**Oliver Cromwell**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frigate</th>
<th>Commander Harman Courter</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania Privateer Ship</td>
<td>7 February 1777-19 May 1777</td>
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</table>

**Commissioned/First Date:** 7 February 1777

**Out of Service/Cause:** 19 May 1777/captured by HM Sloop *Beaver*

**Owners:** George Woolsey of Baltimore, Maryland; and John Pringle et al; James Caldwell; and John Bayard, all of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

**Tonnage:** 220, 248, 264

**Battery:**

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<tr>
<th>Number/Caliber</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Broadside</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>24/</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Total: 24 cannon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Broadside: 12 cannon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swivels:</td>
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**Date Reported:** 7 February 1777

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<tr>
<td>12/9-pounder</td>
<td>108 pounds</td>
<td>54 pounds</td>
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<tr>
<td>6/6-pounder</td>
<td>36 pounds</td>
<td>18 pounds</td>
</tr>
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<td>6/4-pounder</td>
<td>24 pounds</td>
<td>12 pounds</td>
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<td>Total: 24 cannon/168 pounds</td>
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**Date Reported:** 19 May 1777

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**Crew:**

1. 7 February 1777: 150 [total]
2. 19 May 1777: 125 [total]
3. 20 July 1778: 135 [total]

**Description:** 88’ length on the deck, 73’ length on the keel, 25’6” extreme beam, 13’ depth of hold, 5’4” height between decks; called “very handsome” by the British, with ports for all guns and able to fight her entire crew under cover.
Officers: (1) Prize Master William Gregory, [February] 1777-13 June 1777; (2) Prize Master William Forsyth, [February] 1777-26 May 1777

Cruises: (1) Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to the West Indies and various cruises around the West Indies, 17 February 1777-19 May 1777

Prizes: (1) [unknown] slaver, [10 April] 1777
(2) Ship [unknown], [10 April] 1777
(3) Ship Champion (Fellows), off Tobago, British West Indies, [10 April] 1777
(4) Brig Lark, [20 April] 1777
(5) Brig St. George, [20 April] 1777
(6) Schooner Apollo (Tobias Collins), [20 April] 1777
(7) Ship Mercury (Nathan Coffin), [20 April] 1777

Actions: (1) Action with British Transport [unknown] Lady's Adventure, 13 April 1777
(2) Action with HM Sloop Beaver, 19 May 1777

Comments:

Oliver Cromwell was a large ship-rigged privateer fitted out at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, probably in the winter of 1776-1777. Her owners are not exactly known, but two persons with some concern in her were George Woolsey of Baltimore, Maryland and John Pringle of Philadelphia. It was reported that her total outfit probably cost £20000. Harman (or Harmon) Courter was selected as her commander. He was a veteran of the New York Privateer Brig Enterprize, on which he had served as Second Mate. Oliver Cromwell’s $10,000 bond was dated 7 February 1777 and signed by Courter, John Bayard and James Caldwell, both of Philadelphia. She was stated to be a ship of twenty-four guns, with a crew of 150 men.

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1 NDAR, “George Woolsey to John Pringle,” 8: 278
2 NDAR, “Captain James Jones, R.N., to Vice Admiral James Young,” 8: 1029
4 Hahn, Harold M., Ships of the American Revolution and their Models, Naval Institute Press, Annapolis: 1988, 75, 78
The former history of the *Oliver Cromwell* is not certain. She was said to have been built in Philadelphia. She measured 88' length on the deck, 73' length on the keel, 26'1” extreme beam, 13' depth of hold, 5'4” height between decks, and was later called “very handsome” by the British, with ports for all guns and able to fight her entire crew under cover. As converted *Oliver Cromwell* was a miniature frigate. She was said to measure 248 tons.

*Oliver Cromwell* dropped down the Delaware River to New Castle. She sailed from there on 17 February, bound for the West Indies.

*Oliver Cromwell* cruised in the West Indies, in the area around Martinique. She may be the privateer reported to have taken two prizes from the Cork convoy. These

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1. Winfield, *British Warships in the Age of Sail 1714-1792*, 290. In Millar, *American Ships of the Colonial & Revolutionary Periods*, 207-208, different dimensions are given: 85'9” length on the deck, 69' length on the keel, 26' beam, and 12'5” depth in the hold. Millar thinks she was built in Rhode Island in 1774.

6. NDAR, “Journal of His Majesty’s Sloop Beaver, Captain James Jones,” 8: 999; “Captain James Jones, R.N., to Vice Admiral James Young,” 8: 1039

7. Winfield, *British Warships in the Age of Sail 1714-1792*, 290

were sent into Martinique. A British intelligence report of 9 April 1777 indicates the *Oliver Cromwell* was in port at Martinique; she is listed with a battery of twenty-six guns and a crew of 150 men.

