

Joseph Flitner Jr.'s 1833 Trip to Bermuda

Joseph Flitner Jr. (1808-1850) was given command of the brig *Enterprise* no later than October 1832, when he was twenty-four years of age.¹ In the following year, while sailing from Baltimore to Bermuda with a cargo of “flour, meal, corn, oxen, sheep, &c” he encountered a capsized merchant vessel from which he rescued a young boy and returned him to his home in Bermuda. Instead of receiving a hero’s welcome, Captain Flitner was served with a summons to appear in court, where the owner of the capsized vessel accused him of taking a large sum of money from the vessel. My knowledge of this episode is based mainly on two articles that appeared in the June 25 and July 2, 1833, issues of the *Bermuda Royal Gazette*.²

In the opening paragraph of the first article, the reporter says that he received from Captain Flitner the “statement of the loss of the Brigantine *Douglas*” contained in the article’s second paragraph. Whether the article is a full and accurate account of what Flitner actually said is an open question because, as you’ll see, the reporter’s credibility is in question by the end of the article. Here are the first two paragraphs:

SHIPWRECK.—From the master (Flitner) of the American Brig *Enterprize*, of Boston, from Baltimore, which arrived at St. George’s on Tuesday last [June 18], with a cargo of cattle, &c., we have received the following statement of the loss of the Brigantine *Douglas*, Prudden, master, [which] sailed hence [from Bermuda] on the 4th Instant [June 4], for Alexandria, D.C.

On the 11th Instant [June 11], in latitude 33 30 N., longitude 71 45 W., fell in with the wreck of the Brigantine *Douglas*, of St. Andrews, N. B. [New Brunswick], nearly on her beam ends [i.e., lying on her side], full of water, and with her sails set: on boarding her, their attention was immediately attracted by some person, in a weak voice—and which was supposed to be that of a female—calling from below the deck, in the after part of the vessel; on finding the skylight off, the master put his hand down, and directed the person to take hold of it; the hand was grasped with avidity by a boy, who was immediately placed on deck; on being questioned as to the crew of the Brig, &c., he gave the Captain’s name, where from and bound—that she was capsized on the Sunday night previous [June 9]—that the Captain and remainder of the crew were taken off by the Schooner *Jane*, Capt. Davis, which vessel happened to be in company at the time of the accident—and that there was a box of money on board, which he heard rattle to the bottom of the cabin, as the vessel went over.—Capt. F. finding the larboard main rigging and the fore-topmast gone, the mainmast unstopped, cut away the main stay from the foremast head, when she righted several feet, being relieved of the weight of the mainmast; he continued by her four hours, and had all his crew by turns on board her, endeavouring to find the money, but not succeeding, and the wind being fair, he was obliged to leave her, having taken from the wreck a chest and a barrel of bread, the latter wet, both found lashed outside the weather fore shrouds, and a few pieces of rigging and canvas.

The latitude and longitude stated in the article indicate a point roughly halfway between the United States mainland and Bermuda.

In the third paragraph, the reporter relates additional information:

The Douglas was about eight months old, owned by Messrs. J. Bluck & Co., of these Islands, her commander an active and experienced seaman, was in ballast when she sailed hence, and had upwards of \$4000 in silver, on board; \$3000 of which belonged to the owners.

It was not unusual for a merchant vessel sailing in ballast (i.e., without cargo) to carry enough money to buy the desired cargo at the vessel's destination. The \$4,000 reported to be on the Douglas was equivalent to over \$100,000 today, so it could have been exaggerated. The reporter does not identify his source for this sum, but it was most likely provided by Messrs. J. Bluck & Co., the firm that owned the Douglas.

The reporter identifies the rescued boy and relates what is purported to be the boy's own account of what happened after the vessel capsized:

The boy saved is named Richard Prudden, a native of Bermuda, a relation of the Captain's, and about nine years of age. He says that himself and another boy, were asleep in the starboard berth, at the time of the accident, and as she fell over, the other boy succeeded in scrambling up the companion way; that as the water rushed into the cabin he reached a trunk, which buoyed him up to the larboard berth, into which he got; that he heard Captain Prudden hail the Schooner Jane, and Captain Davis replying; that he heard Capt. P. and the crew get out the long boat and leave the vessel.

