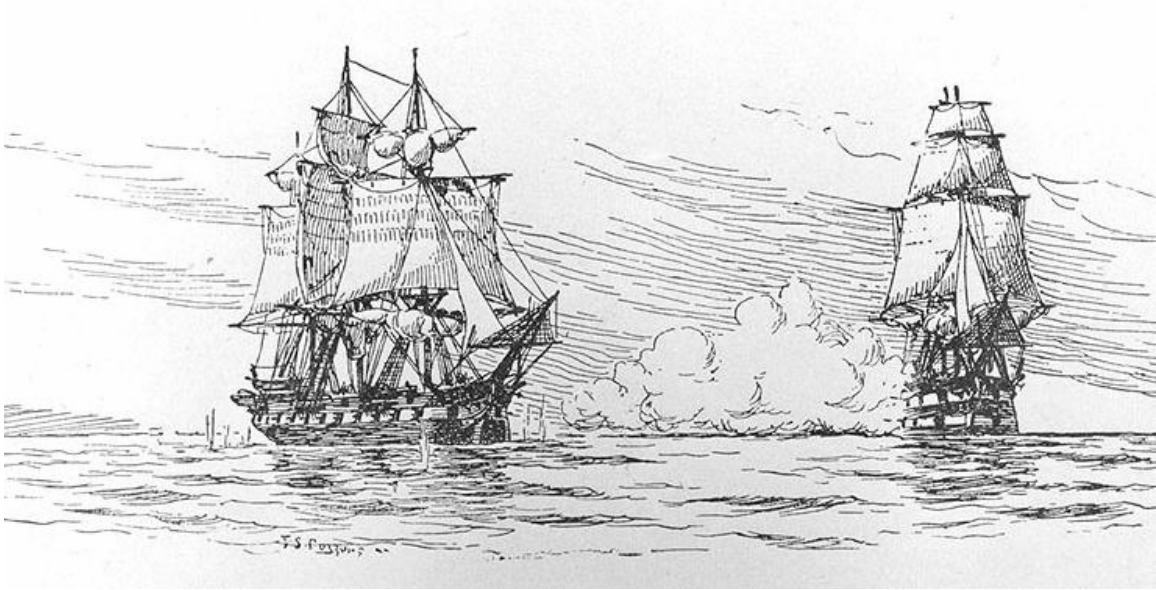


THE CHESAPEAKE-LEOPARD AFFAIR



HMS Leopard (*right*) fires on the USS Chesapeake, June 22, 1807

Characters:

- **Narrator #1**
- **Narrator #2**
- **Thomas Jefferson**, President of the United States
- **James Madison**, U.S. Secretary of State
- **Tench Coxe**, assistant to Mr. Jefferson

Aboard HMS *Leopard*:

- **Commander Joseph Langley**
- **Lieutenant Commander Daniel Hart**
- **Ensign Josiah Dudley**

Aboard USS *Chesapeake*:

- **Commodore James Barron**
- **Robert MacDonald**
- **James Dickinson**
- **Four US sailors** (non-speaking)

Scene 1

Narrator 1: The year is 1807. The USS *Chesapeake*, a small naval vessel called a frigate, has just left the port of Norfolk, Virginia, bound for duty in the Mediterranean Sea.

Narrator 2: Heading down Thimble Shoals Channel, the *Chesapeake* passes a British squadron anchored at the mouth of the channel. Catching sight of the *Chesapeake*, one of the British vessels, the HMS *Leopard*, pulls its anchor and follows the *Chesapeake* to sea.

Dickinson: Commodore Barron, that British ship's been in our shadow for almost an hour's time.

Barron: It has, yes. Stand tight till we can see its intentions. If it means to advance, it would have done so already.

Narrator 1: Aboard the British *Leopard*, Commander Joseph Langley discusses his next move with his lieutenant, Daniel Hart

Hart: Do we advance, Commander? The crew looks haggard and unarmed, and the ship's hull too decrepit to withstand a single round of fire.

Langley: We shall. Advance past them and back a topsail. When they approach us, I'll send you and Dudley out on the skimmer, and we'll give them the usual treatment.

Hart: (Chuckling) Shall I make room in the hold for passengers, sir?

Langley: Aye, we'll be heavier on our return.

Narrator 2: Aboard the USS *Chesapeake*, a panic sets in as they see the *Leopard* shoot past them, then float menacingly as it lay in wait for them. The *Chesapeake* approaches and stops a few hundred yards from the *Leopard*.

MacDonald: Commodore Barron, two men are rowing toward us in a skimmer. One looks to be a lieutenant commander.

Barron: What would they want with us? This may be a warship, but we're on a mission to protect trade vessels, not engage in battle.

Dickinson: Should I clear the deck, sir? We're undermanned, but we have enough hands to man every cannon. A quick strike could—

Barron: (Interrupting) Certainly not. This is a diplomatic mission.

MacDonald: But sir, we—

Barron: (Interrupting) Stand down, men. Let us speak reasonably with our aggressor.

Narrator 1: The skimmer pulls within several yards of the *Chesapeake*. Dudley and Hart stand in the small boat to formally address the men on deck.

Hart: By order of his majesty King George III, we demand to board and inspect this vessel. We suspect the presence of deserters of the Royal Navy.

Barron: Rubbish! We have but thirty men aboard this vessel, each one an American.

Dudley: Where were you born, commodore?

Barron: Born? I am a proud Virginian!

Dudley: And in what year of our lord did you enter this life?

Barron: It is no business of yours, but in the year 1769.

Dudley: So, then, you are one of us. We can press you into service on this ship.

