

GREEN SAMUEL ABBOTT

PIRACY OFF THE FLORIDA
COAST AND ELSEWHERE

Samuel Green

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At a stated meeting of the Massachusetts Historical Society, held in Boston on Thursday, February 9, 1911, Dr. Samuel A. Green presented the following paper: —

Few persons of the present day are aware how extensively piracy prevailed two centuries ago. There was no part of the high seas that was free from the depredation of roving robbers. At times they threatened towns on the coast, and at others they attacked ships on mid-ocean; and they seem to have followed their lawless pursuits at will. When caught, there was little delay in bringing them to trial and securing a conviction; and trivial technicality in forms played no part in reaching results. At times there were multiple executions, and in the community there was no morbid sentimentality shown for the miserable wretches. Not the least of their torture was sitting in the meeting-house on the Sunday before execution and listening to their own funeral sermons, when the minister told them what they might expect in the next world if they got their just dues. On June 30, 1704, six poor victims were hung, on the Boston side of the Charles River bank, for piracy and murder; and there was a great crowd to witness the tragedy. Among the spectators on this occasion was Chief-Justice Sewall, one of the judges of the Admiralty Court which had convicted the pirates, who did not think it beneath his dignity to be present. It was then considered a public duty to invest the scene of execution with as much awe as possible, and it was thought that official station would emphasize this feeling.

The following extract from "The Boston News-Letter," August 21, 1721, shows how in early times piratical craft, heavily manned and carrying many guns, sailed the high seas and pursued their unlawful calling. The vessel was taken somewhere in the Sargasso Sea, off the coast of Africa.

These are to Certifie all Persons concerned that on the 7th Day of May last, William Russel, Master of the Ship Mary of Charlstown, in his Voyage from Madera to Surranam in the Lat. 22 Deg. and 27 N. and Long. 25 and 27 W. from London was taken by a Pirate Ship upwards of 50 Guns, Commanded by Capt. Roberts, about 300 Men, who robb'd him of part of his Cargo, and Forced away from him two of his Men, against his and their own consent, viz. Thomas Russel born in Lexintown near Charlstown and the other Thomas Winchol born in Portsmouth, New-Hampshire in New England.

I have been led to make these introductory remarks on account of a manuscript recently given to the Library by Mrs. William B. Rogers, eldest daughter and sole surviving child of Mr. James Savage, who was for more than sixty years a member of this Society and for fourteen years its President. It consists of an extract from a letter written by her uncle William Savage to her father, dated at Havana, December 31, 1818, giving an account of the capture by pirates of the ship *Emma Sophia*, off the Florida coast, of which vessel he was supercargo. Since the receipt of the paper from Mrs. Rogers I have found in the "Boston Daily Advertiser," February 3, 1819, a fuller version of the letter; and for that reason I here follow the copy as given in the newspaper. Anything that relates to Mr. Savage or his family will always be in order at these meetings. At the unveiling of his bust in this room, on April 12, 1906, Mr. Adams, the President, said that "with the single exception of Mr. Winthrop no member of the Society since its beginning has left upon it so deep and individual an impression" as Mr. Savage has.

The account appears on the second page of the Advertiser, under the heading of "Marine Journal," as follows: —

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