

**BARRON JAMES, DECATUR
STEPHEN**

**CORRESPONDENCE,
BETWEEN THE LATE
COMMODORE STEPHEN
DECATUR AND COMMODORE
JAMES BARRON, WHICH LED
TO THE UNFORTUNATE
MEETING OF THE TWENTY-
SECOND OF MARCH**

James Barron

**Correspondence, between the late
Commodore Stephen Decatur and
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Correspondence, between the late Commodore Stephen Decatur and Commodore James Barron, which led to the unfortunate meeting of the twenty-second of March

The friends of the late Commodore Decatur, have learned, with very great regret, that misconceptions injurious to him prevail, and are extending, relative to the difference between him and Commodore Barron. To place the subject in its true light, they have thought it necessary to submit to the public, without comment, the whole correspondence which preceded the meeting.

CORRESPONDENCE, &c

No. 1

HAMPTON, (VA.) JUNE 12,¹ 1819.

Sir: I have been informed, in Norfolk, that you have said that you could insult me with impunity, or words to that effect. If you have said so, you will no doubt avow it, and I shall expect to hear from you.

*I am, sir, your obedient servant,
JAMES BARRON.*

To Commodore Stephen Decatur,
Washington.

¹ With respect to the date of this letter, it may be proper to observe, that, although it is 12th June, yet the figure 2, as made, might well be mistaken for a 3: hence, in Commodore Decatur's letter of reply, he considered the date to be 13th June. On referring, however, to the post mark on the back of the letter, it was found to have been put into the post office on the 12th: hence, in Commodore Decatur's letter to Commodore Barron, of the 31st October, 1819, it is recognized as dated on the 12th.

No. 2

WASHINGTON, JUNE 17, 1819.

Sir: I have received your communication of the 13th instant. Before you could have been entitled to the information you have asked of me, you should have given up the name of your informer. That frankness which ought to characterize our profession required it. I shall not, however, refuse to answer you on that account, but shall be as candid in my communication to you as your letter or the case will warrant.

Whatever I may have *thought, or said, in the very frequent and free conversation I have had respecting you and your conduct*, I feel a thorough conviction that I never could have been guilty of so much egotism as to say that "*I could insult you*" (or any other man) "*with impunity.*"

I am, sir, your obedient servant,
STEPHEN DECATUR.

To Commodore James Barron,
Hampton, Virginia.

No. 3

HAMPTON, (VA.) JUNE 25, 1819.

Sir: Your communication of the 17th instant, in answer to mine of the 13th, I have received.

The circumstances that urged me to call on you for the information requested in my letter, would, I presume, have instigated you, or any other person, to the same conduct that I pursued. Several gentlemen in Norfolk, not your enemies, nor actuated by any malicious motive, told me that such a report was in circulation, but could not now be traced to its origin. I, therefore, concluded to appeal to you, supposing, under such circumstances, that I could not outrage any rule of decorum or candor. This, I trust, will be considered as a just motive for the course I have pursued. Your declaration, if I understand it correctly, relieves my mind from the apprehension that you had so degraded my character, as I had been induced to allege.

*I am, sir, your obedient servant,
JAMES BARRON.*

To Commodore Stephen Decatur,
Washington.

No. 4

WASHINGTON, JUNE 29, 1819.

Sir: I have received your communication of the 25th, in answer to mine of the 17th, and, as you have expressed yourself doubtfully, as to your correct understanding of my letter of the aforesaid date, I have now to state, and I request you to understand distinctly, that I meant *no more* than to disclaim the *specific* and *particular* expression to which your inquiry was directed, to wit: that I had said that *I* could insult you with impunity. As to the motives of the "several gentlemen in Norfolk," your informants, or the rumors which "cannot be traced to their origin," on which their information was founded, or who they are, is a matter of perfect indifference to me, as is also your motives in making such an inquiry upon such information.

Your obedient servant,
STEPHEN DECATUR.

To Commodore James Barron,
Hampton, Virginia.

No. 5

HAMPTON, OCTOBER 23, 1819.

