

# *Chronicles of Brunonia*

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## Mutiny! A High Seas Misadventure

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Piracy has many extreme stereotypes. Well, two. On one hand there's the eye-patched, parroted, and peg-legged pirate. Movies and popular culture have painted pirates as ever-romantic lovable rogues. Modern day's stark response to the Hollywood pirate is the Somalian/Hong Kong motorboat manned by four guys with rocket launchers.

The golden age of pirates was nothing like either. Pirates in the 1800s were low-life thieves that, like everyone else of the era, did not use rocket launchers. Like any thieves, few men made a full career of piracy. Even the most notable pirates such as Blackbeard and Jack Rackham only lasted a few years before they were caught and killed. Pirates were a lot like those idiots you see in high speed car chases; for some strange reason they think they can get away, except that the cops have the luxury of rotating freshly gassed cars, and the culprit just gets hit by an eighteen wheeler anyways.

What follows is an account of an act of piracy that is demonstrative of most acts of piracy. It showcases the odd and appealing result of two-bit criminals finding themselves in charge of a giant wooden bucket full of rum and floating at sea.

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On November 8, 1830, a brig named the Vineyard sat in New Orleans Harbor. She was not a large ship; little more than a hold with two square-rigged sails. She had no cannons on her less-than-a-hundred foot length. Crews loaded one hundred and twelve bales of cotton, one-hundred and thirteen hogsheads of sugar ("hogsheads," in an editorial but educational aside, is abbreviated "hhds."), fifty-four casks of molasses, and fifty-four thousand dollars were loaded into the

hold. Captain William Thornby and Mate William Roberts had no idea that the cook, Thomas Wansley, saw the money loaded aboard. Cooks. They are the nautical equivalent of the butler. It's always the butler.

On November 9, the Vineyard set sail for Philadelphia under the watch of Thornby and Roberts. It was not an impressive ship. None of the crew had sailed her before. Every last man was there for the job, which was one of a few-thousand small merchant runs of the era. Wansley and six seamen composed the crew. Unbeknownst to the officers, the man who had signed aboard as Charles Gibbs was an accomplished pirate. "Gibbs" was not his real name, but rather an alias adopted in captivity that he used to protect his family. His real name may have been James Jeffreys, but history has had its way with the facts and Gibbs/Jeffreys is Gibbs by the vast majority of accounts.

Born in 1794, Gibbs left his respectable family in Rhode Island at the age of fifteen to ship aboard a privateer in the US Navy ("respectable" here meaning wealthy, and also implying that Gibbs had substantially more education than most sailors). Privateers were legal pirate ships. Countries competing for shipping lanes and commerce couldn't attack each other without starting wars. Somewhere along the line a pirate made a deal with a country to pirate everyone but that country's ships. Thus started a tactic where countries could employ pirates under the table to mess with their competitors. The pirate was given a letter of marque legalizing the piracy. For some reason no one ever pointed out that this made the whole arrangement less under the table than ideal, and privateers never started any wars.

Gibbs's American career ended after serving aboard two ships, being

captured by the British, and eventually released to Boston. He attempted to be a grocer, but it turned out that he was better at killing sailors than selling cabbage. Despite the fact that there were no American privateers to sign up for, Gibbs knew his knack and signed aboard an Argentine privateer. In 1824, his ship mutinied and he took the final step towards becoming a true pirate. In a two year run, his ship took twelve others, sparing none of its four hundred victims. Gibbs gave up piracy and attempted to return to a legitimate privateer's life when he was forced to poison a girl that he had "befriended" in the months his ship held her captive (while never officially stated, this should probably be read as "slept with," making no assumptions about her consent). Gibbs returned to Argentine privateering where he served as the commander of a ship until 1828, when he returned to the states.

On November 13, 1830, when Wansley called the more unsavory crew together, Gibbs's old habits came to surface.

