

John Paul Jones Raids Arichat, 1776

John Paul Jones entered the service of the Continental Navy on December 7, 1775 as 1st Lt. on the *Alfred*. In April 1776 he was assigned to the *Providence* with the temporary rank of captain.

On August 6, 1776 Jones was authorized to take the 12-gun sloop *Providence* on a “Cruise against our Enemies” beginning in the area of Bermuda. By early September they found most British West Indiamen were beyond reach. Wanting wood, water, and additional crew from “Bluenose fishermen” he turned towards Nova Scotia. On September 19 he raised Sable Island, a hundred miles off the Nova Scotia coast. On September 22 he anchored in Canso harbor¹ where he took on wood and water, recruited several willing fishermen, and of the English fishing schooners in the harbor, burned two (ship *John* and schooner *Two Brothers*), sank another, and made prize of a third, *Ebenezer*, loaded with all the fish he could find.

In Canso Jones picked up a fast sailing shallop² for a tender. After hearing that there was a fleet of nine Jerseymen (ships, brigs, and schooners) in the harbors of nearby Isle Madame, Jones sailed with the *Providence* and his new tender to investigate, a distance of about 10 miles. In the harbors of Arichat and Petit de Grat the boats took the Jerseymen by surprise, and the entire lot surrendered. Jones made a deal with his captives, such that they were to keep the schooners *Betsy* and *Hope* to take the Jersey fishermen home (“not short of three hundred”), and they would help him fit out the others as prizes. This work had just completed when, on the night of September 25, a violent gale began. *Providence* and one of her prizes, the 250-ton ship *Alexander*, rode out the storm successfully, but the *Sea Flower*³ drove ashore and had to be burned, and the *Ebenezer*, taken at Canso, dragged onto a reef and broke up. The ship *Adventure*, unrigged and almost empty, was burned. [It is believed that the *Alexander* was captained by Luce, and the *Success* by Balliene.]

The fishing establishment in Arichat harbor was the Robin & Company, owned by John Robin, located on Jerseyman’s Island. The raid ended Robin’s business there, it was not until 1783 that Robin returned to Cape Breton to resume his fish business at which time he relocated to the south side of the harbor on Petit de Grat by Cape Auger.

Another account of the Arichat raid stated that the Robin storehouses were plundered and the entire establishment was razed.

On the afternoon of September 26 *Providence* put to sea with the prizes that survived the gale: *Alexander*, *Kingston Packet*, *Success*, and *Defence*. On the way home Jones captured the whaling sloop *Portland*. He entered Narragansett Bay, RI with four prizes on October 8, after a cruise of 49 days. Jones prided himself on having ruined the English fishing fleet at Canso and Isle Madame. A. C. Jost⁴ reports that “sixteen vessels had been made prize, in addition to those destroyed, and much damage had been done without the loss of a single man and almost without the firing of a shot.”

There is an account of another prize dispatched toward Philadelphia commanded by Midshipman Gallagher, that en route was captured by a privateer schooner *General Gates* of Salem whose skipper imprisoned the crew and was itself soon thereafter chased to Petit de Grat where it ran aground and crew

¹ Canso was perhaps the southernmost undefended harbor on the Nova Scotia coast, and as such an easy target.

² According to the Concise Genealogical Dictionary, a shallop, from the old Norman word *eschalope* or *chaloupe*, is a dinghy fitted with oars or sails and sometimes both.

³ The *Seaflower*, a 45-ton brig, was the first vessel bought by the Robin brothers to capitalize on the remains of French fishing establishments near Louisbourg. In 1764, sailing out of Canso, John and Charles Robin discovered Arichat Harbour and the island they named Jerseyman’s Island, and developed a plan to set up a fishery from that site.

⁴ *Guysborough Sketches and Essays*.

and prisoners took to the woods. Eventually a British man-of-war rounded them all up and carried them to Halifax. It is not clear which prize that was.

During this six week voyage, Jones displayed his skill as a commerce raider and captured many prizes, inflicted significant damage along the coast of Nova Scotia, and received his permanent promotion to captain.

