

“Dissolute and Immoral Practices” The Court Martial of James T. Leonard

Gary M. Gibson



*Had she been Captain Leonard's wife her conduct would have been proper.*¹

In 1812 there were only three sea officer ranks in the United States Navy: lieutenant, master commandant and captain.² With Congress repeatedly refusing to create the rank of admiral, a captain had only a promotion to the honorary title of commodore to look forward to. That title was awarded by the Navy Department to a captain commanding a squadron and convention allowed him to fly a special flag called a broad pendant.³ This flag was also used to denote the senior naval officer present on a station. The right to fly a broad pendant was a privilege jealously guarded and disagreements between officers over that right often left a residue of bad feelings.

One such occurred on 14 July 1812 when the commandant of the New York Navy Yard, Captain Isaac Chauncey, watched a flotilla of gunboats arrive in New York Harbor with one boat, that of Master Commandant James T. Leonard, flying a broad pendant.⁴ That annoyed Chauncey. As senior officer, he felt Leonard was out of line and he confronted him about the matter. Leonard told Chauncey that his was a separate command, not subordinate to Chauncey, and therefore he was authorized by the Navy Department to fly a broad pendant.

Abbreviations used in the notes:

CLB 3 & 4	Isaac Chauncey's <i>Letterbooks</i> at William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan
CLB 5	Isaac Chauncey's <i>Letterbook</i> at Manuscript Department, New York Historical Society
CMT	Transcript of the court martial of James T. Leonard, NAUS, RG 45, <i>Naval Courts Martial</i> vol.4 case 152, film M273 roll 6.
NAUS	National Archives of the United States.
RG	Record Group.
SNLRC	NAUS, RG 45, <i>Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy From Captains</i> , film M125.
SNLRD	NAUS, RG 45, <i>Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy From Commanders</i> , film M147.
SNLRO	NAUS, RG 45, <i>Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy From Officers Below the Rank of Commander</i> , film M148.
SNLSC	NAUS, RG 45, <i>Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy to Commandants and Navy Agents</i> , film M441.
SNLSO	NAUS, RG 45, <i>Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy to Officers</i> , film M149.
SNPLB	NAUS, RG 45, <i>Secretary of the Navy's Private Letter Book</i> , film T829 roll 453.

¹ Testimony of tavern owner William M. Lord, CMT.

² The title of master commandant became commander in 1838.

³ A broad pendant (later called a broad pennant) was a flag, triangular, swallow-tailed or rectangular sometimes with white stars on a blue field (there was no official pattern at the time) flown at the top of a warship's main mast.

⁴ Paul Hamilton to James T. Leonard, 10 July 1812, NAUS, RG45, SNLSO vol 10 p.93, roll 10.

Chauncey lost no time in writing to Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton complaining that he “should feel mortified to see a lieutenant with a broad pendant while I wave a narrow



Captain James T. Leonard

one.”⁵ Secretary Hamilton replied that he was surprised at the “pretensions” of Leonard and that “the flotilla and every officer attached to it, are under your command.”⁶ That ended the matter but thereafter relations between the two men were polite but far from friendly.

Age 34 when he arrived at New York City, James T. Leonard was born there in 1778. He received his midshipman’s warrant at age 21, somewhat older than usual. Only three years later he was an acting lieutenant, probably due to his maturity and possible prior experience in the merchant service. He became commanding officer of

a gunboat a year later and was commissioned a lieutenant in 1807. He served on the frigates *President* and *Constellation*, spent six months as acting commandant at New Orleans and later commanded the bomb ketch *Vesuvius*. The first known meeting between Leonard and Chauncey occurred in March and April 1809 when the *Vesuvius* was repairing at the New York Navy Yard.⁷ If there were any disagreements between them at that time they went unrecorded. Like many naval officers during Thomas Jefferson’s presidency Leonard spent time on half-pay and on furlough serving as master of a merchant vessel. In June 1812 he was ordered to New York City to command the



Commodore Isaac Chauncey from a painting at Flower Memorial Library, Watertown NY. Photograph by the author.

⁵ Isaac Chauncey to Paul Hamilton, 14 July 1812, SNLRC 1812 vol 2 item 125, roll 24. Leonard’s commission as master commandant was sent to him by the Navy Department only four days earlier and Isaac Chauncey still believed Leonard to be a lieutenant, and perhaps Leonard did as well.

⁶ Paul Hamilton to Isaac Chauncey, 20 July 1812, SNLSC, roll 1 frame 176; also film T829 roll 175 p.305.

⁷ Accounts of repairs to *Vesuvius* at the New York Navy Yard signed by James T. Leonard, *Rodgers Family Papers*, Volume 10, Collection 1208, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

gunboat flotilla on that station. He was as experienced as most of his peers and there is nothing in his pre-war record to indicate that he was anything other than a competent and respected professional naval officer.

At the end of August 1812, Secretary Hamilton ordered Chauncey to take command of all naval forces on lakes Ontario and Erie. Chauncey, now possessing the honorary title of commodore, arrived at Sackets Harbor on Lake Ontario in early October. A month later, with only lieutenants on the station, Chauncey wrote Secretary Hamilton asking that a master commandant be appointed to serve as his second-in-command and as captain of the new 24-gun corvette *Madison*.⁸ Hamilton wrote back telling Chauncey that he had appointed James T. Leonard to fill that position.⁹ Leonard, still in New York City, received Hamilton’s order and replied that he would “proceed immediately” to Sackets Harbor.¹⁰

It is likely that neither man was particularly pleased with this new relationship and the records do not tell why Hamilton chose Leonard. Possibly Hamilton’s choice was based on



Paul Hamilton by G. B. Matthews
NHC NH-54757-KN

Leonard and Chauncey having recently worked together on the New York station. Whatever his reason, subsequent events prove that this was not one of Hamilton’s better decisions.

Before Leonard arrived at Sackets Harbor, Chauncey departed to inspect the Lake Erie naval stations at Black Rock and Erie. He left Leonard a letter informing him that he was in command until his return. Chauncey also left instructions that Leonard should prepare the *Madison* for service in the spring and to be sure the squadron was ready at all times to repel a British attack. He advised Leonard that “the better to do this is to visit each vessel every day yourself.”¹¹ Complying with this last advice required Leonard to visit each of 11 vessels every day. With most anchored off shore and surrounded by ice these visits would be both difficult and time consuming. It is likely that Leonard doubted that Chauncey himself would have done this instead of having the captain of each vessel report to him on shore, and not necessarily every day.

⁸ Isaac Chauncey to Paul Hamilton, 5 November 1812, SNLRC 1812 vol 3 item 163, roll 25. For details on the *Madison* see Chauncey to Hamilton, 26 November 1812, *Ibid*, item 192.

