

Title: Captured and Imprisoned: the Fate of the Schooner *Dolphin*

Summary: the story of the *Dolphin*, Forton Prison, and characters Lafayette, George Barber, William Middleton.

- During the American Revolution, the Chesapeake Bay was an important area for transportation. It was important for the Americans to protect seaports and sea lanes from the British so they could get supplies, transport troops and trade items, and maintain communications.
- Often they would commission the ships of local merchants. Such was most likely the case in the commission of the schooner *Dolphin* in 1780. The ship was to patrol the bay and report any enemy activity.
- The captain of the ship was William Middleton. There were “four hands and a boy,” to manage the ship. George Barber was one of those hands.
- In 1781, General Washington ordered the Marquis de Lafayette to take his troops from the north to Yorktown. Lafayette passed through Philadelphia, adding more soldiers. At the top of Chesapeake Bay, at Head of Elk (where the Elk River empties into the bay), Lafayette began looking for water transportation for his troops, as it was easier and faster to travel by water. Many ships were needed for this.
- Lafayette got on board the *Dolphin* at Annapolis and traveled down the bay to the Patuxent River, just above the Potomac.
- The bay by this time was full of British ships, General Clinton having brought the whole British fleet south from New York.
- Lafayette decided that it was too dangerous to continue on the *Dolphin*, so he got off and continued on a barge (a smaller rowboat-like vessel) and on land until he arrived at Yorktown and his troops began to join him.
- When Washington arrived with his troops at Yorktown, the British troops of General Cornwallis were essentially trapped between Washington and Lafayette. Cornwallis surrendered on October 17, 1781.
- The *Dolphin* was captured almost immediately after Lafayette left it. The crew was taken to England and put in Forton [Fortune] Prison in Southampton.
- Captain William Middleton managed to get a disguise and escape from the prison (there are many accounts of escapes from this prison at this time, so it must not have been well-guarded). Middleton made his way to France where he wrote Lafayette.
- Lafayette wrote back, sending money and offering help in getting back to America.
- George Barber was released from prison after the war was over and returned home in a cartiel (an unarmed ship for returning prisoners).
- As the years passed after the war, Congress passed laws regarding pensions for those who had fought, each time adding more men who would be eligible.
- In 1821, Captain Middleton was “memorialized” by the Maryland General Assembly and his wife Sarah received a pension.
- In 1832, George Barber applied for a pension, saying that he hadn’t needed the money before that, but now that he was old and infirm, he needed it.
- All of the documents that George Barber submitted with his application are on file at the National Archives and Records Administration in the Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Application Files. It is this file which is the basis of this lesson.