Wansley whispered into each of the older sailors' ears as he passed out dinner — overly salted chunks of meat and biscuits intentionally baked rock hard to keep the weevils out. He arranged for them to quietly meet after the officers had retired for the night. Packed in a tight circle were five rugged faces. This wasn't a pretty rugged where a handsome man didn't shave for a few days; this was ugly men in a time before face wash and healthcare. Their faces were leathery, scarred, and if they didn't have any sores it was a lucky month. Wansley, the lone black aboard, spoke of the money he saw carted aboard that they were secretly escorting. Gibbs looked on, contemplating a return to his old life. The sailors Church and Atwell listened with smirks and gleams in their eyes, and their

excitement drew Gibbs into the fold. James Talbot, the last man in the shady circle, refused to believe Wansley and went to his hammock, wary of actually sleeping. It was a dangerous thing to mutiny, and even more dangerous to not mutiny while others did.

In the wake of Talbot's refusal, the four mutineers decided to kill not just the Thornby and Roberts, but any of the remaining crew that did not fall in with the plan. Gibbs protested and asked that they spare Robert Dawes, an eighteen year old that Gibbs had sailed with before; he had taken a liking to the kid. This was an act of friendship, albeit not the good kind. Instead of affection and desire to see Dawes live, it was an act of peer pressure. In those days it wasn't enough to convince someone to try pot; no, pirates convinced their friends to rape, pillage, and plunder. The mutineers called Dawes over from his watch and let the terrified boy in on their plan, giving him the choice that all pirates start their careers with: join the mutiny or die.

Church devised the elaborate plot; on November 22, the mutineers would beat the captain and mate to death with clubs before throwing them overboard.

On the decided night, they argued over whether or not to kill Talbot and the last sailor — a man named Brownrigg — and in the wake of their indecision they delayed the plan for a night.

On the night of November 23, Captain Thornby was on deck observing Dawes at the helm and enjoying the cold and crisp evening air. A captain was usually just the guy on the crew in charge, making decisions when they had to be made; he was still relegated to the standard menial manual labor tasks of sailing. With the kid steering, though, Thornby had the chance to enjoy the night under

the guise of overseeing the boy. The steady breeze was freezing, but in that rare opportunity to stop working, Thornby could look up and marvel that the relatively massive vessel could glide along from something as intangible as the wind. In a moment of escape, he could smell the crisp sea air instead of the usual mix of B.O. and bilge water. It was then that Wansley grabbed the pump break — a large detachable lever — and smashed Thornby where his neck met his head, replacing any sensations of peace with a brief explosion, then nothing. Dead or unconscious, Wansley and Gibbs had thrown the lifeless body of the former captain overboard, and Gibbs became the Vineyard's new master.

Mate Roberts heard the commotion and poked his head above deck to see what was what. Waiting were Atwell and Church, clubs in hand. What ensued was a nautical version of whack-a-mole. The double blow Roberts received sent him reeling below deck. Atwell and Church were not experts in physics and didn't realize that hitting Roberts downwards when there was no floor beneath him would not so much kill him as shoot him down. Fire was a no-no, and in the lack of light bulbs, below-decks at night was absolute darkness. Roberts hid. Gibbs darted below. Years of living on ships and killing people gave him the experience to stalk Roberts. The creaks and groans of a ship were all familiar to him, and the barely audible squeak of a man trying to stifle his breath that came from behind that barrel was not a ship's noise. In a few seconds, Gibbs held Roberts prone for Atwell and Church to finish the job.

Still, hitting a man with a club proved too difficult for Atwell and Church. In later testimony, Dawes claims that after Roberts was thrown overboard, he called out for help — very much alive and conscious despite two men hitting him

with clubs — at least twice. He was in the frigid Atlantic of late November without any floatation device. The cold of the water tensed every sinew of his body until he felt his lungs being crushed by the muscles tightening around them. His throbbing head, his boots pulling him down, his clothes tangling and drifting around him like sargasso: just having the strength to yell out means that the guys that had just tried to kill him really sucked at it.

