

The USS Virginia Becomes the HMS Virginia

By early 1778, the British found the Chesapeake Bay very lucrative for capturing American vessels. They established a blockade, typically utilizing at least five vessels. The British strategically positioned their ships in a formation of equal spacing across the mouth of the Bay to effectively control passage into and out of the Bay. This was designed, based on the latest intelligence reports, to prevent the anticipated arrival of the French fleet from entering the bay. It would also be useful in preventing the anticipated war patrol of the Continental Navy frigate USS Virginia and the Maryland commissioned Navy ship Saratoga from leaving the bay. The tactic with the latter was successful more by happenstance than by design.

The USS Virginia was one of the ships of the small Continental Navy and was trapped at Annapolis because of the British blockade. Her commander, Captain James Nicholson, faced many challenges including lack of crew, funds, and a reliable pilot to take the ship down the Bay. On top of this was mounting pressure by the Continental Congress to take some action against the British. In his efforts to be responsive to their desires, Nicholson decided to transit the Bay without a pilot.

The Virginia proceeded by following in the Saratoga's wake, relying on the pilot aboard that vessel. The Virginia and Saratoga sailed together from Annapolis on March 30, 1778. Following in the Saratoga's wake worked well enough until adverse winds near the entrance to the Bay caused Virginia to lag behind. The ship ran aground in the dark, breaking its rudder on the Middle Ground, a sandy shoal between Cape Henry and Cape Charles that was a menace to mariners.

While Captain Nicholson took the ship's papers ashore, the bulk of his crew was still aboard the Virginia, fending for themselves on a drifting hulk. Also on board was Joshua Barney, the Second Lieutenant, who weighed his options for preventing the ship from falling into British hands. Seeing that the wind was fair and blowing somewhat fresh, he decided to attempt to run the Virginia on shore at Cape Henry where the local militia could provide some protection.

Captain Nicholson watched as the British HMS Emerald closed and captured the Virginia and crew the morning of March 31. The Emerald subsequently towed USS Virginia into Lynnhaven Bay to effect repairs on the rudder. The American prisoners were moved aboard two other British ships. The Virginia was later taken to New York City, condemned in a prize court, and commissioned the HMS Virginia in the British Navy.