The startling revelation is that the boy was Captain Prudden's relative. After reaching safety on the schooner Jane, Prudden surely would have known that one of the boys in his care had been left behind. If Prudden tried to return to the Douglas and rescue the boy from almost certain death, the boy's narrative does not mention it, nor does it mention any extenuating circumstances, such as high winds or waves, that would have prevented a rescue attempt. Instead, the reporter offers his gratuitous opinion about the boy's mental state:

It cannot be supposed that the youth saved—though a smart little fellow—retained his presence of mind throughout this trying period, or that he could give anything like a succinct account of all he heard, after being aroused from his sleep by the capsizing of the vessel.

The reporter's opinion is inconsistent with the details that the boy was said to have related to Flitner at the time of his rescue, which suggest that the boy was lucid and remembered what happened on board the Douglas after it capsized. It seems possible that the reporter's opinion was intended to undermine the credibility of the boy's narrative.

The reporter next reveals that a monition, or summons, had been issued for Flitner to appear in a local court:

A monition was issued by the Court of Vice Admiralty, to Duncan Stewart, Esq., Advocate, for the purpose of examining on oath the master and crew of the Enterprize, and until this legal enquiry terminates we forbear entering more fully into the merits and bearings of this perplexing and unfortunate case. We understand that Captain Flitner is a young man, of limited experience, a foreigner, and “a stranger in a strange land.”

Although the reporter says he will “forbear entering more fully into the merits and bearings of this perplexing and unfortunate case,” he then does the opposite by characterizing Flitner as “a young man, of limited experience, a foreigner, and ‘a stranger in a strange land’,” in contrast with his earlier description of Prudden as “an active and experienced seaman.”

The article ends with yet another opinion, which seems intended to turn his readers against Flitner and his crew by asserting the idea that any loss suffered by the owners of the Douglas would be felt by his readers as well:

Losses of this kind are severely felt in these Islands, for so finely connected are the interests of all concerned in commerce, that the sudden loss of so much capital, not only presses heavily on those immediately interested, but is felt more or less by almost everyone connected in trade.

There are plausible reasons why the reporter would have tried to turn his readers against Flitner and his crew. The owner of the lost vessel, the firm John Bluck & Company, was domiciled in Bermuda, a British possession, while Flitner was the master of an American merchant vessel. Only eighteen years earlier, in 1815, American forces led by General Andrew Jackson convincingly defeated British forces attacking New Orleans in the final battle of the War of 1812. The treaty subsequently signed by the U.S. and Great Britain prohibited American vessels from trading with Bermuda and other British possessions, and this restriction was not lifted until 1831. The reporter’s bias against Flitner and his crew may have been intended to appeal to lingering anti-American sentiment in the Royal Gazette’s readership. Moreover, the reporter may have been partial to John Bluck & Company because the firm was a frequent advertiser in the Royal Gazette.

In contrast with the first article, the July 2 article appears to be an objective account of Flitner’s court appearances on June 26 and 27. This article reveals that the summons issued by the Court of Vice Admiralty alleged, among other things, that Flitner took “certain money or specie” from the brig Douglas.

An Instance Court of Vice Admiralty was held in this Town, on Wednesday last, [June 26]—Honorable Henry G. Hunt, Presiding,—before which appeared Joseph Flitner, Master of the American Brig Enterprize, in consequence of a Monition which was issued

from that Court on the 22d ultimo [June 22], on behalf of Messrs. John Bluck & Co., late owners of the Brig Douglas, citing the said Joseph Flitner, and all and every person whom it doth or may concern, to bring into the Registry of the said Court certain tackle and furniture, belonging to the late Brig Douglas, taken from her on the High Seas, and certain money or specie alledged [sic] to have been taken from on board thereof by the said Joseph Flitner, when on his passage from Baltimore to these Islands.