On 13 April 1777 the British Army Transport *Lady’s Adventure* (James Cooper) was off the Île a Vache, Saint-Domingue, French West Indies. Cooper saw a large ship to the southwest, standing north under easy sail. The ship got right ahead of *Lady’s Adventure*, tacked to the south, and shortened sail. Cooper thought she wanted to speak to him. The stranger was about three quarters of a mile away, between *Lady’s Adventure* and the sun. Cooper shortened sail and the ship raised either blue, or white, colors and fired a gun to leeward. Cooper noted the time as 1730, ran up British colors and also fired a gun to leeward. This was evidently the wrong answer to the stranger’s signal and she began to edge away. Cooper put a round in front of the ship, which was ignored. *Lady’s Adventure* fired again: the ship raised all sail and stood away before the wind. Cooper fired a third shot, which he thought struck the ship. The stranger now hauled her wind, hoisted her colors, and fired a broadside at the British, which was returned. The ship wore around and fired another broadside, which was also returned. Finally, the ship fired three guns, which Cooper again answered. She then set sail and stood inshore, being about twenty miles from Port Louis. Cooper reported that she had twenty-four guns on her gun deck and six more on her quarterdeck. Cooper thought it best not to follow her because of the great number of passengers aboard, and steered for Nevis with the ship *Mermaid* (Bowie). Cooper stated the stranger had fought him under French colors. This engagement was possibly with the *Oliver Cromwell*.

*Oliver Cromwell* was next noted on 30 April, when it was reported that she had sent several prizes

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9 NDAR, "Gazette of the State of South Carolina, Monday, April 28, 1777," 8: 460-461


11 NDAR, “Captain James Cooper to Vice Admiral Clark Gayton,” 8: 343-344 and 344 note
into Martinique. These may have been the prizes reported on 5 May 1777 as having been captured by Oliver Cromwell “last week.” Three were noted: an unknown slave vessel from Guinea, Africa with a cargo of three hundred slaves, captured in the Tobago area; a ship from London, captured in the Tobago area; and the ship Champion (Fellows), with a cargo of sugar and cotton, which was taken moving along the Tobago coast and sent into St. Lucia, French West Indies, where the cargo was unloaded. A further report, on 14 May, lists other prizes for the Oliver Cromwell: the brig Lark, from Cork, Ireland, with potatoes, beef and herring; the brig St. George, from Africa with 190 slaves; the schooner Apollo (Tobias Collins), from Whitehaven, Scotland, with cordage valued at £800; and the ship Mercury, from Glasgow, Scotland and Cork, with beef, butter, dry goods, nails, copper and tinwares. All these prizes were sent into Martinique, certainly before the end of April.

Mercury was sent on to Massachusetts under Prizemaster William Gregory. Another report states that Mercury was a 120-ton brig under Nathan Coffin, bound from London with a cargo of dry goods and other items. The dry goods alone were estimated to be worth £14000. She was Oliver Cromwell’s seventh prize and was captured near St. Bartholomew’s. On her route to the United States, Mercury was spoken by a South Carolina vessel, at 34°30'N, 64°00'W, on 23 June 1777. Gregory reported all was ell on board. He valued the prize’s dry goods at £14000.

Mercury arrived safely at Bedford, Massachusetts about 12 June 1777 where her cargo was valued at £18000. It was reported that she was cut out of a harbor at Barbados. She was libeled on 26 June and tried on 16 July 1777.

Within a short time after arriving at Martinique, Apollo was dispatched to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania under William Forsyth as prize master. She next turns up on 26 May 1777, in Sinepuxent Inlet, Virginia, when she was captured by HM Armed Sloop Haerlem and sent into New York, New York. Apollo was probably the “Schooner from Liverpool for this Port, that had been taken by a

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12 NDAR, “Pennsylvania Gazette, Wednesday, April 30, 1777,” 8: 487
13 NDAR, “Extract Of A Letter From St. Vincent’s To A Merchant In Liverpool dated May 5,” 8: 917-918 and 918 note
15 HCA 32/272/5/1-24
17 NDAR, “Connecticut Gazette, Friday, June 13, 1777,” 9: 107 and note
18 NDAR, “Gazette of the State of South-Carolina, Monday, June 2, 1777,” 9: 8
19 McManemin, Captains of the Privateers, 296
21 NDAR, “Libels Filed Against Seven Prizes in Massachusetts Admiralty Court,” 9: 173-174
Rebel Privateer and sent into Virginia,” as reported in the New York newspapers. She was said to have been “cut out of a Harbour by the Merlin.” From this we can deduce that the British sent in boats to Sinepuxent Inlet to re-capture the prize. She arrived in New York on 14 June 1777. Apollo was tried and condemned in the Vice Admiralty court as a re-capture, formerly being the Apollo (Tobias Collins).

