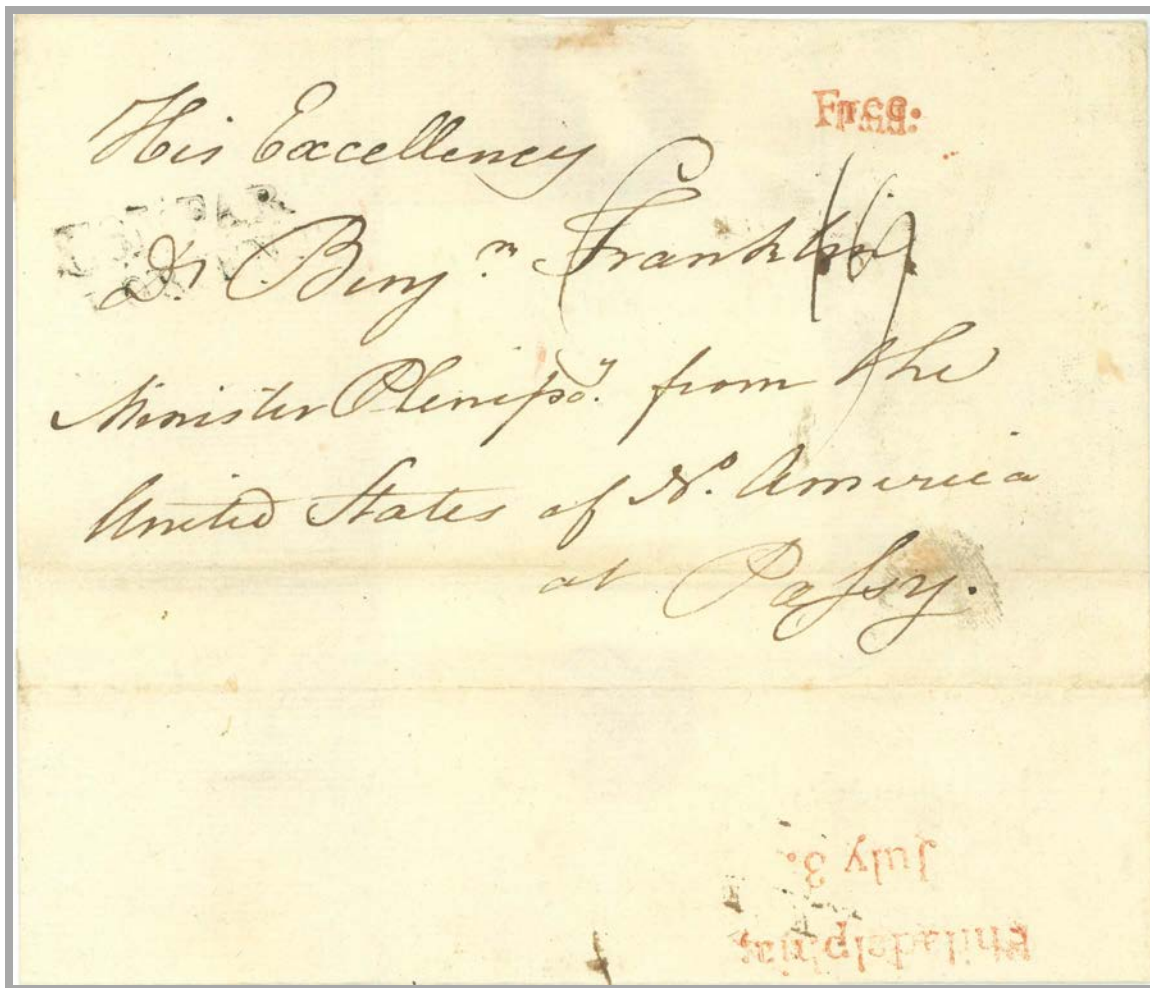
3rd Phase - November 1781 to March 1783



Founding Father Benjamin Franklin served as U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary (ambassador) to France from 1776 to 1785. He was lead negotiator for the April-November 1782 peace negotiations with England.



“Benjamin Franklin” by David Martin



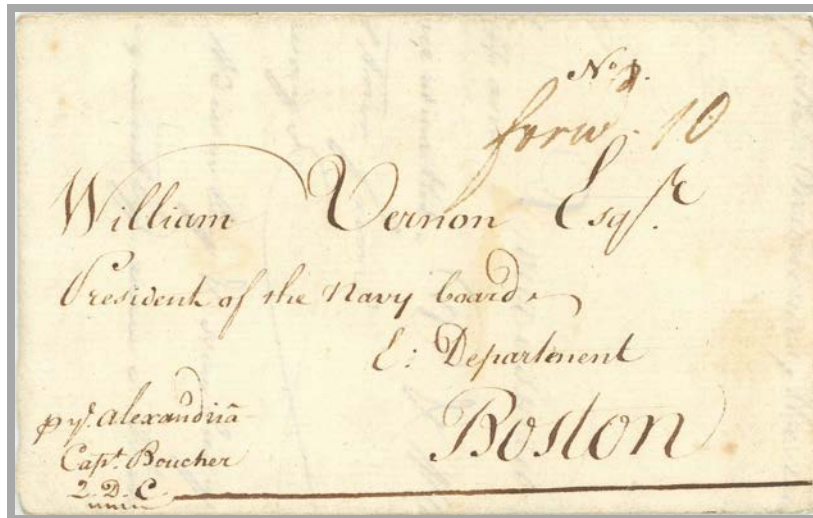
Postmarked July 3, 1782 in Philadelphia - rated “Free” for Richard Bache, former PMG
French 64-gun warship *L'Eveill * left in July and arrived in September at Brest, France
Postmarked “COL. PAR LORIENT” and rated 19 sols due (4 ship plus 15 inland)
Addressed to Benjamin Franklin at Passy (Paris)