⁹ Paul Hamilton to Isaac Chauncey, 19 November 1812, SNLSC, roll 1 frame 196; also T829 roll 175 p.346.

¹⁰ James T. Leonard to Paul Hamilton, 24 November 1812, SNLRO 1812 vol 3 item 180, roll 10.

¹¹ Isaac Chauncey to James T. Leonard, 10 December 1812, CLB 3.

While Leonard was settling in at Sackets Harbor, Chauncey was visiting the new Black Rock naval station north of Buffalo, New York.¹² There he found cause to place the station's commander, Lieutenant Samuel Angus, under arrest. In a letter to Secretary Hamilton, Chauncey stated that he would "therefore be under the necessity of ordering capt Leonard or Lieut Woolsey to this station until the Spring." While proposing Lieutenant Woolsey as a possible replacement for Angus was reasonable, suggesting Master Commandant Leonard was not. The Black Rock naval station was temporary and dedicated to building only a few small vessels. That station would be abandoned in the spring in favor of Erie, Pennsylvania. Chauncey apparently took advantage of this opportunity to prepare the Navy Department in case he later decided to move Leonard away from Sackets Harbor. Had this actually happened, Leonard might have fared better than he did by remaining on Lake Ontario. The victory on Lake Erie the following September, and the glory and promotion to captain that accompanied it, might have been his instead of Oliver Hazard Perry's.

With Chauncey absent, for the next few weeks Leonard went about his duties at Sackets Harbor. At the beginning of 1813, officers at Sackets Harbor believed that Leonard planned an attack against the British at Kingston as soon as the ice permitted as he was "capable of carrying it into full effect."¹³ A week later, Leonard received intelligence regarding the British activities at Kingston, Upper Canada. This estimated

The Corvette *Madison*



A sketch by artist Peter Rindlisbacher

Designed by shipwright Henry Eckford, the *Madison* was launched at Sackets Harbor on 26 November 1812 but was not ready for sea until April 1813. She was about 580 tons, with a 112 foot keel, about 125 feet on deck with a beam of 32.5 feet. Her original armament was 24 32-pound carronades, all on the upper (spar) deck. In July 1813 she had a crew of 221 men. After the war she was sold in 1825, re-rigged as a brig, renamed *General Brady* and was in merchant service until she was discarded about five years later.

See Gary M. Gibson, "The U. S. Corvette Madison," *War of 1812 Magazine*, 20: May 2013.

¹² Leonard arrived at Sackets Harbor on 17 December 1812, CMT.

¹³ Henry Fry to Constant Taber, 1 January 1813, Indiana University, Lilly Library – War of 1812 Collection LMC 2439.

the British force at Kingston, regulars, militia and Indians, to be as many as 1,700 men, which discouraged any attack that winter.¹⁴

At the end of January, Leonard had an unpleasant altercation with Sailing Master William Vaughan. Vaughan called Leonard a “damned little rascal” and threatened to fight him in a duel. Leonard preferred two charges resulting in Vaughan’s arrest and court martial the following April.¹⁵ While it is possible that it was Leonard’s attitude that prompted this, it appears more likely that it was Vaughan who was at fault. During the war Vaughan had a history of conflict with his superior officers as well as with the citizens of Sackets Harbor. The former produced another court martial in 1814¹⁶ and the latter resulting in a number of civil lawsuits during and after the war.¹⁷ Available records, however, show that Chauncey thought very highly of Vaughan which probably accounts for his reducing Vaughan’s sentence to a public reprimand in the first case and approving the court’s sentence of only a private reprimand in the second.¹⁸

In early February Chauncey again left Sackets Harbor on what he thought would be a quick ten day trip to Albany. He was gone a month. Chauncey left orders that Leonard was not to open Chauncey’s mail, even letters from the Navy Department. He was not to alter any of Chauncey’s instructions to the squadron, and he was especially not allowed “to make any attack upon the enemy or suffer any of the seamen or Marines to go upon any enterprize from their

¹⁴ This was an over-estimate but the remainder of the intelligence was reasonably accurate. James T. Leonard to Paul Hamilton, 7 January 1813, SNLRD, 1813 vol 3, roll 3.

¹⁵ Isaac Chauncey to William Vaughan, 28 January 1813, CLB 3. Vaughan’s court martial took place on board the *Oneida* on 16 April 1813; Isaac Chauncey to Melancthon T. Woolsey, 10 April 1813, CLB 4.

¹⁶ Court martial held on 17 November 1814, NAUS, RG45, *Naval Courts Martial*, vol 5 case 182, M273 roll 7. Vaughan was accused of ungentlemanly and unofficerlike conduct as well as quarrelling with and using provoking and reproachful words to his superior officer, essentially the same charges made by Leonard almost two years before. He was found guilty and sentenced to be privately reprimanded by Chauncey. Many of the officers who were members of this court martial had been members of Vaughan’s previous court and probably recalled Chauncey’s leniency at that time and set Vaughan’s sentence accordingly.

¹⁷ Court records at the Jefferson County Clerk’s office, Watertown, New York contain 25 dockets pertaining to court cases during the War of 1812 in which William Vaughan was either the plaintiff or the defendant. This includes a case where Vaughan accused navy Lieutenant Philander A. J. P. Jones of slander for calling him a rascal, scoundrel and coward.

¹⁸ Order of Isaac Chauncey dated 29 April 1813, CLB 4. William Vaughan’s court martial found him guilty and sentenced him to be suspended from “rank and emoluments” for three months. Chauncey reduced that to receiving a public reprimand and ordered “that his sword be returned to him and he return to his duty.” Chauncey was “persuaded that Mr. Vaughan will act with more discretion in future.” Chauncey was wrong.

station.”¹⁹ Directed to a trusted second-in-command, these orders were unusually restrictive but trust, in this case, was clearly absent.

Amidst all these official difficulties Leonard at least had the pleasure of female companionship. He brought a wife with him to Sackets Harbor and introduced her to the community. As the spouse of a senior officer she was warmly welcomed and immediately invited to several dinners, parties and other social gatherings in Sackets Harbor and nearby Brownville.

It did not take long, however, for questions to arise as to the actual status of “Mrs. Leonard.” Eventually it became known that while she was indeed a wife, she was not Leonard’s wife.²⁰ On Chauncey’s return from his first trip in mid-January he asked Leonard to “send her out of the country.” Leonard agreed and Chauncey later said he believed the matter was settled. She apparently left Sackets Harbor but stayed in the vicinity.²¹ As he told Leonard’s court martial, after returning to Sackets Harbor from his second trip Chauncey was surprised when he “saw them walking together publicly in the streets in this place.”²² Chauncey testified that Leonard had “acknowledged to me she was not his wife but his mistress — and said she was the wife of a Mr Williamson who was then absent.”