Because Flitner does not produce the money he was accused of taking, the attorney representing John Bluck & Co. asks the court to order Flitner to post bail for the money and allow examination of his crew. Flitner's attorney counters on the ground that there was no proof of the plaintiff's allegations, and the court adjourns. After what must have been a restless night for Flitner and his crew, the proceedings resume the next day and Judge Henry Hunt denies the plaintiff's application for bail and examination of the crew.

The money not being produced, Duncan Stewart, Esq., for the Plaintiffs, prayed the Court to order bail for the money; also for examining the sailors of the Enterprize.—Seth Harvey, Esq., for Captain Flitner, opposed, on the ground that there was no proof whatever of the money having been taken from the wreck of the Douglas by Capt. Flitner, or any of his crew, or that it was even on board her, when she was fallen in with by the Enterprize.—His Honor the Judge deferred Judgment, and the Court adjourned till 11 o'clock on the following day [June 27], when his Honor said that “The Court exercised all the authority which it thought it could safely do, when it granted the Monition which was prayed for in this case. Returns have been made to the monition on oath. The Court does not think there are sufficient grounds for calling upon the Captain or Mate to give the security asked for: therefore feels itself bound to refuse the application.”

D. Stewart, Esq., asked leave to file an Allegation, with a view to further proceedings, which was granted.

The case was no further proceeded in, and Captain Flitner sailed in the Enterprize, on the 28th ultimo [June 28], for Boston.

The Enterprise arrived in Boston on July 8. The arrival notice in the July 9 issue of the Boston Morning Post includes the notation “Left no Am vessel,” meaning that no other American vessel was then in St. George's, which could only have increased the desolation that the captain and crew of the Enterprise must have felt during their detention in Bermuda.

Although Joseph Flitner Jr. commanded merchant vessels into the 1840s, I found no evidence that he ever returned to Bermuda after 1833. He was indeed fortunate that Judge Hunt had the integrity to apply the rule of British law fairly, even to the benefit of an accused skipper and crew hailing from the young nation that had humbled Great Britain only eighteen years before.

Timeline

Date	Event	Source
Monday, 6/3/33	Brig Douglas, Prudden, clears Hamilton, Bermuda, for Alexandria, District of Columbia	Bermuda Royal Gazette, 6/4/33, p. 2
Tuesday, 6/4/33	Brig Douglas sails for Alexandria	Bermuda Royal Gazette, 6/25/33, p. 2
	Brig Enterprise, Flitner, clears Baltimore, Maryland, for Bermuda	New York Shipping and Commercial List, 6/8/33
	Schooner Jane, Davis, clears St. George's, Bermuda, for Alexandria	Bermuda Royal Gazette, 6/11/33, p. 2
Sunday, 6/9/33	Brig Douglas capsizes while sailing in the company of schooner Jane	Bermuda Royal Gazette, 6/25/33, p. 2
Tuesday, 6/11/33	Brig Enterprise encounters the wreck of the Douglas and rescues Richard Prudden	
Tuesday, 6/18/33	Brig Enterprise arrives at St. George's, Bermuda	
Saturday, 6/22/33	Brig Enterprise clears for Boston but does not sail, because Captain Flitner receives a summons	
Wednesday, 6/26/33	Flitner appears in court and is accused of taking money from the wreck of the Douglas	Bermuda Royal Gazette, 7/2/33, p. 2
Thursday, 6/27/33	Judge Hunt allows Flitner to leave without bail	
Friday, 6/28/33	Brig Enterprise sails for Boston	
Monday, 7/8/33	Brig Enterprise arrives in Boston	Boston Morning Post, 7/9/33, p. 2

Notes

¹ The arrival of the brig Enterprise, Flitner, in Boston on October 30, 1832, from Bath, Maine, is recorded in the Boston Morning Post, November 1, 1832.

² Bermuda National Library website, bnl.contentdm.oclc.org (accessed January 2, 2019).