

Blakeley, Johnston ^[1]

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by Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, 1979

October 1781–October 1814



UNC Press. p. 25. (Digital page 39).

^[2]Johnston Blakeley, naval officer and hero of the War of 1812 ^[3], was born near the village of Seaford in County Down, Ireland. His father, John Blakeley, emigrated with his wife and son to Wilmington when Johnston was two years old; John Blakeley's wife died on the voyage, and he and his son lived together for many years in Wilmington ^[4]. Blakeley was educated at a school in Flatbush, Long Island, and from 1797–99 attended The University of North Carolina ^[5], where he was president of the Philanthropic Society ^[6]. When his father died, Blakeley became the ward of Edward Jones of Rockrest, Chatham County ^[7]. Left without funds by a disastrous fire that destroyed the Blakeley warehouses in Wilmington, Blakeley sought a career in the U.S. Navy ^[8] and was appointed midshipman on 5 Feb. 1800. He served in the Mediterranean during the war with the Tripoli pirates, under Captain John Rodgers and Commodore Stephen Decatur; he was commissioned lieutenant 10 Feb. 1807 and on 4 Mar. 1811 assumed command of the schooner *Enterprise*. When war with England was declared in 1812, Blakeley was stationed at the Norfolk Navy Yard, and later he was sent to New Orleans. Becoming restless, he asked Edward Jones to intercede for a more active command for him. Through the influence of Congressman William Gaston ^[9] and Senator James Turner ^[10], he was transferred to New Hampshire, where, on 19 Aug. 1813, the *Enterprise* captured the British privateer schooner *Fly* off Cape Porpoise, in Blakeley's first exploit.

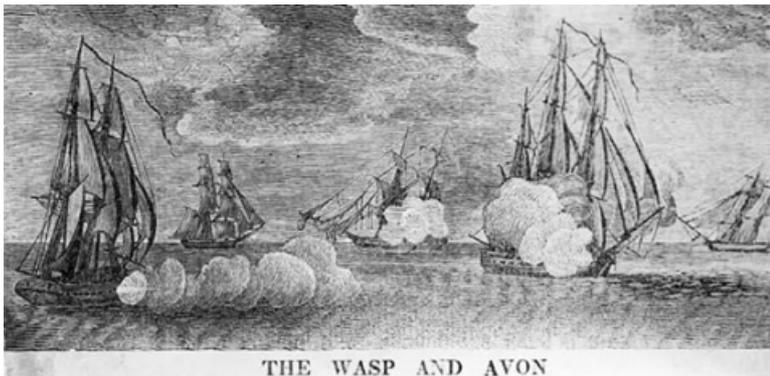
Blakeley was promoted to command of the *Wasp*, under construction at Newburyport, described by one of its officers as "a beautiful ship, and the finest sea-boat, I believe, in the world." She carried twenty carronades and two long twelve-pounder guns, with a crew of 173. Blakeley was given sealed orders to sail to western Europe and create as much havoc as he could against British shipping, then to sail south to the Spanish coast, where the British were fighting Napoleon's armies, and finally to return to New Orleans.



Engraving of Johnston Blakeley. Image courtesy of the NC Museum of History.

[11]

The *Wasp* sailed 1 May 1814 with "a fine breeze at North West." Officers and crew were described by one of them as "young and ambitious—they fight with more cheerfulness than they do any other duty. Captain Blakeley is a brave and discreet officer—as cool and collected in action as at table." During the cruise to European waters, Blakeley spent long hours training his sailors and gunnery crews. When he reached his cruising station, the British vessels *Neptune*, *Reindeer*, and *Regulator* were quickly defeated and burned; the *William*, the *Orange Boven*, and the *Jenny* were captured and scuttled; the commandeered neutral vessel *Henrietta* carried the wounded from the *Reindeer* to port. Of these engagements, the one on 28 June with the *Reindeer*, a twenty-one-gun brig, was the most noted. The battle lasted nineteen minutes. Although the *Reindeer* twice approached close enough to board, both times the Americans beat her off. Blakeley praised his crew's "cool and patient conduct . . . while exposed to the fire of the shifting guns of the enemy" and the "animation and order exhibited when actually engaged." The *Reindeer* "was literally cut to pieces, in a line with her ports; her upper works, boats and spars were one complete wreck." The following day, Blakeley burned the remains of the *Reindeer* and limped into the friendly French port of L'Orient, with his foremast, rigging, and sails "a good deal injured." Five men were dead and fourteen wounded. Well received in France, Blakeley attended to his wounded and repaired his vessel. Finally, after sending home some of his wounded with their share of prize money, Blakeley set sail again 27 Aug. 1814, heading for the coast of Spain to intercept British supply ships.