Several officers, including Lieutenant Melancthon Woolsey, attempted to resolve the situation by asking Leonard directly if the woman was his mistress or his wife. Leonard gave unconvincing answers.²³ The situation became more complicated when Leonard allowed a young midshipman, Thomas W. Freelon, to stay with him while Freelon was recovering from an illness.

¹⁹ Isaac Chauncey to James T. Leonard, 1 February 1813, CLB 3. When in Albany he was ordered to New York City and so informed Leonard; Isaac Chauncey to James T. Leonard, 10 February 1813, SNLRD 1813 item 51, roll 5.

²⁰ Leonard’s court martial included testimony from William M. Lord, a local tavern owner who provided a room in his house for “Mrs. Leonard.” When he heard rumors that she was not Leonard’s wife, he asked Leonard if that was the case and was told “in substance that he was not bound to tell me who she was, that if I got my pay for keeping her, it was sufficient for me.” Additional testimony from Tad Lawrence, a Brownville merchant, related that she was received, addressed and entertained as Leonard’s wife by Mrs. Samuel Brown, General Jacob Brown’s sister-in-law, at her home in Brownville three or four times. CMT.

²¹ Marine Captain Richard Smith testified at Leonard’s court martial that Leonard “has lived publicly and openly with this woman, except a short time last winter when she was absent” and that “she is generally understood by the officers of the navy to be his mistress and not his wife.” CMT. During her “short time” absence from Sackets Harbor, Leonard’s mistress may have lived at Walter Lord’s house. See note 20.

²² Chauncey left Sackets Harbor on 5 February 1813 for Albany and New York City, returning to Sackets Harbor on 3 March.

²³ Woolsey testified at Leonard’s court martial that “I told him ... that if she was his wife he was injuring himself and her by suffering the reports which were in circulation to pass uncontradicted — that if she was his mistress, he was injuring society by suffering her to associate with respectable families in this country who supposed her to be his wife — He replied that I might assure any one who inquired of me, that she was not his mistress — I however became satisfied that she was not his wife.” CMT.

At that time his mistress was absent but, as Chauncey testified, Leonard unwisely allowed the young midshipman to remain after she returned thereby creating even more speculation as to the bedroom activities in Leonard’s house.

None of this would have caused Leonard anything more serious than social ostracism and becoming even more unpopular with Chauncey were it not for his ill-advised choice of sleeping quarters and a spell of good weather. Before Leonard’s arrival in December Chauncey issued a general order that

*No officer or man on any pretext whatever is to sleep out of the vessel which he belongs to without permission first obtained from me in writing or recommended by the Doctor.*²⁴

This order was later reinforced by a general order issued by Leonard himself while Chauncey was absent. That order prohibited officers from sleeping outside their vessels or “being absent therefrom” between 8 p.m. and daylight without special permission from the commanding officer, at this time Leonard himself.²⁵ Before Chauncey left for Albany and New York City in February he told Leonard that “As soon as the [*Madison’s*] cabin is in a state to be occupied I request that you will sleep on board.”²⁶

Leonard, however, decided that sleeping on board the still incomplete *Madison* did not compare with the much warmer option available ashore: a bed with his mistress in it. Therefore Leonard began to regularly sleep on shore instead of on board the ship he commanded, in clear violation of the letter of Chauncey’s orders and the spirit of his own. This would be Leonard’s undoing.

In the late afternoon of 12 April 1813 the *Madison* was anchored in Black River Bay outside Sackets Harbor. While the bay was covered with ice, a spell of warmer weather made it clear that the ice was about to break up. That evening the wind shifted to the southwest and “blew heavy particularly in squalls.”²⁷ The ice broke up and about midnight the *Madison* began to drag its anchor and drift up the bay.²⁸ Lacking anyone senior on board, the small winter crew had

²⁴ General Order by Isaac Chauncey, 4 December 1812, CLB 3. This was a common requirement in most navies.

²⁵ General Order by James T. Leonard, 8 January 1813, CMT.

²⁶ Isaac Chauncey to James T. Leonard, 1 February 1813, CLB 3. As the requirement that a warship’s captain be on board through the night whenever possible was so commonly known, why did Chauncey specifically order Leonard’s compliance? Perhaps Chauncey feared Leonard needed that reminder.

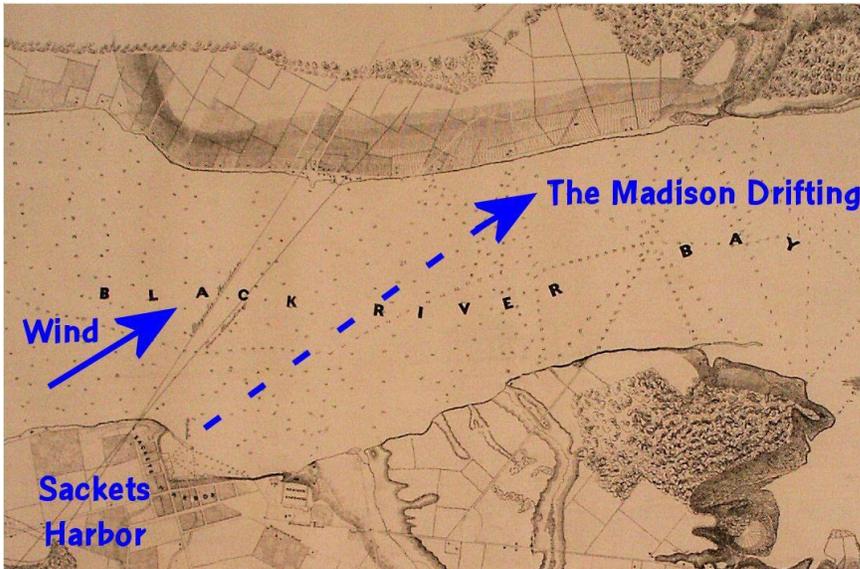
²⁷ CMT, testimony of Lieutenant Francis Gregory.

²⁸ Black River Bay, outside Sackets Harbor, has a silt-covered rock bottom and anchors do not “hold” well. Ben Ford, Katie Farnsworth, M. Scott Harris and Carrie Sowden, *War of 1812 Shipwrecks Project*:

trouble securing the ship. By daybreak the *Madison* had drifted a mile and was getting very close to shore.²⁹ Leonard, snug in bed at home with his “wife,” was totally unaware of the situation.

Fortunately Isaac Chauncey arose early that morning, noticed the problem, had himself rowed out to the *Madison* and directed the measures necessary to save the ship and return it to Sackets Harbor. He then asked “where’s Leonard?”

