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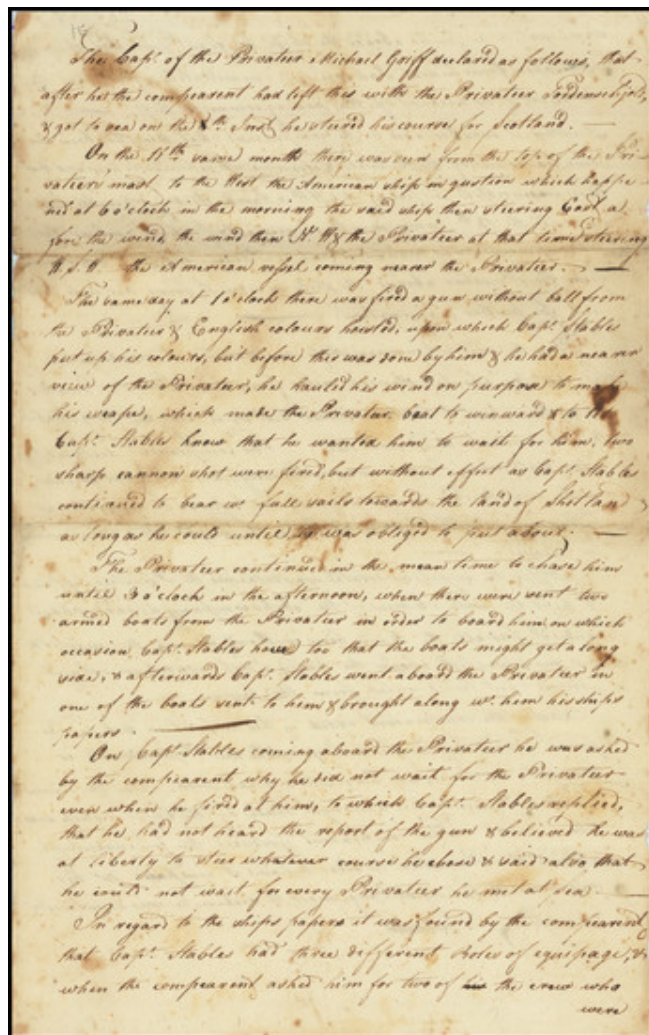
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(American Revolution - Virginia Privateering) Manuscript Document Concerning the American Privateer Grand Turk, Captured Near Scotland's Fair Isle by Michael Griff [The Capt. of the Privateer Michael Griff declares as follows ...]

Stock#: 82328
Map Maker: Anonymous
Date: 1783
Place: [Scotland]
Color: Uncolored
Condition: VG
Size: 8 x 12.5 inches
Price: \$ 3,500.00



Description:

Privateering in the American Revolution: the Virginia State Navy's Grand Turk Captured in Scotland

A remarkable first-hand description of the chase and capture of an American privateer just a few months before the Treaty of Paris was signed.



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A fascinating manuscript document relating to the capture of the American privateer, *Grand Turk*, a brig operating under letters of marque for the Virginia State Navy during the American Revolution. At the time British and American privateers operated under letters of marque, licenses from their respective governments allowing them to attack and capture enemy ships - essentially a legal form of piracy. An armada of more than 2000 privateers commissioned by the American Continental Congress and individual states preyed on enemy shipping on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. This severely disrupted the British economy, helping to turn British opinion against the war, often providing rich rewards for the ship owners. The Virginia State Navy was created in December 1775 by the Provisional Assembly in order to authorize the Committee of Safety to purchase, man, and outfit armed vessels to protect the colony's waters from threats posed by the British Royal Navy. In addition to commissioning several vessels of her own, Virginia issued letters of marque to authorize merchant ships to attack enemy vessels during the course of commercial voyages. While in a legal sense a vessel operating under letters of marque was different than a commissioned privateer, in practice the distinction was likely minimal.

Our *Grand Turk*, not to be confused with the perhaps better known *Grand Turk* of Salem, Massachusetts, was a brig built for the Virginia State Navy that was first commissioned on October 1, 1781. She was spotted, chased, and captured near Scotland's Fair Isle in the Spring of 1783 by Michael Griff, Captain of the British privateer *Tordenskjold*, an event recorded in detail in the present manuscript deposition. Griff's first-hand account describes the capture as having been made off the coast of Scotland's Fair Isle in the subarctic North Sea on March 11, 1783. Griff states that "the master [i.e. Schermerhorn] and one man was left aboard the *Grand Turk*, which is not yet arrived but lies 3 miles from the town." Virginia's privateer was apparently selected to cross the Atlantic in order to engage in the American naval strategies abroad, perhaps on a commercial voyage. The present manuscript describes play-by-play the ensuing chase as Captain Stables attempted to steer the *Grand Turk* to freedom.