Meanwhile, Courter may have been having crew problems. One report notes that his crew was “weak and very sickly.”22 Another states that more than half the crew were men enlisted from the prize vessels.23 Both of these statements were probably true and contributed, no doubt, to Oliver Cromwell’s capture. About 1 May 1777 the Oliver Cromwell was going out of the harbor at a small bay south of St. Pierre, Martinique, a place so commonly frequented by American privateers and prizes that it was known locally as Philadelphia Bay. As Oliver Cromwell passed a French sloop-of-war anchored there Courter fired a salute, which was promptly returned.24

On 19 May Oliver Cromwell was off St. Lucia, when she was sighted at 0600 by HM Sloop Beaver (Commander James Jones).25 Beaver was a more or less standard sloop-of-war, mounting fourteen 6-pounders, measuring 286 tons, and with a nominal crew of 125 men.26

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22 NDAR, “Gazette of the State of South Carolina, Monday, June 16, 1777,” 9: 124-125
23 NDAR, “Gazette of the State of South Carolina, Monday, June 30, 1777,” 9: 192-195
24 NDAR, “Intelligence Regarding Martinique Received from Arthur Piggott,” 9: 457-461
25 NDAR, “Journal of His Majesty’s Sloop Beaver, Captain James Jones,” 8: 999
26 Winfield, British Warships in the Age of Sail 1714-1792, 278
The American was to windward, northwest of the island. When Beaver fired a shot to bring her to, Courter turned Oliver Cromwell and bore directly down toward Beaver. When within range Courter hoisted American colors and fired a broadside into the British. The two vessels then ranged side by side, running down toward St. Lucia, and waged a hot but short fight, using great guns and musketry.\textsuperscript{27} Jones had a narrow escape, taking a musket ball through his coat which grazed the skin.\textsuperscript{28} After forty-five minutes the Oliver Cromwell struck, only two miles off St. Lucia. Her marksmanship had been terrible, and that of the British had been superb: Beaver had three men wounded; Oliver Cromwell had thirteen\textsuperscript{29} or fifteen\textsuperscript{30} killed and twenty wounded,\textsuperscript{31} out of a crew of 125.\textsuperscript{32} Courter later stated he lost thirty-one killed and more than twenty wounded.\textsuperscript{33} By noon the British had sent over a prize crew, put a lieutenant and a mate aboard, received the American officers aboard the Beaver, repaired the damage to Oliver Cromwell's rigging, and made sail.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{27} NDAR, “Journal of His Majesty's Sloop Beaver, Captain James Jones,” 8: 999

\textsuperscript{28} NDAR, “London Chronicle, Thursday, July 31, to Saturday, August 2, 1777,” 9: 545

\textsuperscript{29} NDAR, “Captain James Jones, R.N., to Vice Admiral James Young,” 8: 1029

\textsuperscript{30} NDAR, “Journal of His Majesty’s Sloop Beaver, Captain James Jones,” 8: 999

\textsuperscript{31} NDAR, “Captain James Jones, R.N., to Vice Admiral James Young,” 8: 1029

\textsuperscript{32} NDAR, “Captain James Jones, R.N., to Vice Admiral James Young,” 8: 1029

\textsuperscript{33} NDAR, “Silas Deane to Conrad Alexandre Gérard,” 11: 1001 and note

\textsuperscript{34} NDAR, “Journal of His Majesty's Sloop Beaver, Captain James Jones,” 8: 999
Courter's sickly crew and the action of the men from the prizes was blamed for the loss. The men from the prizes had reportedly urged Courter to fight, then ran below when the Beaver got alongside.

A reporter in the West Indies amplified the behavior of the Oliver Cromwell's crew in a letter dated 13 June 1777: "No doubt you will have heard of the Oliver Cromwell being taken by the Beaver sloop of war of fourteen guns, entirely owing to the dastardly behaviour of the crew, who were principally Europeans, and at whose request the Captain carried the Oliver along side, contrary to his own opinion. After the first broadside was exchanged, they never made a regular fire, but ran from their quarters, and several times jumped upon the quarter-deck, attempting to strike the colours, which the Captain, notwithstanding his First Lieutenant and pilot were killed, bravely prevented, by cutting several of them down. He was alongside the Beaver three quarters of an hour, making a shew of fighting, and endeavouring all in his power to encourage his men, though to little purpose, till common humanity moved him to strike. . . ."