Apparently still unaware of the situation, James T. Leonard took his time that morning.



Track of the drifting Madison, Map detail from NARA RG 77 115-2

He did not arrive on board the *Madison* until nearly noon, when a court martial of which he was president was scheduled to convene. When court adjourned he immediately left the ship and did not return until that evening. He did not

have to worry about sleeping on board that night, however, as his bed was occupied by Commodore Chauncey.

That evening Chauncey informed Leonard that he was under arrest for disobedience of orders, neglect of duty, and dissolute and immoral practices, the last being, of course, related to his public dalliance with “Mrs. Williamson.” Until his court martial could be convened, Leonard was required to confine himself “to a district four miles square in or about this village.”³⁰ This was the standard restriction for an officer under arrest but the limits were more generous than usual.³¹

Combined Archaeological and Geological Survey of Black River Bay, Lake Ontario, Jefferson County, New York, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2012, p.31.

²⁹ Isaac Chauncey’s testimony, CMT.

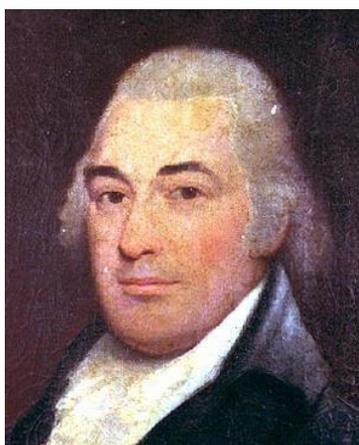
³⁰ Isaac Chauncey to James T. Leonard, 13 April 1813, SNLRC 1813 vol 2 item 176, roll 27.

³¹ Most officers under arrest were restricted to the “limits of the village” a much smaller area than one four miles square.

Three days later Chauncey wrote Navy Secretary William Jones informing him of Leonard’s arrest and asking him to authorize a court martial. In his letter to Jones, Chauncey spent as much ink describing Leonard’s activities with his mistress as he did in describing Leonard’s negligence with the *Madison*. Chauncey justified that by telling Jones:

*He now lives with her as publickly as if she was his wife, however criminal this conduct may be in itself by putting publick opinion so much at defiance, I should not have noticed it at this time if it had not led to a criminal neglect of his duty.*³²

Jones promptly authorized Chauncey to convene a court martial to try Leonard on the charges preferred against him.³³ Chauncey acknowledged this authority but informed Jones that “at



*William Jones by Gilbert Stuart
NHC NH-54764-KN*

present it would be impossible” to bring Leonard to trial.³⁴

This was true as Chauncey had just returned to Sackets Harbor after the attack on York and was about to leave to support the attack on Fort George.

On 29 May 1813, Leonard, the highest-ranking naval officer present at Sackets Harbor but still under arrest, was forced to be a bystander when the British attacked. Leonard quickly wrote an unofficial letter to Secretary Jones describing the attack, justifying his doing so by the fact that the naval officer in charge, Lieutenant Wolcott Chauncey, Isaac’s younger brother, was “absent up the river, when the express was making up.”³⁵ Leonard later had to revisit these events as he was called as a witness when Lieutenant John T. Drury was court martialed for his actions during the attack.³⁶

Shortly before this, Leonard had a personal tragedy. His younger brother, 23-year-old Frederick, a sailing master who Leonard encouraged to come to Sackets Harbor, died of fever

³² Isaac Chauncey to William Jones #3, 16 April 1813, SNLRC 1813 vol 3 item 2, roll 28.

³³ William Jones to Isaac Chauncey, 27 April 1813, SNLSO vol 10 p.378, roll 10.

³⁴ Isaac Chauncey to William Jones #17, 15 May 1813, NAUS, RG45, SNLRC 1813 vol 3 item 137, M125 roll 28.

³⁵ James T. Leonard to William Jones, 29 May 1813, SNLRD 1813 item 66, roll 5.

³⁶ Court Martial of John T. Drury, 8 July 1813, NAUS, RG45, Naval Courts Martial vol 4 case 143, M273 roll 6.

“brought about by fatigue” shortly after his return from the American raid on York, Upper Canada. Frederick was buried at Sackets Harbor with a large tombstone paid for by his brother.³⁷

Shortly afterwards Leonard wrote Secretary Jones complaining that he had heard nothing in reply to his request to be quickly brought to trial to “relieve me from this most unjust, oppressive, and dishonorable act of a commanding officer.”³⁸ Apparently agreeing with Leonard, Jones wrote Chauncey that “Captain Leonard, having been a long time under arrest, you will bring him to trial immediately.”³⁹ Chauncey wrote to Jones acknowledging receipt but also presuming that Jones’ order

*Was not intended to operate to the injury of the publick service. Under that impression I shall take upon myself the responsibility of deferring it until my return from my next cruise, after which he shall be brought to trial immediately.*⁴⁰

Leonard himself wrote Jones the day before noting that while “the fleet has now laid in this harbour a month & five days & likely to remain 14 days more, with officers of grade sufficient to make a court martial” Chauncey had not ordered that court martial.⁴¹ Recognizing that Leonard had a point, Chauncey wrote to Jones stating his belief that there would not be enough officers available “after excluding those which I have understood captain Leonard meant to object to.”⁴² Chauncey went on to claim it would be “particularly inconvenient and injurious to the publick service” to convene Leonard’s court martial at this time as “every officer and man is engaged from daylight until after dark in preparing the squadron for service.” He closed the letter by again promising Jones that “I shall lose no time however in bringing him to trial immediately upon my return.”⁴³

A week later, with Leonard’s letter in hand but without Chauncey’s, Secretary Jones wrote to both Leonard and Chauncey. He told Chauncey about Leonard’s letter and

³⁷ Frederick Augustus Leonard’s body was later reburied in the Military Cemetery at Sackets Harbor. Gary M. Gibson, *Service Records of U. S. Navy and Marine Corps Officers Stationed on Lake Ontario During the War of 1812*, 2nd edition (Sackets Harbor: 2012) p.109.

³⁸ James T. Leonard to William Jones, 3 June 1813, SNLRO 1813 item 69, M147 roll 5.

³⁹ William Jones to Isaac Chauncey #23, 26 June 1813, SNPLB pp.37-39.

⁴⁰ Isaac Chauncey to William Jones #60, 8 July 1813, SNLRC, 1813 vol 4 item 172, roll 29.

⁴¹ James T. Leonard to Isaac Chauncey, 7 July 1813, SNLRD 1813 item 82, roll 5.

⁴² When Leonard’s court was finally convened it included nearly every sea officer remaining at Sackets Harbor and Leonard objected to only one: Master Commandant Melancthon Woolsey.