Sir: I had supposed that the measure of your ambition was nearly completed, and that your good fortune had rendered your reputation for acts of magnanimity too dear to be risked wantonly on occasions that can never redound to the honor of him that would be great. I had also concluded that your rancor towards me was fully satisfied, by the cruel and unmerited sentence passed upon me by the court of which you were a member; and, after an exile from my country, family, and friends, of nearly seven years, I had concluded that I should now be allowed, at least, to enjoy that solace, with this society, that lacerated feelings like mine required, and that you would have suffered me to remain in quiet possession of those enjoyments; but, scarcely had I set my foot on my native soil, ere I learnt that the same malignant spirit which had before influenced you to endeavor to ruin my reputation was still at work, and that you were ungenerously traducing my character whenever an occasion occurred which suited your views, and, in many instances, not much to your credit as an officer, through the medium of our juniors; such conduct cannot fail to produce an injurious effect on the discipline and subordination of the navy. A report of this sort, sir, coming from the respectable and creditable sources it did, could not fail to arrest my attention, and to excite those feelings which might naturally be expected to arise in the heart of every man who professes to entertain principles of honor, and intends to act in conformity with them. With such feelings I addressed a letter to you under date of the 13th June last, which produced a correspondence between us, which I have since been informed you have endeavored to use to my farther injury, by sending it to Norfolk by a respectable officer of the navy, to be shewn to some of my particular friends, with a view of alienating from me their attachment. I am also informed, that you have tauntingly and boastingly observed, that you would cheerfully meet me in the field, and hoped I would yet act like a man, or that you had used words to that effect: such conduct, sir, on the part of any one, but especially one occupying the influential station under the government which you hold, towards an individual, situated as I am, and oppressed as I have been, and that chiefly by your means, is unbecoming you as an officer and a gentleman; and shews a want of magnanimity which, hostile as I have found you to be towards me, I had hoped for your own reputation you possessed. It calls loudly for redress at your hands: I consider you as having given the invitation, which I accept, and will prepare to meet you at such time and place as our respective friends, hereafter to be named, shall designate. I also, under all the circumstances of the case, consider myself entitled to the choice of weapons, place, and distance; but, should a difference of opinion be entertained by our friends, I flatter myself, from your known personal courage, that you would disdain any unfair advantage, which your superiority in the use of the pistol, and the natural defect in my vision, increased by age, would give you. I will thank you not to put your name on the cover of your answer, as, I presume, you can have no disposition to give unnecessary pain to the females of my family.

*I am, sir, your obedient servant,
JAMES BARRON.*

Commodore Stephen Decatur,
Washington.

No. 6

WASHINGTON, OCTOBER 31, 1819.

Sir: Your letter of the 23d inst. has been duly received. Prior to giving it that reply which I intend, its contents suggest the necessity of referring to our June correspondence.

On the 12th June last, you addressed to me a note, inquiring whether I had said that "I could insult you with impunity." On the 17th June, I wrote you, in reply, as follows: "Whatever I may have *thought or said in the very frequent and free conversations I have had respecting you and your conduct*, I feel a thorough conviction that I never could have been guilty of so much egotism, as to say that I could insult you, or any other man, with impunity."

On the 25th of June, you again wrote to me, and stated, that the report on which you had grounded your query of 12th June, "could not now be traced to its origin," and your letter is concluded in the following words: "your declaration, if I understand it correctly, relieves my mind from the apprehension that you had so degraded my character, as I had been induced to allege." Immediately on receiving your letter of the 25th of June, I wrote to you, 29th June, as follows: "As you have expressed yourself doubtfully as to your correct understanding of my letter of the 17th June, I have now to state, and I request you to understand, distinctly, that I meant *no more* than to disclaim the *specific and particular* expression, to which your inquiry was directed, to wit: "that I had said that I could insult you with impunity." Here ended our June correspondence, and, with it all kind of communication, till the date of your letter of the 23d inst. which I shall now proceed to notice.

Nearly four months having elapsed since the date of our last correspondence, your letter was unexpected to me, particularly as the terms used by you, in the conclusion of your letter to me of 25th June, and your silence since receiving my letter of the 29th June, indicated, as I thought, satisfaction on your part. But, it seems that you consider yourself aggrieved by my sending our June correspondence to Norfolk. I did not send the June correspondence to Norfolk, until three months had expired after your last communication, and not then, until I had been informed by a captain of the navy, that a female of your acquaintance had stated, that such a correspondence had taken place.² If that correspondence has, in any degree, "alienated your friends from you," such effect is to be attributed to the correspondence itself. I thought the papers would speak for themselves, and sent them without written comment.

