

SOUTH EAST GALWAY ARCHAEOLOGICAL & HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Wilson Rathborne (1748-1831)
Galway's Unsung Navel Hero

A front that provided interest to many Irishmen at the end of the eighteenth century was the American War of Independence (1775-1783), a conflict which involved Galwaymen on both sides. A reserved and modest, yet courageous and swash-buckling character from the era was the British naval officer Wilson Rathborne (1748-1831) from Ballinakill in south-east Galway.

Among the first of the many naval battles that Rathbourne was involved in, was the Battle of the Chesapeake in 1781 where the French defeated the Royal Navy in perhaps the decisive naval battle of the American Revolutionary War. Rathborne moved on and saw much action in the West Indies and in the Mediterranean where he was badly wounded in the arm and lost his right eye 'in battle' in 1795.

Rathborne would have his revenge against the French and his finest hour came on November 4th 1805 in the aftermath of the Battle of Trafalgar. The French and Spanish ships that had not been sunk or captured made their escape, but they were caught at Ortegual Bay off Cadiz and Rathborne and his 48-gun frigate HMS Santa Margarita helped rout and capture the vessels.

In truth, Rathborne's career petered out somewhat thereafter and he eventually accepted base positions. His modesty, and one suspects his background, may have contributed to what Ralfe questioned as a 'slowness of promotions'. With little fanfare, Rathborne passed away at his nephew's residence at Ballymore in Craughwell in August 1831.

[The above painting is of Battle of the Chesapeake or 'the Second Battle of the Virginia Capes' by V Zveg as held by the U.S. Naval History and Heritage. Pictured also is the medal won by Rathbourne and his men in 1805]

References:

1. Woodman, R (2001). The sea warriors: fighting captains & frigate warfare in the age of Nelson, Carroll & Graf.
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3. Ralfe, James (1828). Naval Biography of Great Britain: Consisting of Historical Memoirs, Whitmore & Fenn.
4. UK National Archives: Records of the Admiralty, Naval Forces, Royal Marines & Coastguard 1788 and 1817, Refs: ADM 6/23/448 - 2nd Lieutenant and ADM 9/2/282 – Captain (promoted 18th October 1802).