⁴³ Isaac Chauncey to William Jones #60, 8 July 1813, SNLRC 1813 vol 4 item 172, roll 29.

*As he has been now near three months under arrest, nothing but the strongest necessity, and the absolute interest of the service, must be suffered to protract the decision of his case.*⁴⁴

Jones then reassured Leonard that he had again ordered Chauncey to convene his court martial and resolve the matter.⁴⁵ Two days later Jones received Chauncey’s letter justifying the delay. Jones, despite some misgivings about “defeating the end of justice” agreed with Chauncey that “delaying the expedition for the sole purpose of expediting the trial, is out of the question” but he again insisted that Leonard be brought to trial at “the earliest opportunity that the service will possibly admit.”⁴⁶

Before he received Jones’ letter an increasingly frustrated Leonard again wrote the navy secretary. This time he complained that while he still awaits his trial, since his arrest “crimes have been committed on this station by Lieuts,” and their court martials convened, trials ended and the sentences announced. If circumstances allowed courts to try other officers what was preventing Chauncey from ordering a court to try him? Furthermore, the fleet had now sailed and there was no hope of his receiving justice until it returned. Leonard concluded that he has

*No alternative but to bear with indignity this reproach or go away & break my arrest and thereby subject myself to dismissal from service & acknowledge the falsity of my accusations.*⁴⁷

Leonard was somewhat consoled when he later received Jones’ reassuring letter. At least the Navy Department was not ignoring him. However, he feared that

*The prospect of a court martial is now farther distant than ever; from the persecuting disposition of Commodore Chauncey, & a total disregard of the orders of the Navy department.*⁴⁸

Leonard also stated his belief that Chauncey had informed the department that the testimony Leonard gave during Lieutenant Drury’s court martial, unfavorable to his brother Wolcott, was prompted by Leonard’s “animosity to the Commodore.” Leonard protested that his opinion was common amongst those present at the time: Wolcott Chauncey’s retreat up Black River Bay,

⁴⁴ William Jones to James T. Leonard, 17 July 1813, SNPLB p.54.

⁴⁵ William Jones to Isaac Chauncey #29, 17 July 1813, SNPLB p.54.

⁴⁶ William Jones to Isaac Chauncey #30, 19 July 1813, SNPLB pp.57-58.

⁴⁷ James T. Leonard to William Jones, 26 July 1813, SNLRD 1813 item 89, roll 5.

⁴⁸ James T. Leonard to William Jones, 5 August 1813, SNLRD 1813 item 94, roll 5.

“flying from a foe,” was unnecessary. Many officers at the time as well as later historians, including this author, agree with Leonard’s opinion.⁴⁹

A month later Leonard again wrote Secretary Jones. It had been five months since his arrest, no court martial had yet been ordered, “nor have I had any communication with Com. Chauncey upon any subject since the beginning of my arrest.” He reported his increasing distress at his “sacrifice of time and loss of opportunity in the Navy” resulting from the delay.⁵⁰

While Leonard’s letter was travelling to Washington, Secretary Jones again reminded Chauncey of the need to “seize the first possible moment to convene a Court Martial for the trial of Capt. Leonard.”⁵¹ Four days later, with Leonard’s letter in hand, Jones wrote again assuring him that he had written Chauncey urging “the necessity of an immediate decision of your case.”⁵²

When Chauncey returned to Sackets Harbor in early October, Leonard wrote to Chauncey informing him that Jones had promised “that an immediate decision of my case will take place so soon as the squadron returns to Sacketts harbor.” Leonard asked for this decision or, if that was not happening, he would “conceive himself at liberty to repair to Washington” to settle his accounts.⁵³

Chauncey wrote back to Leonard making the now unbelievable claim that he was “as anxious as you possibly can be that a decision may be had in your case as soon as possible” and telling Leonard that his court martial must be further delayed as “at this time on the eve of an important expedition it would be utterly impossible“ to hold it. Chauncey also responded to Leonard’s intention to visit Washington to settle his accounts with a blunt statement:

*In answer to your threat of leaving this station, I presume that you are too well acquainted with the consequences to put it into execution — if, however, you should be so forgetful of the obligations of an officer in your situation as to leave the limits assigned to you by your arrest (which was liberal) you will do it at your peril and abide the consequences.*⁵⁴

⁴⁹ For example, Robert Malcomson, *Lords of the Lake* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1998) p.139; Patrick A. Wilder, *The Battle of Sackett’s Harbour 1813* (Baltimore: The Nautical & Aviation Publishing Co., 1994) p.131.

⁵⁰ James T. Leonard to William Jones, 13 September 1813, SNLRD 1813 item 124, roll 5.

⁵¹ William Jones to Isaac Chauncey, 19 September 1813, SNPLB pp.69-71..

⁵² William Jones to James T. Leonard, 23 September 1813, SNLSO vol 11 p.95, roll 11.

⁵³ James T. Leonard to Isaac Chauncey, 7 October 1813, included in SNLRC 1813 vol 6 item 136, roll 31.

⁵⁴ Isaac Chauncey to James T. Leonard, 8 October 1813, included in SNLRC 1813 vol 6 item 136, roll 31. Leonard’s accounts were not settled until 1823, at which time he was found to owe the government a large sum of money. Had Chauncey allowed Leonard to settle his accounts in 1813 and then return to Sackets Harbor, that difficulty may have been resolved much earlier.

Since June, Leonard had been repeatedly complaining to Secretary Jones that given the time he has been waiting for his court martial, the limits of his arrest were far from liberal. He was beginning to consider leaving which was a very unwise option. By breaking his arrest he would be, in effect, confessing his guilt and leaving himself open to further charges and almost certain dismissal. In his next letter to the secretary, to be sure Jones was aware of Leonard’s state of mind Chauncey included copies of the letters he had exchanged with Leonard.⁵⁵

Three weeks later, with the squadron back in Sackets Harbor for a week, Chauncey still refused to order Leonard’s trial. Leonard again wrote to Secretary Jones, this time pleading with him to issue a “peremptory call of officers to this court” as it was clear Chauncey had no intention of doing so any time soon.⁵⁶

A month later, with his squadron now in port for the winter and plenty of officers with time on their hands, Isaac Chauncey finally ran out of excuses.⁵⁷ Over seven months after Leonard was arrested and confined to Sackets Harbor, he finally got his court martial. Chauncey informed him his trial would take place on board the frigate *General Pike* at Sackets Harbor on 1 December 1813.⁵⁸



Captain Arthur Sinclair

Chauncey, perhaps wanting to compensate for his earlier excuse of not having enough officers available, packed the court. He ordered 12 officers to sit in judgment, including Captain Arthur Sinclair as president, Masters Commandant Melancthon T. Woolsey and William M. Crane and just about every lieutenant remaining on the station.⁵⁹ Civilian attorney Amos Benedict was appointed judge advocate.

