

THE CORBET U.S.S. GEORGE WASHINGTON, OF THE MEDITERRANEAN SQUADRON (1800-1802), IN A SPANISH GENTLEMAN'S COLLECTION WATERCOLOR

Dr. Alfonso de Ceballos-Escalera y Gila, Viscount of Ayala
Fellow of the Real Academia de la Mar

It is hardly known in the European marine environment the fact that, since 1800, the then young Republic of the United States of America (better: of the the center of the North of America), permanently sustained a naval force in the Mediterranean Sea, then domain of the British and French squads.

This naval force, known as *Mediterranean Squadron*, fwas permanently between 1801 and 1818; and later, Washington sent several squads with specific missions between 1820 and 1865 –when it was appointed *European Squadron*-.

The strategic interest of this United States naval action was headed to Project the Northamerican merchant vessels in those Waters, and to survey and erase the Tunisian and Berber piracy, later that coming from the Greek islands. Should be pointed out that the United States held two wars against the Tunisian and Algerian regencies (the *Barbary Wars*), the first one in 1801-1805, and the second one in 1815. Those combats along the Tripoli coasts left a deep memory in the United States sailors and soldiers and contributed to forge the later grandeur of the today redoubtable *U.S. Navy*:

Dr. Alfonso de Ceballos-Escalera y Gila, Viscount of Ayala

that's why the famous himn of the *U.S. Marine Corps* begins with the words *From the Halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli...*⁽¹⁾.

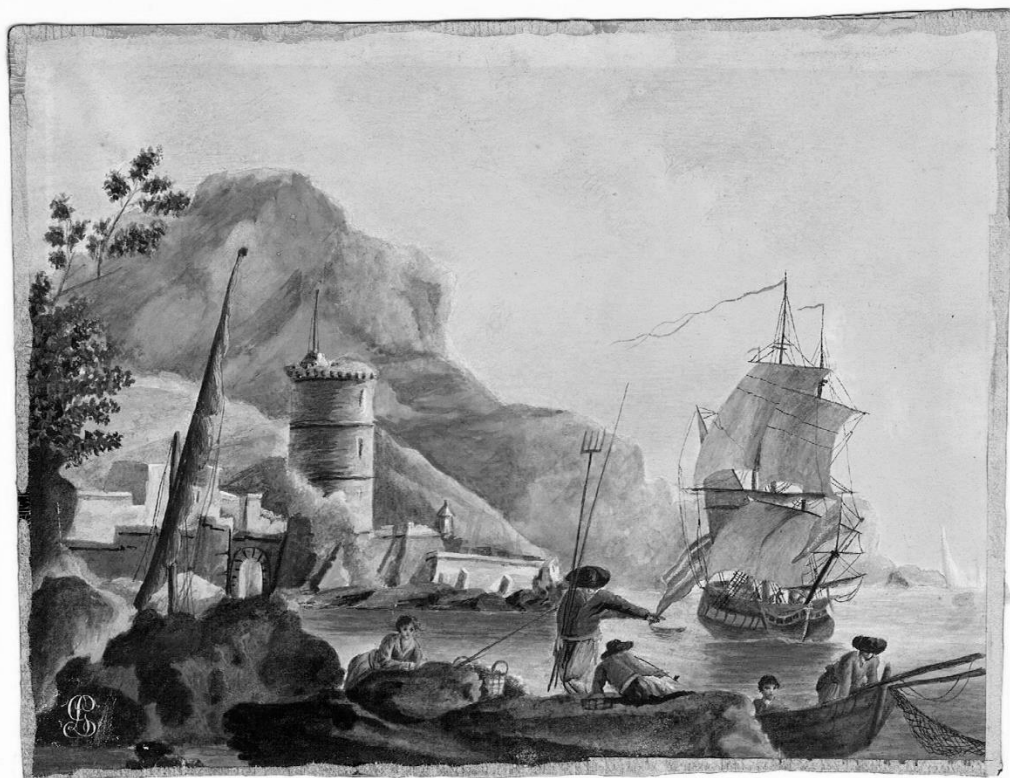
The apparition of a quite interesting watercolor undoubtedly representing one of the ships which was part of the United States force in the Mediterranean Sea, kept in the collection of a Spanish gentleman, provoked us to handle the pen to gloss its artistic and historiographic semblance.