An engraving of the *Wasp* in battle. Courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of History.

[12] Quickly the *Wasp* captured the brigs *Lettice* and

Bon Accord. Blakeley sighted a fleet of ten sail on 1 Sept., cut out and burned the brig *Mary*, laden with military stores, but was driven off by a seventy-four-gun frigate guarding the convoy. In the late evening of the same day he sighted four more sail and engaged the heavy brig *Avon* in a bitter fight lasting forty-seven minutes. The approach of three other brigs forced him to leave after receiving the surrender of the *Avon* but before his crew could board it. The *Wasp* drew off safely to repair her damage.

A lean three weeks followed, after which good fortune came again. Having seized the brigs *Three Brothers* and *Bacchus*, the *Wasp* captured the *Atalanta*, which was laden with wine, brandy, and silk. Since there was some doubt as to the nationality of the *Atalanta*, Blakeley did not follow his usual custom of burning her but instead put Midshipman David Geisinger and a prize crew aboard. On 22 Sept. 1814 the *Atalanta* set sail to Savannah, Ga., where she arrived safely in November. No further word was ever received from the *Wasp*.



Commemorative Medal in honor of Johnston Blakeley. North Carolina Museum of History.

^[13]Rumors flew to account for the mysterious disappearance of the valiant vessel. A privateer claimed to have seen the *Wasp* off the Canary Islands. The British frigate *Lacedemonian* was believed by some to have sunk her off Charleston, S.C. John C. Calhoun heard a report that she was operating in the Pacific Ocean. Blakeley was promoted to post captain, but he and his men never returned.

Blakeley was married in Boston to Jane Ann Hoop on an unknown date; they had one child, a daughter named Udney Maria, born in January 1815 after her father's disappearance. His widow remarried in 1820 and eventually moved to the island of St. Croix, where she had lived for a time as a child. Congress voted Blakeley a gold medal, and the North Carolina legislature in 1816 authorized a sword to be given to Mrs. Blakeley and offered to pay for the education of his daughter. Mrs. Blakeley suggested that a silver tea service would be more suitable for Udney Maria; accordingly, a suitably inscribed service was presented. The daughter attended school in Philadelphia, remaining there until 1829. She joined her mother in St. Croix, married Baron Joseph von Bretton in 1841, and died in childbirth together with her infant, 2 Mar. 1842.

Blakeley's portrait is at the Philanthropic Society Hall at [The University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill](#)^[5]. A poem written in 1854 may serve as a fitting epitaph:

No more shall Blakeley's thunder roar
Upon the stormy deep;
Far distant from Columbia's shore
His tombless ruins sleep;
But long Columbia's song shall tell
How Blakeley fought, how Blakeley fell.

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Additional Resources:

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Johnston Blakeley, War of 1812 Hero, Lost at Sea, This Day in North Carolina History, North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources: <http://nchistorytoday.wordpress.com/2013/05/01/johnston-blakeley-war-of-1812-hero-lost-at-sea/> [15]

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Image Credits:

Unidentified artist, circa 1840. "Johnston Blakeley, 1781-1814." North Carolina Portrait Index, 1700-1860. Chapel Hill: UNC Press. p. 25. (Digital page 39). <https://www.worldcat.org/title/832326?oclcNum=832326> [2]. Accessed 10/14/2014.

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