After the surrender Courter was well treated by the British. The letter from the West Indies notes that "... Captain Jones, of the Beaver, and his officers, treated Captain Courter with the utmost politeness, and even caressed him, and acknowledge to every body that he behaved on the occasion like a brave and good officer. - This information we have from a gentleman, who was on board the ship after she was carried into Grenada, and may be depended upon. The people, who would not enter into the Kings service, were confined in goal. But the Captain had his quarters in the fort, the

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35 NDAR, "Gazette of the State of South Carolina, Monday, June 30, 1777," 9: 192-195

36 “Extract of a letter from the West Indies, dated June 13,” in The Pennsylvania Gazette [Philadelphia], July 23, 1777
pleasantest situation in Grenada.”

Her captor described *Oliver Cromwell* as a very handsome ship, well found, with ports for all her guns and able to fight her crew under cover. Her battery was noted as twelve (or fourteen) 9-pounders, six 6-pounders, and six 4-pounders. She had sailed with 150 men aboard, but only had 125 aboard at the time of her capture. In a report to the Admiralty on 20 June 1778, Vice Admiral Young listed her as a 220-ton ship, armed with twenty-four guns and with a crew of 135 at her capture.

By 25 May the prize had been brought into Grenada, where the prisoners were landed. Jones was highly praised for capturing a vessel so much stronger than his own. On 12 June 1777 Vice Admiral James Young suggested to the Admiralty that the *Oliver Cromwell* be taken into the Royal Navy as a 6th rate and giving the command to Jones. He also reported that the prisoners were being sent to England on HM Frigate *Hind*. On 14 June *Oliver Cromwell* was escorted into English Harbor, Antigua by HM Sloop *Cygnnet*. Four days later she was tried and condemned, in the Vice Admiralty court at Grenada. On 23 July 1777 Young proposed to the Admiralty that she be made into a 16-gun sloop-of-war, noting that he would have to send her to England to be armed. On 19 August 1777 Young had her surveyed: she was valued at £2000 and was taken into the Royal Navy as HM Sloop *Beaver’s Prize*. Meanwhile the Admiralty had ordered, on 27 August, that she be bought as a 24-gun 6th rate, to be named the *Convert*, and ordered Young to appoint Jones to command her, he being promoted to post captain. By 10 October 1777 the Admiralty had changed its mind: she

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37 “Extract of a letter from the West Indies, dated June 13,” in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* [Philadelphia], July 23, 1777

38 NDAR, “Journal of His Majesty’s Sloop *Beaver*, Captain James Jones,” 8: 999; “Captain James Jones, R.N., to Vice Admiral James Young,” 8: 1029


40 NDAR, “Captain James Jones, R.N., to Vice Admiral James Young,” 8: 1029

41 NDAR, “Vice Admiral James Young to Philip Stephens,” 9: 102-103

42 NDAR, “Vice Admiral James Young to Philip Stephens,” 9: 121-122

43 NDAR, “A List of all Captures which have been Condemned in the Vice Admiralty Court of Grenada since the Commencement of the Present Rebellion in North America,” 11: 612-613 and 612 note

44 NDAR, “Vice Admiral James Young to Philip Stephens,” 9: 322-324

45 NDAR, “Survey and Valuation of Captured Pennsylvania Privateer Ship *Oliver Cromwell*,” 9: 768-770

46 NDAR, “Lords Commissioners, Admiralty, to Vice Admiral James Young,” 9: 604

47 NDAR, “Philip Stephens to Vice Admiral James Young,” 9: 608-609
was not to be a 6th rate, but her purchase was approved.\textsuperscript{48}

Courter was sent to England and committed to Forton Prison on 13 October 1777.\textsuperscript{49} Courter was in prison on 1 December 1777, when he signed a petition seeking better conditions.\textsuperscript{50} A list of prisoners at Forton Prison on 29 December 1777 lists ten members of \textit{Oliver Cromwell’s crew}.\textsuperscript{51} By 13 February 1778 Courter had escaped to France, with a companion, where he met Silas Deane. Deane referred to him as a man of “approved Fidelity & Courage” in giving him a mission as a courier to America.\textsuperscript{52}

On 15 December 1778 the Philadelphia newspaper carried an advertisement for the distribution of prize money for the crew of the \textit{Oliver Cromwell}.\textsuperscript{53}

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\textsuperscript{48} NDAR, “Vice Admiral James Young to Philip Stephens,” 9: 322-324
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\textsuperscript{49} Kaminkow, 45
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\textsuperscript{50} NDAR, “Almon’s Remembrancer,” 11: 891-893 and 893 note 2
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