⁵⁵ Isaac Chauncey to William Jones #90 and #92, 7 and 8 October 1813, SNLRC 1813 vol 6 items 136 and 146, roll 31.

⁵⁶ James T. Leonard to William Jones, 27 October 1813, SNLRD 1813 item 149, roll 5.

⁵⁷ Leonard was fortunate that the navy’s rules for courts martial were more liberal than those of the British Royal Navy. There, lieutenants were not allowed as members of a court martial. Had this been the case in the United States Navy, Chauncey would not have the five senior officers required to constitute a court and Leonard would still be waiting. *Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty’s Service at Sea* (1808) Section XII Chapter II Article I Item VI.

⁵⁸ Isaac Chauncey to James T. Leonard, 29 November 1813, CLB 5.

⁵⁹ Most naval courts martial had between five and seven members. Courts with up to 13 members were allowed but very unusual. *Articles of War* (1800), Article XXXV: “Provided, that no general court martial shall consist of more than thirteen, nor less than five members.” The lieutenants were John Pettigrew,

Leonard's trial began on schedule but in an attempt to reduce the number of reasons Chauncey could use to justify a delay, Leonard agreed to dispense with having his own attorney and that any defense witnesses not currently present would not be ordered to return to Sackets Harbor. Both concessions hampered his defense.⁶⁰

On the court's first day, they received a letter from Master Commandant Woolsey stating that "In consequence of my indisposition it will be impossible for me to attend the Court Martial on board the *General Pike* this day." The court decided to move their proceedings from the cramped quarters of the *General Pike* to the home of Sailing Master William Vaughan to allow Woolsey to join the court. This was the same William Vaughan who was arrested by Leonard's order earlier that year.

On Woolsey's appearance, Leonard objected that Woolsey "had exhibited strong prejudices against him" and he did not believe Woolsey would act impartially as a member of the court. After asking Woolsey if he could act impartially and receiving an affirmative answer, Leonard's objection was overruled and Woolsey joined the court.

Leonard was facing three separate charges. Each charge had one or more specifications and each specification was considered separately when arriving at a verdict. A "fully proven" finding under even one specification resulted in a guilty verdict and the awarding of some form of punishment.

The first charge was disobedience of orders with one specification: Leonard violated Chauncey's order that he sleep on board the *Madison* by sleeping on shore frequently between 30 March and 12 April 1813. Chauncey knew that too many people had witnessed Leonard's regular overnight absences from the *Madison* for him to have any defense. As expected, the court ruled that this charge was "fully proven." Leonard was guilty of disobeying Chauncey's order.

The second charge was neglect of duty and Chauncey provided five separate specifications: failure to prepare the *Madison* for service, leaving the *Madison* in the ice in an unprepared state, not visiting the *Madison* early in the morning of April 13th, not having the ship

Joseph S. Macpherson, Henry Wells, Samuel P. Macomber, James Dudley, Charles W. Skinner, Joseph Wragg and P. A. J. P. Jones. By December, many lieutenants obtained leave and left to spend the winter at a warmer place.

⁶⁰ Leonard informed Captain Arthur Sinclair, the future president of his court martial, of these concessions and Chauncey acknowledged them in his 8 October letter to Leonard, included in Isaac Chauncey to William Jones #92, SNLRC 1813 vol 6 item146, roll 31. Chauncey agreed to dispense with summoning any absent prosecution witnesses, which sounded fair but Chauncey knew all the witnesses he needed were already present.

prepared to meet any type of wind and weather, and finally for leaving the ship after the court martial adjourned before the *Madison* was fully secured and safe. Chauncey’s confidence that at least one of these specifications would be proven was well-founded. The court found Leonard innocent of the first specification but guilty of the other four.

The final charge was dissolute and immoral practices. Chauncey listed only one specification but it had a number of parts and unusually the court ruled on each part separately. On his accusatory statement, Chauncey started out well enough but his writing quickly changed into a lecture instead of a legal specification:

For introducing sometime in December last your mistress to the family of Major Samuel Brown and suffering her afterwards to pass as your wife and in violation of your promise to me you are now living with the same woman in the most public manner, whereby you neglect your duty to your country and to your ship, and set a bad example to the officers generally and the young midshipmen in particular, one of which lives in the house with you and your mistress!

This was the most difficult and delicate charge for the court to consider and most testimony was very circumspect. In particular, the full name of Leonard’s mistress was never given, nor where she came from, where her husband was, or even confirmation that she was married. The closest they came to identifying her was a reference to a “Mrs. Williamson.”⁶¹ Following the established custom of the time, she was never called to testify and would not have been even if she was still in the area, which is unlikely.

The court heard testimony from a number of navy and marine officers as well as from local citizens. After questioning by the prosecution, Leonard was given an opportunity to cross-examine each witness. Lacking legal counsel, Leonard sometimes asked questions that he should have avoided as the answers did him more harm than good. One example happened during Leonard’s cross-examination of Marine Captain Richard Smith about his encounter with “Mrs. Leonard”:

Question by Leonard: Has she ever suffered you to take any liberties with her which would be improper — for you to take were she my wife?

⁶¹ Brownville merchant Tad Lawrence’s testimony unfortunately brought the name of an innocent young girl, Fanny Canfield, into the story and she has become a local legend. Miss Canfield, the daughter of a respected local merchant, has been called Leonard’s mistress because of a note Lawrence testified she had written and signed while acting as Mrs. Leonard. After making that clear, his testimony ended with “Understood afterwards she did not write the note,” something local legend has overlooked. Other than Lawrence’s testimony there is no reference whatever to Miss Canfield during Leonard’s court martial or elsewhere. CMT.

Answer: She suffered me to take liberties which might be expected from her as your mistress, but which would be improper were she your wife.

Another time Leonard was cross examining Isaac Chauncey about Chauncey's request that Leonard send his mistress away:

Question by Leonard: Did I ever promise you I would not live with this woman again?

Answer: You promised me you would get rid of her, that you would send her away, and I understood the promise to be that she should not be kept here by you while on this station.

Question by Leonard: Did I promise you I would never live with this woman again?

Answer: The conversation I have related above — I did not request you to engage never to live with her again.

Leonard was also foolish enough to call Thomas W. Freelon, the midshipman Chauncey claimed was living in Leonard's house with his mistress, as a defense witness. Leonard's examination went well enough, but when it became the prosecution's turn the following exchange resulted:

Question by the prosecution: Did you frequently see her about the house?

Answer: Yes.

Question by the prosecution: Did you know that this lady was Captain Leonard's mistress?

Answer: Yes.