The *Grand Turk*'s master was Cornelius Schermerhorn (1756-1826), a sea captain described by his contemporaries as a man of "vast size and extraordinary strength," who was operating under "letters of marque and reprisal" issued by the governor of Virginia during the American Revolution. The *Grand Turk* was steered by a Captain Stables, a rather mysterious figure who was detained by Schermerhorn and may have originally been in the British service, a supposition made in the present document. According to the *Naval Records of the American Revolution 1775-1788*, Virginia's *Grand Turk* was equipped with 14 guns and had a crew of 60 men. She was bonded for \$20,000 by Samuel Davison and Joseph Carson, both of Philadelphia. Carson was also part-owner of the vessel, the other owners being John Wright Stanly and George Emlen, also of Philadelphia. Intriguingly, one year before the *Grand Turk*'s capture, Captain Schermerhorn and his brig had captured the British Schooner *Three Friends* in the harbor of Edenton,



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North Carolina. The British vessel was condemned on March 8, 1782 for illicit trading and sold at auction. This incident could have provoked a desire among British privateers for revenge against the American brig.

The NRAR confirms that the *Grand Turk* was captured on April 1, 1783, corroborating the content of the present document. The date of April 1st must be based on the day the brig was brought into harbor, about three weeks after being detained at sea.

Excerpts from the manuscript: (note: Captain Michael Griff is referred to throughout the document as "the compearent," an obsolete term from Scots legal argot for "a person who appears in a court of law either in person or by legal representation of an attorney.")

The Captn of the Privateer Michael Griff declared as follows, that after he the compearent had left this with the Privateer Tordenskjold, & got to sea on the 8th Inst. he steered his course for Scotland. On the 11th the same month there was seen from the top of the privateer's mast, to the West, the America ship in question which happened at 6 o'clock in the morning... [referring to the American privateer Grand Turk]

The same day at 1 o'clock there was fired a gun without ball from the Privateer of English colours hoisted; upon which Captain Stables put up his colours, but before this was done by him, & he had a nearer view of the Privateer, he hauled his wind on purpose to make his escape, which made the Privateer beat to the windward so to let Capt. Stables know that he wanted him to wait for him, two sharp cannon shots were fired... Capt. Stables continued to bear with full sails towards the land of Shetland...

The Privateer continued in the meantime to chase him until 3 o'clock... when there were sent two armed boats from the Privateer in order to board him... Captain Stables went aboard the Privateer... & brought along with his ship's papers... when asked why he did not wait for the Privateer even when he fired at him, Capt. Stables replied, that he had not heard the report of the gun & believed he was at liberty to steer whatever course he chose... he out not wait for every Privateer he met at Sea.

In regards to the ship's papers it was found by the compearent that Capt. Stables had three different roles of equipage.. for two of the crew who were not to be found aboard the ship, he first said they were taken from him at Fahrsund [Farsund, Norway] & immediately after that they had deserted on account of their having committed theft...



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Further...there had been tore some letters from the journal & clean leaves replaced, likeways that there was written instead of the 11th of March the day when he was detained... the compearent was induced to put a prize-master & 6 men from the privateer aboard the ship in order to bring her into this port for further examination...

When the said American ship was detained it was done in Lat. 59o 36' about 3 Danish miles from Fair Isle [Shetland, northern Scotland] the Privateer going then about 2 knots an hour... The compearent declared also that when Stables was asked why he steered that course, as he was bound for America by his papers, he answered as before mentioned that he believed he might steer what course he pleased.

Lastly the compearent added in his declaration that he had found onboard an English Sloop called the Hope which is brought in here, an English signal book, where the name Stables is mentioned amongst those of the English ship masters...

Biography:

Captain Cornelius Schermerhorn (1756-1826) was a member of a family long engaged in business as ship chandlers and merchant shippers, especially to and from New York City, Charleston, and other ports on the southern seaboard. He was engaged by the Virginia State Navy as a privateer during the War of Independence, in command of the brigantine *Grand Turk*, he subsequently followed suit in his family's tradition. He was later engaged in the general shipping business with his brothers, Peter and Abraham. A newspaper item of 1 April 1786, reads as follows: "For Savannah, the brigantine, *Rock-a-hock*, Cornelius Schermerhorn, master. For freight apply to Peter Schermerhorn, No. 73 Water St., opposite the Crane Wharf." He lived at 39 Beekman St., New York City, from 1794 until 1814. He was a shipmaster until about 1812, and then it appears he settled down to the occupation of a merchant, with an office at 71 South St. In 1818 he was selected to bring the remains of General Montgomery from Charleston to New York City.

Detailed Condition:

Folio sheet. Text on recto and verso. A few minor stains. Old crease marks. Otherwise quite clean.