



Viper

Sloop-of-War
Massachusetts Privateer Ship

Commander William Williams

9 May 1780-30 October 1780

Commissioned/First Date:

9 May 1780

Out of Service/Cause:

2 December 1780/sold out of service

Owners:

Jonathan R. Livingston and David Dickson, both of Boston, Massachusetts

Tonnage:

Battery:

Date Reported: 9 May 1780

Number/Caliber Weight Broadside

16/

Total: 16 cannon/

Broadside: 8 cannon/

Swivels:

Date Reported: 29 November 1780

Number/Caliber Weight Broadside

16/6-pounder 96 pounds 48 pounds

Total: 16 cannon/96 pounds

Broadside: 8 cannon/48 pounds

Swivels:

Crew:

(1) 9 May 1780: 121 [total]

(2) 10 July 1780: 130 [total]

(3) 10 July 1780: 90 [total]

Description:

Officers:

Cruises:

(1) Boston, Massachusetts, to [Philadelphia, Pennsylvania],
22 October 1780-[November] 1780

Prizes:

(1) Schooner [unknown], [June] 1780

(2) British Privateer Brig *Resolution* (Thomas Ross), 10 July 1780

(3) Ship *Sarah*, off Sandy Hook, New Jersey, 31 October 1780

Actions:

(1) Action with *Resolution*, 10 July 1780

(2) Action with [the former] *Hetty*, 30 October 1780

Comments:

Massachusetts Privateer Ship *Viper* was commissioned on 9 May 1780 under Commander William Williams of Boston, Massachusetts. She was listed as being armed with sixteen guns and as having a crew of 120 men. Her \$10000 Continental and £4000 Massachusetts bonds were signed by Williams and by John R. Livingston and David Dickson, both of Boston.¹ According to the petition, the lieutenant was one Morris,² and the Master was John Waddle.³

Viper sailed out to cruise off the Nova Scotia coast about late June 1780. An un-named schooner was captured and sent into Boston, perhaps in late June.⁴

On 10 July 1780 she was off the Halifax, Nova Scotia lighthouse. The British Privateer Brig *Resolution* (Thomas Ross) was coming out to sea.⁵ *Resolution* was armed with sixteen guns and was owned by Benjamin Mulberry Holmes, formerly a resident of Boston. She had been fitted out specifically to cruise in Boston Bay.⁶ The two privateers began a “hot engagement” during which both were shot up and disabled. The British surrendered with eight killed and ten wounded. They claimed that the Americans lost thirty-three men killed and wounded. The British reported *Viper* had a crew of 130 men and mounted twenty-two guns. The Americans scoffed at these claims and reported that *Viper* had sixteen guns, a crew of ninety men and lost one killed and two wounded in the action.⁷ *Viper* returned to Boston from this cruise on 17/18 July.⁸ The *Resolution* got into

¹ Allen, *Massachusetts Privateers of the Revolution*, 317

² MASSRW 11:58

³ MASSRW 16:369

⁴ *The New-York Gazette; and The Weekly Mercury* August 28, 1780, datelined Boston, July 24, 1780

⁵ *The Massachusetts Spy: Or, American Oracle of Liberty* [Boston], August 24, 1780, datelined Halifax, July 11, 1780

⁶ *The New-York Gazette; and The Weekly Mercury* August 28, 1780, datelined Boston, July 24, 1780

⁷ *The Massachusetts Spy: Or, American Oracle of Liberty* [Boston], August 24, 1780, datelined Halifax, July 11, 1780

⁸ *The Massachusetts Spy: Or, American Oracle of Liberty* [Boston], August 24, 1780, datelined Halifax, July 11, 1780; *The New-York Gazette; and The Weekly Mercury* August 28, 1780, datelined Boston, July 24, 1780

Boston on 20 July.⁹

Viper began refitting for her next cruise. A crew list, dated 30 September 1780,¹⁰ indicates some of her officers for the next cruise. There were two lieutenants aboard the *Viper*: First Lieutenant John Larcher of Providence, Rhode Island,¹¹ and Second Lieutenant John Wardell.¹² *Viper*'s Master was Benjamin Jones,¹³ and her First Mate was David Lamb of Boston.¹⁴ Two Second Mates are listed, Charles Chadwick¹⁵ and Reuben Hamlin,¹⁶ Her Captain of Marines was William Lamb of Boston.¹⁷ The Surgeon aboard was William Truen.¹⁸