The four murderers then threw themselves a party and got smashed on rum. Dawes and Brownrigg cautiously looked on. They had managed to not get killed in the mutiny, but the same erudite men that had just smashed the officers with clubs while sober were now drunk. Talbot huddled in the darkened forecastle, praying for his life. Crouched in a corner, he dared not move despite the pins and needles in his leg. Anything to avoid the notice of the men whose breath smelled like cheap booze and testosterone (which smells a lot like cheap booze). His prayers were answered by the mutineers coming up to him and offering him a drink or death. They slurred their already terse and uneducated speech such that Talbot probably heard something akin to, "Hey Tlbut, hav'erself some er grog 'ere...if ye don' you'er ca'erdly wank n' we'll beet yer hed in like ee did ter tha' stupid ferkin' capin an' 'is mate!" Talbot wisely chose to drink.

In the morning — despite his hang-over and due to his experience, education, and general common sense — Gibbs took his place as new captain and set in motion his new vision for the ship. Everyone was assigned to do what they did before, and the ship continued doing exactly what it had been. The only difference so far was a lack of two men and depleted grog stores. Realizing that sailing into Philadelphia without a captain might raise a few eyebrows, Gibbs had

Talbot steer a course towards Long Island, where the pirates decided to destroy the crime scene. Loading the money into two small boats, the entire crew set towards land and scuttled the Vineyard: setting it on fire and leaving it to the mercy of the ocean. These were men set on making money regardless of murder and villainy, and they set the cotton, sugar, molasses, and ship afire. These things were worth far, far more than the money they brought on the lifeboats. They pretty much jacked a Corvette full of DVD players, took the money out of the glove box, and rolled the car off a cliff.

Fire was bad for good reason. Aside from ships being wooden, they were sealed with tar. By the time the brig was a massive fireball, the men could still feel the intense heat on their faces and necks as the tiny boats lurched away. By the time it was completely sunk and gone, they weren't halfway ashore.

Having burned the maps along with the ship, the men were unaware that they were attempting to sail and row their tiny boats ashore through particularly rough ocean. Stumbling upon a bar, brutal waves, and lots of pointy rocks, one of the boats ran into trouble and had to drop ballast. This very simply means they dumped extra weight to make the boats more maneuverable and ride higher in the water. The ballast they dumped was the money. The money. The money they had staged the entire mutiny to obtain. With this turn of events, the pirates of that boat effectively made less profit than if they had not killed anyone and simply been paid their wages.

Despite their sacrifice to sea, the boat wrecked. Atwell, Church, and Talbot died. This would be a slow process. First they would struggle to keep the boat — their buffer from the brutal sea — in a condition that would allow it to still be



called a boat. After a lot of bailing and yelling, the boat went down. Only then would the slow process of drowning start. If they were lucky, their heads got smashed on rocks. If they were unlucky, they fought the waves until the water sucked them down, muffling their ears and saturating their taste and smell with salt. After the final realization that they'd never breathe again, the pirates may have wished they had just taken their wages. Talbot likely thought something closer to, *God dammit. I saw this coming.*

The rest of the men made it ashore despite the theory of natural selection. They were on a small, remote patch of beach on Long Island. The hard sand segued to beach grass, which merged with wind-swept, desolate trees. Being pirates, they buried their share of the money in the packed sand of the beach. They then made their way to the home of a Mr. Johnson who let his home out as an inn. In those days, living in the isolation of the seaside meant taking money for whatever you could. Four men offering cash for lodging was not unheard of. Their ragged and vagrant appearance was not suspicious to Johnson; it merely told him that they were average sailors. They were vagrants, they had money, and he had food and an extra room or two. The pirates proceeded to get drunk, again, and fell asleep. By this point, the mutineers had still made no attempt to include Brownrigg in their scheme, nor had they made any effort to ensure his silence. Once the pirates were passed out, Brownrigg reported everything to Johnson. The two were joined in fear, and bonded over the night they stayed up, wide awake, quietly discussing the rogues passed out in the next room. The two made plans to have the pirates apprehended.