After deliberation the court decided that Leonard had not specifically introduced his mistress to Major Samuel Brown's family as his wife (so that part of the specification was "not proved") but that he had passed her off as his wife in general and by doing so and continuing to live openly with her he had set a bad example for other officers. The court found him guilty of this charge.

Officers accused of misconduct at a court martial almost always ended their defense by submitting a lengthy written statement addressing and refuting each individual specification. For some reason, perhaps the lack of legal counsel, Leonard failed to do this. Whatever Leonard's reason, when the last defense witness finished testifying the trial was over. Leonard never testified in his own defense and the court never received a written summary of that defense in his own words.

Leonard's court martial lasted eight days and on its conclusion the court was cleared and the members voted on each specification, in reverse order of seniority. Individual votes were never recorded and only a simple majority (seven members in this case) would acquit or convict. The court found Master Commandant James T. Leonard guilty of most specifications and sentenced him

To be suspended from service for the term of twelve months from the thirteenth day of April last, and to be publicly reprimanded by the Secretary of the Navy in a general order to be read on board every ship in the Navy of the United States, and at every station where there are naval officers.

It was the custom to keep the result of a naval officer’s court martial secret until approved by the Secretary of the Navy. Recognizing that this would take some time, and wanting to get the now-convicted Leonard away from Sackets Harbor, Chauncey readily agreed to his request to be allowed to travel to New York City and there await the news of the court’s decision.⁶² After being restricted to Sackets Harbor for almost eight months Leonard was as eager to depart as Chauncey was to see him gone.

So Leonard arrived in New York City, and waited, and waited. A month passed and neither Leonard nor Chauncey heard a word from the Navy Department regarding the court’s verdict. Leonard was the first to complain at the end of January 1814.⁶³ Chauncey followed a month later. Chauncey was worried that “there had been some informality in the proceedings” and the verdict of the court would be overturned by Secretary Jones. He felt better, however, after speaking with attorney Amos Benedict, the judge advocate, who reassured Chauncey that everything went according to law.

Chauncey also discovered that just because Leonard was no longer present, he could still be annoying. Chauncey complained to Navy Secretary Jones that

*Captain Leonard speaks of me and my character unbecoming the officer and gentleman particularly when he knows that his situation precludes the possibility of my noticing it.*⁶⁴

Two days after Chauncey’s letter, Leonard wrote another letter to Jones again asking that his sentence be made known to him.⁶⁵

The General Order from the Navy Department announcing the verdict and Leonard’s sentence and ordering that it be publically read was prepared on 15 January 1814. However, for some reason it did not reach Sackets Harbor until 4 March, the same day Chauncey posted his letter to Jones. Chauncey immediately ordered that the order be complied with and “be publicly read on Sunday next on board of each vessel of the squadron” and also to be read “to the Marines on parade.”⁶⁶

⁶² Isaac Chauncey to James T. Leonard, 10 December 1813, CLB 5.

⁶³ James T. Leonard to William Jones, 29 January 1814, SNLRD 1814 vol 1 item 33, roll 5.

⁶⁴ Isaac Chauncey to William Jones #10, 4 March 1814, SNLRC 1814 vol 2 item 99, roll 35.

⁶⁵ James T. Leonard to William Jones, 6 March 1814, SNLRD 1814 vol 1 item 76, roll 5.

As almost eight months of his twelve month suspension had already passed when he left Sackets Harbor for New York (the time he was under arrest counted), on 13 April 1814 Leonard could resume his duties, assuming the navy was willing to find any duties for him to perform. With every naval officer in the service aware of his reprimand, and the reasons for it, anyone would be justified in assuming that Leonard's future in the navy, and his hope for promotion, was gone forever. Certainly if a naval officer was convicted on such charges a century later his naval career would be over.

Surprisingly that was not the case. When Leonard's suspension expired he travelled to Washington and met with Secretary Jones. The meeting apparently went well and Leonard believed that Jones was willing to consider giving him a new command. In a letter to Jones a few days later, Leonard offered to accept the command of the sloop *Epervier*, recently captured from the British.⁶⁷

Whatever Leonard's hopes were, he was disappointed. Over three months passed with no orders from the Navy Department. Anxious to do something productive to aid the war effort, Leonard informed Secretary Jones that he had accepted New York Governor Daniel D. Tompkins' offer to command "a corps of Sea Fencibles" to defend New York City until he received orders from the Navy Department.⁶⁸ Jones readily approved Leonard's accepting Tompkins' offer acknowledging that

*Since your report of readiness for service, no suitable command has presented itself, except on the lake which, it was presumed, would not have been acceptable to you.*⁶⁹

Even if Leonard had been willing to accept a command on Lake Ontario it is certain that Chauncey would have done everything in his power to block that appointment. Leonard would have to wait for another opportunity to arise.

And arise it did, but not until the war was almost over. In early 1815 Master Commandant James T. Leonard received the pleasant news that he was promoted to captain.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Memo from Isaac Chauncey, 4 March 1814, CLB 5. Chauncey acknowledged receipt of this order in a letter to Jones and Chauncey also sent a copy of the order to Jesse Elliott, commanding at Erie, Pennsylvania; Isaac Chauncey to William Jones #12, 6 March 1814, SNLRC 1814 vol 2 item 19, roll 35 and Isaac Chauncey to Jesse Elliott, 10 March 1814, CLB 5.

⁶⁷ James T. Leonard to William Jones, 14 May 1814, SNLRO 1814 vol 2 item 81, roll 13.

⁶⁸ James T. Leonard to William Jones, 30 August 1814, SNLRD 1814 vol 2 item 27, roll 5. The Sea Fencibles were a naval militia formed to assist in the defense of coasts and harbors. Command of such a unit was an honorable post but well outside the mainstream of the war.

⁶⁹ William Jones to James T. Leonard, 3 September 1814, SNLSO vol 11 p.413, roll 11.

Given Leonard’s court martial conviction, why was he promoted? Unfortunately nothing in the records offers a reason. However, by early 1815 William Jones was gone, replaced by Benjamin W. Crowninshield. At the same time Isaac Chauncey was himself in conflict with the navy department over his next post and the money owed him by the government. Finally there was the feeling in Washington that Leonard’s court martial had been unreasonably delayed by Chauncey. These factors likely gave the Navy Department the opportunity to take a fresh look at Leonard’s case resulting in his promotion. In addition, while the War of 1812 was actually over, word of the Treaty of Ghent had not reached Washington when Leonard’s promotion was approved by the Senate. An officer of Leonard’s experience and apparent ability would soon be needed to command one of the new warships under construction on the Atlantic.