Hart: Indeed, commodore, you are subject to service aboard the HMS *Leopard*, as you are rightly a British subject.

MacDonald: Never! Our freedom came at a price! I spent the winter of '77 at Valley Forge, and when you lobsterbacks turned tail and sailed home, we became rightful Americans.

Hart: There are two ways to proceed. Either we board this ship directly, or we sift through the pieces that float atop the water. The choice is yours, commodore.

Narrator 2: Commodore Barron tells Commander Hart, in the harshest language imaginable, what he thinks of the *Leopard's* demands. Hart and Dudley turn and row back to their vessel.

Narrator 1: The *Leopard* slowly approaches. Suddenly a giant explosion is followed by a cannonball hurtling toward the *Chesapeake's* broadside.

Dickinson: Incoming!

Barron: Cover!

Narrator 2: The *Leopard* fires three times, each time striking the *Chesapeake*. Robert MacDonald is hit in the chest and shoulder.

MacDonald: (sounds a man might make upon being hit by a cannonball)

Narrator 2: The ship lists heavily to its starboard side.

Narrator 1: The *Chesapeake* raises a white flag, and the *Leopard* pulls alongside. British sailors begin hastily boarding the *Chesapeake*.

Langley: Search every crate! If there is contraband on board, I demand it be fully documented. Bring the deserters to me!

Barron: This is not legal, commander!

Langley: It is legal and entirely warranted, commodore. Your ship harbors deserters of the crown, each of whom shall be rightly returned to service.

Narrator 2: Dudley brings four US sailors to the deck, and Langley looks them over.

Dickinson: This is madness! These are American citizens, sailors in the American Navy, every one of them! These are not your men!

Langley: Yes, these are our men, all right. (Smirking) I hope you have your sea legs, gentlemen, because you're in for a long and unpleasant trip.

Narrator 1: This practice – taking sailors from ships and forcing them into service – was known as **impressment**.

Narrator 2: British sailors had been pressing sailors from merchant ships into the Royal Navy for decades.

Scene 2

Narrator 1: It turns out that the four men – two white, and two African-American – had indeed served in the Royal Navy. All four were taken to Halifax, in British North America...

Narrator 2: ...modern-day Canada...

Narrator 1: ...where they were tried for treason. The court was unable to determine the native country of three of the four men, and each was sentenced to be whipped five hundred times.

Narrator 2: The fourth was a man named Jenkin Radford, the only member of the press gang born in Great Britain. He was summarily convicted of treason, executed by hanging from the fore yard-arm of the *HMS Halifax*, and thrown overboard into Halifax Harbour.

Narrator 1: Word of these events reaches Washington, DC, two days later. Tench Coxe, an assistant to President Thomas Jefferson, approaches Jefferson and his secretary of state, James Madison.

Coxe: Mr. President, Mr. Secretary: The British have bombed and seized the *USS Chesapeake* and impressed four of our sailors. One was executed for treason.

Madison: This is surprising to me, Mr. President. The British have been so focused on defeating Napoleon and the French, I cannot believe they would roust American vessels.

Coxe: Perhaps, if we'd allowed our federal government the strength to support a robust, standing navy, this tragedy would never have occurred.

Jefferson: That will be all, Mr. Coxe.

(Coxe departs)

Madison: That filthy Hamiltonite. Can you believe the nerve! An imperial navy would simply entice the British *and* the French to—

Jefferson: (interrupting) Mr. Madison, let us save this debate for a more appropriate time. You are the Secretary of State; your job is to work diplomatically with other countries, not shape our policies at home.

Madison: Correct, Mr. President.

Jefferson: Never since the battle of Lexington have I seen this country in such a state of exasperation.¹ What course of action do you recommend?

Madison: We may be on a course for war, but we do not have the ships or the manpower to take on the British Royal Navy.

Jefferson: (smiling) Unless we begin impressing sailors, of course.

Madison: That would be diplomatic suicide. Instead, I suggest we get this *Chesapeake* affair on the front page of every newspaper in every city, from the Atlantic Coast to the deepest recesses of the frontier.

Jefferson: And we'll have young, able men volunteering for duty by the score.

Madison: Precisely.

Jefferson: But how do you suppose we give Britain its just punishment?

Madison: What are your thoughts on an embargo?

Narrator 2: An embargo prohibits trade with a specific country.

Narrator 1: It's intended to punish a country by hurting its economy and forcing it to change from within.

Jefferson: That could work. We shall pass an embargo act, requiring all ships to get direct, explicit permission from the president before docking at any foreign port.

¹ Jefferson actually said this.

Madison: How do we prevent American ships from ignoring this embargo?

Jefferson: Every trading vessel must post bond to the government equal to the value of its cargo.

Narrator 2: **The Embargo Act of 1807** did indeed punish the British, as they lost one of their top trading partners. It also forced American industry to rely less on British imports and more on American-made products.



Narrator 1: However, the public sided with smugglers, not the government. People wanted the imported goods they were accustomed to, at the prices they were used to paying.

Narrator 2: And a lot of trade ships simply ignored the law, realizing that the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service – which was created by Alexander Hamilton in 1790 to catch smugglers along the East Coast – didn't have nearly enough ships to enforce the law.

Narrator 1: This Cutter Service is now known as the U.S. Coast Guard, yet another feather in the cap of our fine founding father, Mr. Alexander Hamilton.

Narrator 2: By 1809, when James Madison became the fourth U.S. President, the Embargo Act had been replaced by the **Non-Intercourse Act**, which limited the embargo to just France and Britain.

Narrator 1: By 1810, U.S. relations with Europe were at their lowest in the young nation's history.

Narrator 2: War seemed impossible to avoid. But who would fire the first shot?