It is watercolor on paperboard, a small format work, 20x15'5 cm oblong. Representing a cove with rocks and fishing boats in foreground, with a fortified villa in the medium plane –highlighting a great round crenellated tower with its gate-, and in the background a high cliffs. In the water, a medium-sized vessel, navigating in sail peaking two United States flags. The work, ralthough simple, demonstrates a remarkable ease with the brush.

The work belongs clearly to the Napolitan style, although it is useless to define the geographical position of the scene, nor the author's nationality, as this style was widely imitated all around Europe since mid 18th Century to the first third of 20th Century, specially by French, British and Dutch artists.

¹ . About the *U.S. Mediterranean Squadron* may consult the works of Gardner W. ALLEN, *Our Navy and the Barbary Corsairs* (Chester, 1905); and Joshua E. LONDON, *Victory in Tripoli: How America's War with the Barbary Pirates established the U.S. Navy and shaped a Nation* (New Jersey, 2005).

*THE CORBET U.S.S. GEORGE WASHINGTON,
OF THE MEDITERRANEAN SQUADRON (1800-1802),
IN A SPANISH GENTLEMAN'S COLLECTION WATERCOLOR*



Curiously, the watercolor is carefully signed –but being a minor work– with a very well designed cipher on characters only used in the Georgian England: the letters of the cipher are **G-L**, as well as **L-G**. Once consulted the most important artists signature and cipher data base –John Castagno’s web <http://www.artistssignatures.com>–, it seems the mentioned letters might correspond to the Dutch painter **Gerrit Lamberts** (Amsterdam, 1776-1850). Obviously the cipher may not be attributed by the moment to that artist, who dedicated his work to urban landscape and to Rijksmuseum

conservation, and from whom are not known travels nor stays near the Mediterranean Sea, but as author of a few marine paintings⁽²⁾.

Let's see the represented vessel in the watercolor. Judging by its rig, it should be a corbet (taking twenty cannons, counting the ports), with three poles, bowsprit, ratchet and mainmast, all of them with square rig, and the mizzen with lateen sailing. Realize that these ships, due to their lightweight and their large canvas in relation with their light displacement were able to get high velocity with good wind. That's why they were suitable to fight piracy.

Nevertheless, the identification of the represented vessel must be addressed from the watercolor itself, and from the lists of the *Mediterranean Squadron* serving ships during the first Barbary War (1801-1805), because the represented characters and the style of the work point to those dates of the *Napoleonic period*.

And checked out this class of ships (corbet or *sloop of war* in the time Anglosaxon naval lexicon), there was only one in the *Mediterranean Squadron*: the appointed *George Washington*, 624 tons displacement, 33 metres in length and 10 metres broad, mounting 24 cannons of 9 inches and 8 of 6, with a crew of 220 men. She had been built as a merchant ship in Providence in 1793, cost US\$69.024, and bought by the Congress in 1798. She was in the first and second turnovers of the Mediterranean fleet, between 1801 and 1802, taking part in the first Barbary War. She was the first United States warship to enter the Mediterranean Sea (September of 1800), under the command of Captain William Bainbridge, who was substituted later –maybe temporarily- by Captain John Shaw.

² . News about the artist in the *Biographisch woordenboek der Nederlanden*, vol. 11 (1865), by A.J. van der AA.

*THE CORBET U.S.S. GEORGE WASHINGTON,
OF THE MEDITERRANEAN SQUADRON (1800-1802),
IN A SPANISH GENTLEMAN'S COLLECTION WATERCOLOR*

By the way, the *George Washington* visited in the end of 1800 the Spanish port of Alicante and returned to the United States to be repaired. Back in the Mediterranean Sea in the first months of 1801, visited French and Italian ports –in one of them the watercolor could had be done-, then to Malaga and once again Philadelphia in April of 1802. After an inspection and due to her poor condition she was immediately removed of the *U.S. Navy*, and sold in May of that year⁽³⁾.