British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

3rd Phase - November 1781 to March 1783



The British blockade tightened considerably during the third phase of the blockade. Freed from supporting army operations, the Royal Navy concentrated on the blockade.



Dated January 22, 1782 from Bordeaux, France - endorsed to *Alexandria*, Capt. Boucher
Ran blockade to New London, CT - 10d due (2 dwt 16 grains to Boston plus 16 grains ship fee)



Dated February 24, 1781 at Lyon, France - routed on *Ducondray* via Nantes
Letter held up West Indies for 18 months - ran blockade to Philadelphia in September 1782
Rated for 10d to Baltimore (2d ship plus 8d) – forwarded back to Philadelphia for additional 8d

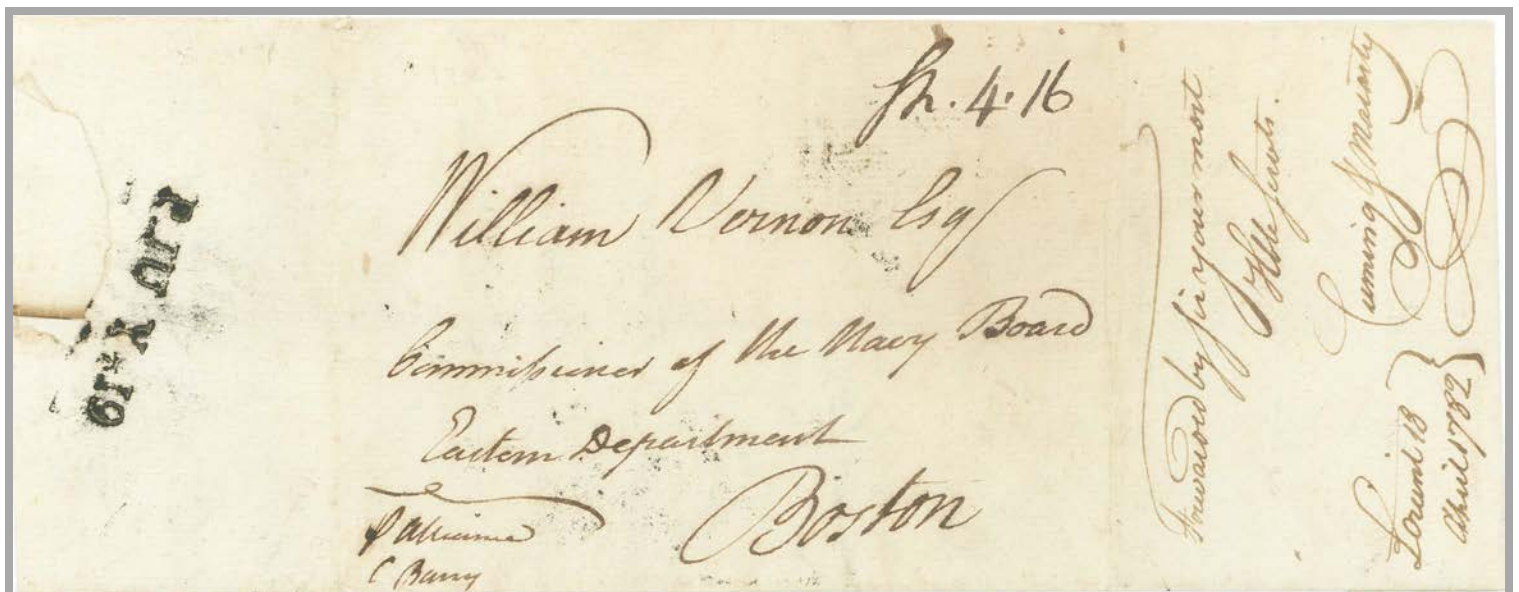
British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

