Esek Hopkins Biography

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Biography

Esek Hopkins (1718-1802), first commander of the American Navy, was a Revolutionary patriot whose abilities were not equal to his important task.

Esek Hopkins, born in present-day Scituate, R.I., early turned to the sea for his livelihood. By the time of the American Revolution he was a veteran merchant captain who had sailed to almost every corner of the globe. His brother, Stephen Hopkins, served in the Continental Congress and was chairman of the Marine Committee, formed to supervise naval affairs. Consequently, Esek Hopkins's appointment as "commander in chief" of the infant navy was largely due to his brother's influence.

In January 1776 Congress instructed Esek Hopkins to raid British shipping along the coasts of Virginia and North Carolina. He decided instead to swoop down on New Providence in the Bahamas to capture guns and ammunition for the American Army. The undefended forts at the Nassau port were easy prey, and Hopkins's small fleet returned with badly needed military stores. This, however, was Hopkins's last triumph.

On his return voyage from the Bahamas, Hopkins missed an excellent chance to take the British *Glasgow*. Moreover, he angered southern congressmen by his failure to operate in the Chesapeake Bay and southward, and there were general complaints of his inactivity in late 1776 and early 1777. (In fairness to Hopkins, it should be noted that he found it impossible to enlist sailors because privateer captains were offering roughly twice the regular pay of Navy seamen.)

When H. M. S. *Diamond* ran aground on the Rhode Island coast and the sluggish Commodore Hopkins lost this excellent chance to destroy it, the officers of his own flagship petitioned the Marine Committee to remove him from office. Hopkins had already been indiscrete in criticizing both Congress and some of his subordinates. Therefore, it was with no particular remorse that Congress in March 1777 suspended Hopkins and soon afterward dismissed him from the Navy.

Though a loyal officer, Hopkins was "an old-fashioned, salt horse sailor" who was probably too old and too set in his ways by the time of his appointment to adjust to his new duties as a fighting officer and administrator. From 1777 to 1786 Hopkins sat in the Rhode Island Legislature, and from 1782 until his death he served as a trustee of Rhode Island College.