

Chapter I

Boyhood at the Trap



This story about Captain Thomas Macdonough begins with James McDonough, his grandfather. James migrated from Ireland to Delaware in 1725 and settled at the Trap, St. Georges Hundred, New Castle County, Delaware. The name Trap refers to McDonough's farm and also to a nearby settlement about six miles from Middletown. The Trap village was named McDonough in 1844 by the post office. James was a physician and a man of strong character. James had two brothers. John settled in Newtown, Long Island, and Augustin went to the East Indies.

In 1746 James married Lydia Laroux, also of St. Georges Hundred. They had seven children: Thomas, Bridget, John, James, Patrick, Mary, and Micah.

Their oldest son, Thomas, studied medicine and became a physician. In 1770 he married Mary Vance, a neighbor of the McDonoughs.

In March 1776 Delaware elected Dr. McDonough to be a major in a battalion in the Revolutionary War. Major McDonough immediately joined the command at Dover, Delaware. He was a commander at the battle of Long Island in August, where he won the praise of General George Washington for gallantry, and in the battle of White Plains, New York, October 28. Here he received a wound which incapacitated him from active duty the last two months of service. The battalion was disbanded in

January 1777 and the major received an honorable discharge.

During the remainder of his life Dr. Thomas served his state in many civic positions. During his service on the Privy Council¹ he became a “close friend of Caesar Rodney,”² who was elected president of Delaware March 31, 1778. Caesar Rodney’s nephew, Caesar Augustus Rodney, was also a friend of Dr. Thomas and his son, Captain Thomas.

In 1788 Dr. McDonough was elected third Justice of the Court of Common Pleas and Orphans Court of New Castle County. In 1791 he was elected second Justice of these courts.

The records of St. Ann’s Episcopal Church at Middletown show that Major McDonough was one of the wardens in 1793 and 1794.

During the early years of their marriage, Dr. Thomas and Mary McDonough lived in a small log house at the Trap. Here, on December 31, 1783, was born Thomas, Jr., their sixth child and second son, who would be a navy hero.

The following year, 1784, the family moved to a large brick house built on land owned by James McDonough, father of Dr. Thomas and grandfather of Thomas, Jr. Here four more McDonoughs came into the family. Young Thomas’s brothers and sisters were: Lydia, Hannah, James, Mary, Hester, Samuel, Jane, John, and Joseph.

During these times the main house consisted of only one principal room downstairs and two smaller rooms on the second floor. However, the use of brick and the fine interior woodwork as displayed in the fully panelled end wall on the second floor indicate that, despite the apparent

smallness of the dwelling, its builder and residents were people of superior affluence in the immediate area of St. Georges Hundred. This is further borne out by Patrick MacDonough's 1803 inventory which listed among other things six yellow Windsor chairs, an eight-day clock, silver items such as teaspoons, sugar tongs and a creamer, and a "pleasure sleigh." Other buildings at this time were a granary, corn crib, smokehouse, and kitchen.³

The McDonough children had a happy childhood on their father's farm and often visited their grandparents nearby. According to the stories of their neighbors, the McDonough boys liked to play jokes on the residents of the Trap village.

A legend told by Lewis Vandegrift in Volume XVII of the papers on the Historical Society of Delaware recalls this tendency of the McDonough boys. It seems that brother James ordered a coffin for a certain lady he assured the coffin-maker "was on the brink of death." The tradesman worked through the night but, on delivery of the coffin, lo and behold he saw the lady walking out her front door. He was so angry, he insisted that James pay for the coffin. James, with the assistance of his laughing brothers, took the burial piece home and propped it up in a corner. And there it stood for years, Vandegrift says, "a receptacle for good cheer and hospitality."⁴

In 1822, Captain Macdonough wrote from Middletown, Connecticut to his sister Lydia in Delaware:

I should like to visit the old home where I have spent some youthful, happy hours; to stroll about the fields and woods as I used to do.⁵



Thomas
died
Dec. 23, 1817

Patrick
died
Sep. 27, 1803

Sarah McNunn
died
March 26, 1827

Macdonough family graveyard

In his moments of nostalgia Macdonough's thoughts probably turned back to happy winter evenings with his family gathered around the fireplace at the Trap farm. The children listened spellbound to their father's stories of the hardships and courage of Revolutionary War soldiers.

Macdonough's parents did not live to an old age. His mother, Mary, died in 1792 at the age of 41. Three years later Dr. Thomas died at age 48. The commodore's parents were buried beside his grandparents, James and Lydia, in a small plot near the Macdonough homestead at the Trap.

Thomas, Jr. was twelve years old when his father died. No doubt his uncle Patrick helped Thomas's oldest sister, Lydia, care for the orphaned children still at home. With the next generation, Thomas, Jr. changed the spelling of his name to Macdonough.

The reader will notice throughout the book that Thomas's last name will be spelled in two ways, depending on the historical work quoted from. The McDonoughs and the Macdonoughs are the same family.

Another small confusion in this story is the reference to the Middletowns. As a boy Thomas lived near Middletown, Delaware, and when he married he lived in Middletown, Connecticut.

Finally, we refer to Thomas Macdonough as "the Commodore." This term was given him after the battle on Lake Champlain but it was not an official rank used by the navy in those days. He was Captain Macdonough. It is more an affectionate and honorary title than real.

Ships Thomas Macdonough Sailed

Ship	Date		Purpose
<i>Ganges</i>	May 15	1800	War with France
<i>Constellation</i>	October 20	1801	To cruise in Mediterranean
<i>Constellation</i>	July	1802	Fought in Tripoli
<i>Philadelphia</i>	August	1803	Tripoli
<i>Enterprise</i>	December 14	1803	To rescue the <i>Philadelphia</i>
<i>Intrepid</i>	February 16	1804	To burn the <i>Philadelphia</i>
<i>Enterprise</i>	June 3	1805	Peace with Tripoli
<i>Syren</i>		1806	
	Summer	1806	Went for visit to Middletown, Connecticut
<i>Wasp</i>	January	1807	
	March	1807	Recruiting
<i>Gulliver</i>	March	1809	Commercial ship (Traveled to East India for one year)
	August	1811	(back in charge of gunboats)
<i>Jeannette Snow</i>	March 12	1812	Commercial ship
	June	1812	War with Great Britain