With respect to the court martial upon you for the affair of the Chesapeake, to which you have been pleased to refer, I shall not treat the officers, who composed that court, with so much disrespect, as to attempt a vindication of their proceedings. The chief magistrate of our country approved them; the nation approved them; and the sentence has been carried into effect. But, sir, there is a part of my conduct, on that occasion, which it does not appear irrelevant to revive in your recollection. It is this; I was present at the court of inquiry upon you, and heard the evidence then adduced for and against you; thence I drew an opinion altogether unfavorable to you; and, when I was called upon, by the Secretary of the Navy, to act as a member of the court martial ordered for your trial, I begged to be excused the duty, on the ground of my having formed such an opinion. The honorable Secretary was pleased to insist on my serving; still anxious to be relieved from this service, I did, prior to taking my seat as a member of the court, communicate to your able advocate, general Taylor, the opinion I had formed, and my correspondence with the Navy Department upon the subject, in order to afford you an opportunity, should you deem it expedient, to protest against my being a member, on the ground of my not only having formed, but *expressed* an opinion unfavorable to you. You did not protest against my being a member. Duty constrained me, however unpleasant it was, to take my seat as a member;

² See the extracts from Capt. Carter's letter, post. page 13.

I did so, and discharged the duty imposed upon me. You, I find, are incapable of estimating the motives which guided my conduct in this transaction.

For my conduct as a member of that court martial, I do not consider myself as, in any way, accountable to *you*. But, sir, you have thought fit to deduce, from your impressions of my conduct as a member of that court martial, inferences of personal hostility towards you. Influenced by feelings thence arising, you commenced the June correspondence, a correspondence which I had hoped would have terminated our communications.

Between you and myself there never has been a personal difference; but I have entertained, and do still entertain the opinion, that your conduct as an officer, since the affair of the Chesapeake, has been such as ought to forever bar your readmission into the service.

In my letter to you, of the 17th June, although I disavowed the *particular expressions* to which you invited my attention, candor required that I should apprise you of my not having been silent respecting you. I informed you that I had had *very frequent and free conversations respecting you and your conduct*; and the words were underscored, that they might not fail to attract your particular attention. Had you have asked what those frequent and free conversations were, I should, with the same frankness, have told you; but, instead of making a demand of this kind, you reply to my letter of 17th June, "That my declaration, if correctly understood by you, relieved your mind," &c. That you might correctly understand what I did mean, I addressed you as before observed, on the 29th June, and endeavored, by *underscoring* certain precise terms, to convey to you my precise meaning. To this last letter I never received a reply.

Under these circumstances, I have judged it expedient at this time, to state, as distinctly as may be in my power, the facts upon which I ground the unfavourable opinion which I entertain, and have expressed, of your conduct as an officer, since the court martial upon you; while I disclaim all personal enmity towards you.

Some time after you had been suspended from the service, for your conduct in the affair of the Chesapeake, you proceeded, in a merchant brig, from Norfolk to Pernambuco; and by a communication from the late Captain Lewis, whose honor and veracity were never yet questioned, it appears – that you stated to Mr. Lyon, the *British consul* at Pernambuco, with whom you lived, "That if the Chesapeake had been prepared for action, you would not have resisted the attack of the Leopard; assigning, as a reason, that you knew, (as did also our government,) there were deserters on board your ship; that the President of the United States knew there were deserters on board, and of the intention of the British to take them; and that the President caused you to go out in a defenceless state, for the express purpose of having your ship attacked and disgraced, and thus attain his favorite object of involving the United States in a war with Great Britain." For confirmation of this information, Captain Lewis refers to Mr. Thomas Goodwin, of Baltimore, the brother of Captain Ridgely of the Navy, who received it from Mr. Lyon himself. Reference was made to Mr. Goodwin, who, in an official communication, confirmed all that Captain Lewis had said. The veracity and respectability of Mr. Goodwin are also beyond question. You will be enabled to judge of the impression made upon Captain Lewis' mind, by the following strong remarks he made on the subject:

"I am now convinced that Barron is a traitor, for I can call by no other name a man who would talk in this way to an Englishman, and an Englishman in office."

These communications are now in the archives of the Navy Department.

If, sir, the affair of the Chesapeake excited the indignant feelings of the nation towards Great Britain; and was, as every one admits, one of the principal causes which produced the late war, did it not behove you to take an active part in the war, for your own sake? – Patriotism out of the question! But, sir, instead of finding you in the foremost ranks, on an occasion which so emphatically demanded your best exertions, it is said, and is credited, that you were, after the commencement of the war, to be found in the command of a vessel sailing under *British license*

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