The next day, Johnson led the Vineyard's surviving crew to an

establishment simply called Mr. Leonard's tavern in a town called Gravesend. His reasons were simple: he appreciated the money, but he could not support four extra men who randomly showed up. And Leonard had more booze! The idea that pirates are stupid except for the captain is only half true; not even Gibbs was familiar enough with the concept of foreshadowing to be wary of a town named Gravesend. Mr. Johnson went to the police. Gibbs was arrested, having been swarmed by police while he sat unaware at the bar. Wansley fled into the woods, where he was captured rather easily. Running seems like a decent idea until you try it in the very woods where your multiple pursuers grew up. Wansley hadn't had a chance to even get out of breath before a cop tackled him into a tree. The two men were hauled to New York city for trial, Times Square bus tours, and their deaths.

Gibbs and Wansley stood trial on March 11, 1831 and were sentenced to death. In a tiny and dingy courtroom their fates were decided. The judicial system existed back then, but the trial of an admitted pirate and his accomplice would be expedited so drastically that it would never withstand modern appeal. Witnesses pointed at the pirates, the pirates shrugged a few words out in defense, and the "not-predetermined" verdict was read from the crib sheet the judge had in his drawer for pirate trials. The extent of Wansley's defense statement was to try and convince the court to kill Dawes and Brownrigg, too, on the basis that he was being singled out and killed because he was black. Aside from the fact that his co-defendant was white, the logic of, "If you kill me, kill them!" did not save Wansley's life. Brownrigg escaped suspicion by being the the man that turned the pirates in. Dawes escaped suspicion by being the primary witness, and even after

Gibbs had pulled all sorts of strings to keep the ungrateful whelp alive!

Gibbs was not without entertainment. The New York jail where he was held also held a former girlfriend of his — an unnamed woman from Liverpool that Gibbs had encountered in his travels. Given that she was a pirate's lover that was now in jail, it is a safe bet that this unnamed woman was a whore. Pirates and whores is a very true stereotype. It wasn't quite as despicable then as it is painted now. It was just an honest situation; the girl would be the pirate's girlfriend in exchange for money and gifts for the two weeks he was ashore. Gibbs spent his last few days writing love-letters for the guards to carry a few hundred feet away to a woman who, given her profession and the era, probably couldn't read them anyways.

On the gallows, April 22, 1831, Gibbs's spoke his final words: "Good people who surround me here, you behold me with this fatal cord around my neck, soon to appear before the God whom I have so often offended. In youth I was on board a vessel of war, and took an oath that at any other time would seem horrible to me ; I kept it, and was a murderer, and I hope you will all take warning by my fate. I was born of respectable parents, and received a good education, but I did not properly apply these advantages; however, I hope that Christ will make my death as easy as if I had died on a downy pillow — I now confess as I have before confessed, that I have been guilty of shedding blood of many of my fellow men, of which I humbly pray the forgiveness of God."

Wansley requested a psalm be sung and was obliged by the clergyman in the crowd. Hangings were good entertainment for all. When the singing ended, the two men were, as Gibbs's confession states, "launched into eternity." It

probably felt more like rope burn and strangling than a downy pillow.

Within six months of the Vineyard setting out, only two of the nine men aboard remained alive. The pirates got as many nights of debauchery out of the ordeal as they would have if they finished the job and went on a bender in Philadelphia. Gibbs, the once accomplished privateer, was reduced to a bottom-dwelling thief.

All of this comes from a full confession Gibbs wrote in jail that details his life of piracy and, in particular, the mutiny of the Vineyard. A publisher named Israel Smith took the confession and published a predecessor to "scared straight" literature for "the youth."

The confession itself proves completely non-scary. Gibbs whacked a few guys with clubs, got so drunk that he was easily caught, and was summarily killed. Compared to Blackbeard taunting the authorities for years while he amassed a fleet before being stabbed twenty times, shot five times, decapitated, and swimming around the ship seven times without a head (at least that's what the legend says), Gibbs's story is outright boring. Smith realized this and added a fire and brimstone segment that has very little to do with Gibbs, or pirates, for that matter. The basic tenet, repeated ad nauseum, was, somewhat unoriginally, Sinners burn! Look at these sinners! They'll burn! Don't be a sinner! Sinners burn!

Piracy did not see a noticeable decline with the publishing of the confession. Possibly because pirates couldn't read.

## **Bibliography**

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