A return trip to Nova Scotia was planned to release American prisoners forced to work in Sydney's coal mines and to capture the British collier fleet. Jones embarked on this mission from Providence, RI on October 27, 1776 on the *Alfred* and *Providence*. These two ships were originally accompanied by the *Hampden* commanded by Captain Hacker, but after hitting a sunken rock, its officers and crew were transferred to the *Providence*. Jones' first prize was the brigantine *Active* taken off Cape Breton on November 11, it had been bound from Liverpool to Halifax; the *Active* was dispatched to Edenton, NC. The next day, on November 12, another prize was taken, the 350-ton armed transport *Mellish*, carrying a cargo of winter uniforms and other supplies to Quebec for the British Army. Because she was too valuable to risk recapture, Jones put his own crew onboard and ordered her to stay within signaling distance. On the 16th Jones captured the *Kitty*, bound from Gaspé to Barbados with a cargo of oil and fish; it was dispatched to Rhode Island. The *Providence*, whose crew feared the ship was too dangerous to sail further because of extensive leaks, gave Jones, on the *Alfred*, the slip and sailed back to Rhode Island.

On November 22, off Canso, Jones sent in armed boats which burned a grounded British supply ship, destroyed an oil warehouse, and carried off a small, fast schooner to replace the *Providence*. Off Louisbourg on November 24 he captured three colliers from Sydney bound for New York; one was the *Betty*, a fairly large ship. The captured crews informed Captain Jones that the American seamen prisoners in the coal mines had enlisted in the Royal Navy. That ended the Sydney mission, and the *Alfred* with her new tender, storeship *Mellish*, and the three captured colliers turned southward.

Most of this account has been taken from *John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography* by Samuel Eliot Morison, 1959 (Google Books). There are other accounts, largely written by Nova Scotians, that seem to confuse the sequence of events.

A. C. Jost summarized the November raid "There was havoc indeed at Canso, Arichat, and Petit de Grat when the second visit had ended."

How many ships were taken in Nova Scotia? On the first trip in September:

September 22 Canso harbor: 2 burned (ship *John* and schooner *Two Brothers*), 1 sunk, 1 prize (*Ebenezer*), 1 shallop taken as tender
In Arichat harbor: 1 burned (*Sea Flower*), 4 named prizes (*Alexander*, *Kingston Packet*, *Success*, *Defence*), 1 lost (*Ebenezer*)
En route home: 1 prize (*Portland*)
Total: 3 burned, 1 sunk, 5 prizes, 1 shallop confiscated.

On the second trip in November:

November 11: 1 prize (*Active*)
November 12: 1 prize (*Mellish*)
November 16: 1 prize (*Kitty*)
November 22: 1 burned, 1 confiscated
November 23: 3 prizes (colliers)
total: 6 prizes, 1 burned, 1 confiscated

Was John Paul Jones a pirate or privateer as some Nova Scotians claim? Piracy is robbery on the high seas. Privateers were armed private ships commissioned to cruise against the commerce or warships of an enemy, combatants bound by internationally recognized laws of war. A letter-of-marque ship was an armed merchant vessel authorized to take prizes if she had the opportunity, but whose main duty was to carry cargo. By these definitions Jones was none of the above: he was an officer of the Continental Navy on a ship built expressly for that Navy and owned by it, authorized to harass the British in the opening days of the Revolutionary War.

It's easy to see how the people of Isle Madame would resent him and be unimpressed by his standing as a naval officer, especially an officer of a navy of a British Colony. Nova Scotia was also a British colony and Arichat a center of British commerce. September was the month when the fish were salted and dried against the long winter months to come. "A blow struck successfully in that quarter would soon make itself felt across the ocean." By his raid he effectively destroyed the fishing industry of the enemy and caused panic that was felt in London.

Jones' role in the destruction of the Arichat fishing industry has been characterized as one of competition. This is another error. He had never been in the fishing industry or any other even loosely related to fishing. He was, at the time of the raid, a naval officer following orders, which he did with great success. It was Arichat's misfortune to be caught up in the war for independence between America and Britain.