3rd Phase - November 1781 to March 1783



USS Alliance in 1778

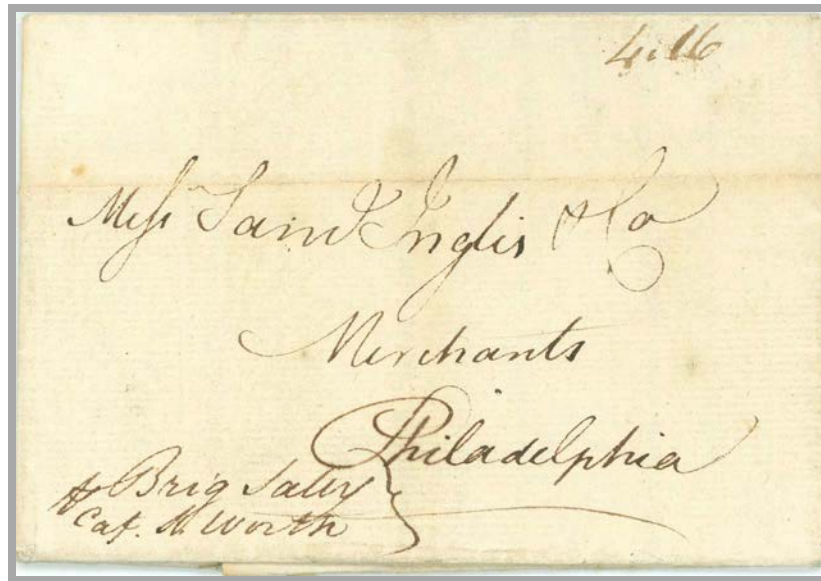
The U.S.S. *Alliance* was a 36-gun frigate in the Continental Navy. She carried the Marquis de Lafayette back to France in January 1782, and departed from Lorient, France on March 16 for New London, Connecticut.



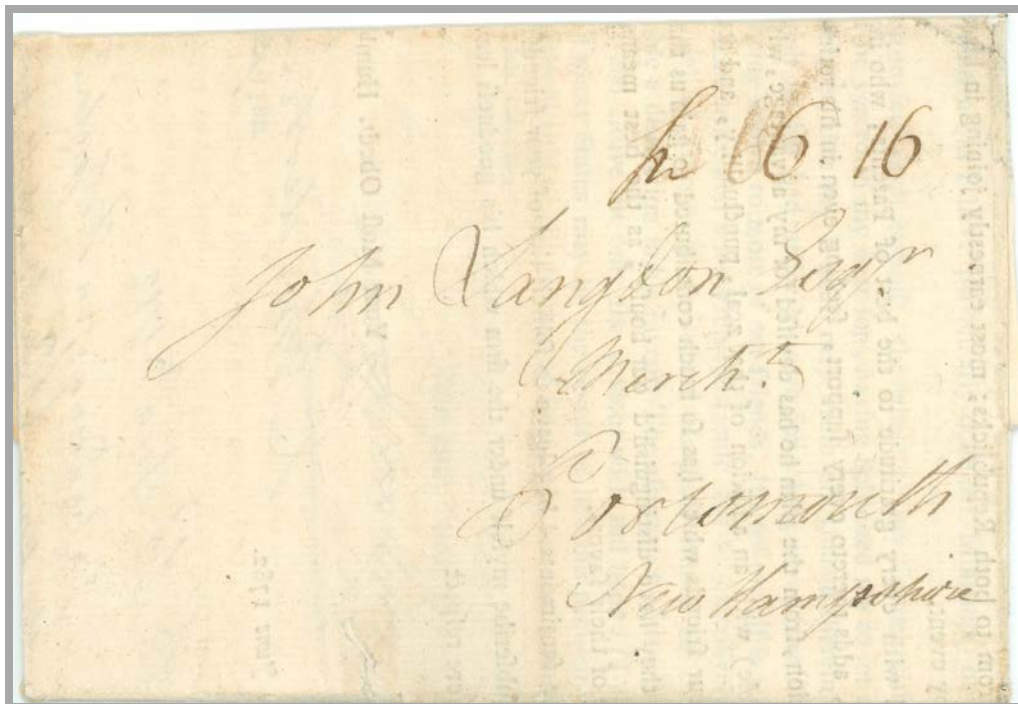
Forwarded from Lorient, France on April 18, 1782 - endorsed to the departed U.S.S. *Alliance*
American privateer *St Helena* departed on June 2 - ran the Delaware Bay blockade on July 18
Postmarked in Philadelphia on July 19 - rated for 4 dwt due to Boston plus 16 grain ship fee

British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

3rd Phase - November 1781 to March 1783



Dated Nantes, France November 19, 1781 - endorsed to the brig *Sally*
Left Nantes on November 28 - ran blockade into Providence, RI on January 20
Rated for 4.16 dwt due - 4 dwt to Philadelphia plus 16 grains ship fee



Dated Amsterdam, Holland August 2, 1782 - printed circular dated June 1
Left Amsterdam on brig *Firebrand* - ran blockade into Boston on October 10
Rated for 6.16 dwt due - triple-weight 6 dwt to Portsmouth, NH plus 16 grains ship fee

British Blockade during the Revolutionary War

3rd Phase - November 1781 to March 1783



The Preliminary Articles of Peace were signed on November 30, 1782 at Paris. News of this was received at New York on March 17, 1783 and the blockade was lifted soon after that.



Postmarked October 5, 1782 at Philadelphia - marked "PAID"
Carried through Chesapeake Bay blockade - probably to neutral Ostend
Hand-carried across Channel to London - placed into Penny Post on January 22, 1783
Only letter from this period known with both American and British postmarks