Benjamin W. Crowninshield by U. D. Tenney — NHC NH 54721-KN

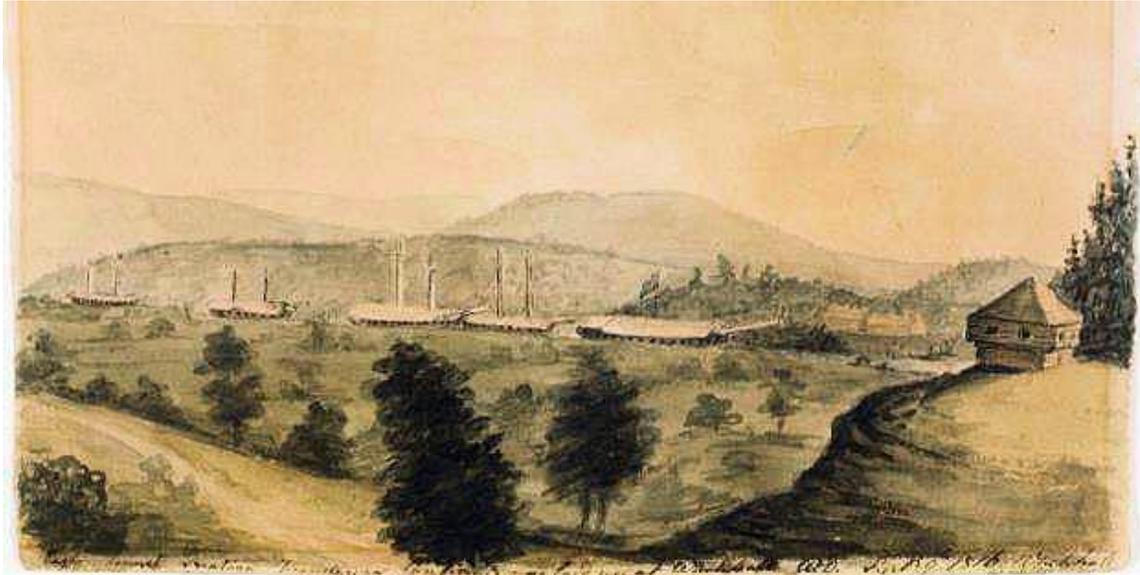
For the moment however, Captain Leonard was still out of a job, but not for long. That spring he was appointed to command the naval station on Lake Champlain. During the war Lake Champlain was a very important command as it guarded the most direct route to Montreal and also from Canada to Albany and the Hudson River. By war’s end the American squadron on that lake included seven warships and a number of gunboats.⁷¹ Had the war continued into 1815, he would have become “Commodore Leonard.”

Unfortunately for Leonard, with the war over, the Lake Champlain station was about as out-of-the-way place as the navy could find to station a now-senior officer who had become something of an embarrassment to the department. There is no record that any other captain wanted the post. In addition to these laid-up warships anchored at Whitehall, New York, Leonard had a staff of only one lieutenant, one sailing master and a few seamen. Too few men to put even the smallest warship back in service. Even a marine guard was considered unnecessary.

⁷⁰ President Madison submitted Leonard’s promotion to the Senate for their approval on 1 February 1815. The Senate gave their consent on 4 February 1815. *Executive Proceedings of the Senate*, II (Washington: Duff Green, 1828): 607, 615.

⁷¹ The force on Lake Champlain at the beginning of 1815 included the 37 gun frigate *Confiance*, the 26 gun corvette *Saratoga*, the 20 gun brig *Eagle*, and the smaller vessels *Ticonderoga*, *Linnet*, *Chubb*, *Preble* and *Finch*. This was a more powerful squadron than Chauncey had on Lake Ontario in 1813.

By the end of 1815, Leonard's force was reduced to five warships and a few row galleys after the others had been sold.⁷² By the early 1820s all the remaining warships were so decayed as to be worthless and most had already sunk.⁷³ In 1821 the Navy Commissioners declared the Lake Champlain warships unworthy of repair. Relations with the British had improved and there seemed little chance they would ever be needed.



Leonard's last command: the Lake Champlain fleet laid up at Whitehall, NY in September 1816. From left: Eagle, Linett, Saratoga, Ticonderoga and Confiance. Lake Champlain Maritime Museum collection.

On 10 June 1823, Leonard had his accounts settled for the period since 1812. The audit showed a balance owed by him to the government of \$23,261.02 and Leonard's monthly salary (\$100.00) was withheld until the debt was repaid.⁷⁴ Until then, Leonard received only his daily rations allowance. As commandant on Lake Champlain, this was \$96.00/month, enough income for him to live comfortably.

By the early 1820s Leonard was looking for another job. Unfortunately his nemesis, Isaac Chauncey, was serving as one of the Navy Commissioners between 1820 and 1824. During that

⁷² By the fall of 1815 only the *Confiance*, *Saratoga*, *Eagle*, *Ticonderoga* and *Linnet* remained at Whitehall.

⁷³ In 1820, Leonard reported that the frigate *Confiance* had sunk and he recommended breaking her up. James T. Leonard to Smith Thompson, 8 April 1820, SNLRC, 1820 vol 2 item 117 roll 67.

⁷⁴ Circular from Richard Cutts, 23 June 1823, "List of persons in the service of the United States, who are in arrears on the books of the Fourth Auditor's Office, 1823," NAUS, RG 217, entry 804 item 193. Leonard was not alone. The commandant at the Sackets Harbor NY naval station, Captain Melancthon T. Woolsey, had his accounts audited at the same time and was found to owe \$43,817.93. Officers on the lakes often spent a great deal of government money but failed to keep all the receipts for those expenditures. Leonard apparently found many of those missing receipts as the amount he owed was reduced to \$3,899.20 on 30 November 1824. With that reduction, Leonard would be out of debt by March 1828 and his pay would resume.

time Leonard had little chance of being offered a new post. After the sale of the last of the navy's property on Lake Champlain in 1825 Leonard was never offered another command.⁷⁵ Despite numerous requests to the Navy Department, Leonard remained on the books as “Commander on Lake Champlain.” Leonard's last known request for a new post was in July 1832. At that time he reported his health to be “in excellent condition, as it generally is.”⁷⁶ As before, no new post was offered. Four months later, on 9 November 1832, Leonard, now 54, died suddenly at his residence in New York City.⁷⁷ There is no known record that he ever married.

⁷⁵ William Bainbridge to Samuel L. Southard, 2 June 1825, NAUS, RG 45, *Miscellaneous Letters to the Secretary of the Navy*, 1825 vol 4 item 55.

⁷⁶ James T. Leonard to Levi Woodbury, 14 July 1832, SNLRC 1832 vol 7 item 55 roll 172.

⁷⁷ Washington DC, *National Intelligencer*, 14 November 1832.