³. About the ship, see the essays by Donald L. CANNEY, *The old steam navy* (Annapolis, 1900); and by Hovard Irving CHAPELLE, *The History of the American Sailing Navy. The ships and their development* (New York, 1949).

Dr. Alfonso de Ceballos-Escalera y Gila, Viscount of Ayala



Lets do a portrait of the main commander of our vessel: William Bainbridge, born in Princeton, then British province of New Jersey, in 1774. Started his naval carrer as merchant officer (1792-1798), joining the newborn *U.S. Navy* in 1798. Second Officer in the schooner *U.S.S. Retaliation* in West Indies, surrendered in front of two French frigates. The next year of 1799 commanded the bric *U.S.S. Norfolk*, with 18 cannons. In 1800, prior to the first Barbary War, was appointed commander of the

*THE CORBET U.S.S. GEORGE WASHINGTON,
OF THE MEDITERRANEAN SQUADRON (1800-1802),
IN A SPANISH GENTLEMAN'S COLLECTION WATERCOLOR*

U.S.S. George Washington, which sailed to Argel and to Istanbul. Afterwards commanded the frigate *U.S.S. Philadelphia*, which stuck in Tripoli, where he was prisoner together with his crew for nine months. After released, he went back to the United States, where he was trailed and absolved. He after headed the port of Charleston and the frigates *U.S.S. President* (1809-1812) and *U.S.S. Constitution* (1812-), capturing the British powerful *H.M.S. Java*. Since then Bainbridge and his crew were considered national heroes; was awarded with the Congress gold medal and New York ordered his portrait from Gilbert Stuart (1755-1828), who made it *circa* 1814, today at the *United States Naval Academy Museum*. In 1815, as commodore, participated in the second Barbary War or Algerian War heading the *Mediterranean Squadron* (command held up to 1821). When returned home served in land until his dead in Philadelphia in 1833, where was buried. Several United States ships were named after him. As well as several cities, fortresses and streets after him⁽⁴⁾.

It seems he was substituted in the corbet command by Captain John Shaw; it should have happened when the last return of the ship to the United States, March-April 1802. Shaw, born in Mountmelick (Ireland) in 1773, went to United States in 1790, established as merchant marine in Philadelphia. When the U.S. Navy was organized in 1798 he was enlisted as lieutenant, serving in the *U.S.S. Montezuma* against the French. In 1799 commanded the schooner *U.S.S. Enterprise*, capturing seven French ships and

⁴. Thomas HARRIS, *The life and services of Commodore William Bainbridge, U.S. Navy* (Philadelphia, 1837); James Fenimore COOPER, *Lives of distinguished American naval officers* (Philadelphia, 1846); James BARNES, *Commodore Bainbridge: from the gunroom to the quarter-deck* (1897); H.A.S. DEARBORN, *The life of William Bainbridge* (Princeton, 1931); and David F. LONG, *Ready to hazard: A Biography of Commodore William Bainbridge, 1774-1833* (Hannover N.H., 1981).

Dr. Alfonso de Ceballos-Escalera y Gila, Viscount of Ayala

recovering several American merchant ships, gaining a lot of fame. In 1800, commanding the frigate *U.S.S. Adams* joined the *Mediterranean Squadron* and took place in the first Barbary War. Promoted to Captain in 1807, in the war of 1812 against the British headed the naval station of New Orleans and the frigate *U.S.S. United States*. He died in Philadelphia in September 1823. Several United States ships were named after him, as well as a Caribbean island⁵.

In conclusion, I consider the work belonging to the collection of the mentioned Spanish gentleman is a truly iconographic rarity, as the images of the then new born U.S. Navy (created and organized in 1798) are very few. And there is no more left of the corbet *U.S.S. George Washington*, which the ship we identify in the watercolor. Its value is not the artistic – although it is a carefully done work of art-, but iconographic. Its knowledge and divulgation engrows the United States naval historiography of its foundational time.

⁵. James Fenimore COOPER, *Lives of distinguished American naval officers* (Philadelphia, 1846); and also *History of the Navy of the United States of America* (New York, 1856).