

Stede Bonnet, Gentleman Pirate

Pirates were welcomed in Charles Town's harbor during the colony's early years. For the colonists, pirates provided protection and profit. As long as they raided Spanish ships, it reduced the chances that Spain would attack the colony. When these sea-going thieves came ashore they paid for their supplies with Spanish gold and silver and sold their booty below its value.

It was a wonderful arrangement for the profit-seeking colonists, but this relationship did not last long. Eventually the Proprietors and the Crown began to frown on this illegal business when it threatened English interests. A law was passed to authorize trials for pirates in the colonies or at sea instead of bringing them to London.

Uneducated and unemployed seamen often found their way to a pirate ship's crew. But one Barbadian named Stede Bonnet was an unlikely candidate for the profession.

Born in 1688, Bonnet's family owned a plantation three miles east of Bridgetown, Barbados. Shortly after his birth, Bonnet and his two sisters were orphaned when their father and mother died. Bonnet inherited the plantation. Guardians saw to it that he was educated and raised to be a gentleman.

At the age of 21, Bonnet married Mary Allamby in 1709, who was also the daughter of a planter. The newlyweds lived in Bridgetown where their family grew to three sons and a daughter. Bonnet's status also grew. As a landowner he became a major in the island's militia. After establishing himself as an upright member of society, he was made a Justice of the Peace in January 1716. A year later, Major Bonnet informed his friends and family that he was leaving Barbados. On March 25, 1718, he prepared the legal papers that allowed his wife and two friends to conduct his affairs while he was away. Bonnet had a secret plan.

Without the knowledge of family and friends, he bought a sloop, named her the *Revenge*, armed it with ten guns and hired a 70-man crew. He was giving up a gentlemen's life to become a pirate.

Bonnet had no experience as captain of a pirate ship. Because he was not a seaman he had to trust the experiences of his crew. Nevertheless, on its maiden voyage to plunder, the *Revenge* proved worthy. Off the Virginia and Charles Town coasts Bonnet captured several vessels. At least two of them came from Barbados. He burned them to prevent word of his involvement from reaching home.

Bonnet later assumed the name Captain Edwards. While in the Caribbean, his course crossed path with Queen Anne's *Revenge*, captained by Edward Teach, the notorious and ruthless Blackbeard. They formed an alliance and hijacked ships in the West Indies. It did not take Teach long to realize that Bonnet was greener than a rookie seaman. He cleverly lured him into giving up command of the *Revenge* in exchange for quarters on the Queen Anne's *Revenge* where he would not be bothered with the demands of commanding a ship and crew. Teach in turn placed one of his trusted men in charge of Bonnet's ship.

They set sail for the Bay of Honduras and later the Grand Cayman Island. During the voyage Teach was able to expand the fleet to five ships that were used in a May 1718 blockage of Charles Town. For a week Teach seized ships as they entered and left the harbor. One of the captured ships carried a VIP passenger, Samuel Wragg, a member of the Provincial Grand Council, who was bound for London. After threatening to kill Wragg and the hostages, Teach was able to convince Governor Robert Johnson to exchange them for medical supplies.

Blackbeard's plans were contrary to the adage that there is honor among thieves. He was laying a plot to cheat Bonnet by running with the valuables the pirate fleet had stolen and sharing it with only a few close comrades. While off the coast of North Carolina, Blackbeard returned Bonnet to the command of the *Revenge* and falsely announced he planned to seek a Royal Amnesty that was offered to pirates. Bonnet decided to do the same and he did so. But Blackbeard did not. After receiving amnesty, Bonnet returned to the inlet where the *Avenger* was anchored, but Blackbeard was gone with the loot. Bonnet and his crew searched for him but failed to find Blackbeard. Although he had just received a Royal pardon, Bonnet soon returned to his old pirate ways off the coast of Virginia. To conceal his identity he assumed the name Captain Thomas and changed the name of his vessel to the *Royal James*.

On July 2, 1718, Bonnet and his crew captured the merchant sloop *Fortune* off the coast of Delaware Bay. Two days later they seized the sloop *Frances*. They took both sloops to the Cape Fear River where they repaired the *Royal James*.

As word reached Charles Town that pirates had gathered at Cape Fear, another pirate threat appeared off the coast of Charles Town. Pirate Charles Vane threatened the colony with hopes of having the same success as Blackbeard. But Governor Johnson dispatched two armed ships, the *Henry* and the *Sea Nymph*, under the command of Colonel William Rhett to capture Vane. But Vane may have been warned of the attempt to capture him and he escaped. Rhett then decided to investigate the report of pirates at Cape Fear.

On September 26, 1718, Rhett arrived at the Cape Fear but both of his ships ran aground briefly and later dropped anchor for the night. Bonnet, aka Captain Thomas, sent a small boat down river to investigate. When the scouting party returned with word that armed vessels were at the river Bonnet prepared the *Royal James* for a fight.

During the battle on the following day Rhett's two vessels and Bonnet's ship sailed into shallow water and were grounded. During the gun battle, Rhett's men got the upper hand and Bonnet surrendered. Rhett was pleasantly surprised to learn that the pirate leader Captain Thomas was "the" Stede Bonnet. He and 33 of his men who survived the gun battle were taken to Charles Town where the crew was placed in the Watch-house. Bonnet, however, was considered a gentleman. He was held in the house of the provost marshal. On October 24, 1718, Bonnet escaped and the provost marshal was dismissed under suspicion that he being a Barbadian had aided Bonnet's escape.

Four days later while Bonnet was still at large, Bonnet's men were arraigned and all but four were convicted of piracy and sentenced to death. They were hanged November 8 at the tip of the Charles Town peninsula. Two days before his men were hanged on November 8 Bonnet was recaptured and placed under heavy guard. Two days after the executions, Bonnet was put on trial and, like the majority of his crew, he was convicted and sentenced to hang by his neck until dead.

The execution was set for December 10, 1718. Before he was carried out, Bonnet pleaded for mercy and his supporters also asked Governor Johnson to commute his sentence. But the governor was not moved. A frightened and semi-conscious Bonnet went to the gallows with his manacled hands clutching a faded bouquet of flowers. His body hanged in the chilly December wind for several days before it was cut down and buried beyond the low-water mark.

Unlike Bonnet, Blackbeard was not captured and brought to trial. He was killed off the coast of North Carolina on November 22, 1718, in a fight with two Royal Navy vessels dispatched from Virginia. Blackbeard's head was severed and taken back to port. His body was dumped into the sea.

A plaque that stands under the broad branches of the oak trees in White Point Garden at the Charleston Battery marks the day that Bonnet died. Its inscription reads: "Near this point in the autumn of 1718, Stede Bonnet, notorious "gentleman pirate," and twenty-nine of his men, captured by Colonel William Rhett, met their just deserts. After a trial and charge, famous in American history, by Chief Justice Nicholas Trott. All were buried off White Point Gardens, in the marshes beyond low water mark."

Bonnet's friends could only speculate as to why he gave up his life of luxury in Barbados for a harrowing life of piracy. Some blamed a mental disorder that followed an unhappy marriage, while others said he was simply searching for adventure.