After refitting, *Viper* sailed from Boston on 22 October 1780. On 30 October¹⁹ she was off Sandy Hook, New Jersey²⁰ in the early morning. A sail was seen bearing down. When Williams turned to chase the stranger took flight. About 1200 the two vessels were within pistol shot and Williams showed his colors and delivered a broadside. A "spirited" duel began which lasted for thirty minutes, when the British drew ahead. Williams "ported his helm" and delivered a raking broadside. Just then he was shot in the chest, which threw the *Viper* into confusion, and the British vessel escaped. Williams died six hours later (he was the only American casualty). The British vessel was a 16-gun privateer²¹ (formerly the *Hetty*, owned in Philadelphia)²² out of New

⁹ *The Massachusetts Spy: Or, American Oracle of Liberty* [Boston], August 24, 1780, datelined Halifax, July 11, 1780

¹⁰ MASSRW 2:480

¹¹ MASSRW 9:511

¹² MASSRW 16:552. This man may be the "John Waddle" that was the Master on the first cruise.

¹³ MASSRW 8:900

¹⁴ MASSRW 9:430

¹⁵ MASSRW 3:235

¹⁶ MASSRW 7:169

¹⁷ MASSRW 9:440

¹⁸ MASSRW 16:80

¹⁹ *The Independent Ledger, and the American Advertiser* [Boston], December 4, 1780

²⁰ *The Pennsylvania Packet or the General Advertiser* [Philadelphia], November 21, 1780. According to Maclay, *History of American Privateers*, 208, the action was off Cape Hatteras, North Carolina.

²¹ Maclay, *History of American Privateers*, 208

²² *The Pennsylvania Packet or the General Advertiser* [Philadelphia], November 21, 1780. Maclay, *History of American Privateers*, 208, says she was named the *Hetty*, but this not certain.

York. *Viper*'s First Lieutenant took command and steered for Philadelphia.²³

The next day (31 October)²⁴ she captured a ship with a cargo of provisions²⁵ (beef, pork, butter, raisins)²⁶ bound from Cork, Ireland to New York, New York.²⁷ This was the ship *Sarah*,²⁸ Both *Viper* and *Sarah* arrived at Philadelphia on 20 November.²⁹

Sarah was advertised for sale on 28 November, along with her cargo. The sale was set for 4 December 1780.³⁰ Before she went to the auction block, another advertisement was published on 29 November:

“To be sold on Saturday next, the 2d of December, at twelve o'clock, at the Coffee house, The Privateer Ship VIPER, Of sixteen Six pounders; With all her Tackle, Apparel, Furniture and Stores, as she came from Sea, per Inventory. JOHN BAYARD, Auctioneer.”³¹

It appears that this was the last mention of the *Viper*.

²³ Maclay, *History of American Privateers*, 208

²⁴ Maclay, *History of American Privateers*, 208

²⁵ *The Pennsylvania Packet or the General Advertiser* [Philadelphia], November 21, 1780

²⁶ *The Pennsylvania Packet or the General Advertiser* [Philadelphia], November 28, 1780

²⁷ *The Pennsylvania Packet or the General Advertiser* [Philadelphia], November 21, 1780

²⁸ *The Pennsylvania Packet or the General Advertiser* [Philadelphia], November 28, 1780. According to Maclay, *History of American Privateers*, 208-209, she was the ship *Margaret* (beef, pork, butter and porter), from Charleston, South Carolina to New York. This seems unlikely, and I don't believe two prizes were sent to Philadelphia.

²⁹ *The Pennsylvania Packet or the General Advertiser* [Philadelphia], November 21, 1780

³⁰ *The Pennsylvania Packet or the General Advertiser* [Philadelphia], November 28, 1780

³¹ *The Pennsylvania Gazette* [Philadelphia], November 29, 1780