

This Day in History... March 22, 1820

Death of Stephen Decatur

On March 22, 1820, naval hero Stephen Decatur was mortally wounded in a duel with a former friend and fellow officer. The shocking encounter ended the life of one of America's most respected naval leaders and revealed how personal rivalries could turn deadly, even among national figures.

Stephen Decatur Jr. was born on January 5, 1779, in Sinepuxent, Maryland. His family had temporarily left Philadelphia during the British occupation but returned soon after his birth. As a child, Decatur suffered from severe whooping cough. In hopes of improving his health, he joined his father on a merchant voyage to Europe. The trip restored his health and sparked a lifelong desire to go to sea.

His parents preferred that he enter the clergy, but Decatur chose a different path. After leaving school, he worked in shipbuilding and helped oversee construction of the frigate *United States*. With his father's support, he earned a commission as a midshipman in the U.S. Navy and began active service aboard that same vessel.

During the Quasi-War with France in the late 1790s, Decatur served along the Atlantic coast, protecting American merchant ships from French privateers. His early assignments gave him valuable experience in naval operations and discipline. These skills would prove critical in the conflicts that followed.

In 1801, the United States entered the First Barbary War against North African states that were attacking American shipping in the Mediterranean. Decatur quickly distinguished himself. He commanded several vessels and captured enemy ships during the conflict. His most famous action came in 1804, when he led a small raiding party into the harbor at Tripoli to destroy the captured American frigate *Philadelphia*. The ship had fallen into enemy hands after running aground. Decatur's nighttime mission successfully burned the vessel, preventing its use by Tripolitan forces. The operation was widely praised for its precision and daring.

Decatur had a talent for drawing and designing ships and models.



Later in the war, Decatur took part in attacks on Tripoli itself. He engaged in close combat, including hand-to-hand fighting during boarding actions. For his performance, he was promoted to captain at the age of 25, making him one of the youngest captains in Navy history. He briefly commanded the USS *Constitution* and later oversaw construction of additional naval vessels.

In the years before the War of 1812, Decatur enforced the Embargo Act along the eastern seaboard. When war broke out with Britain in 1812, he again saw active combat. In October 1812, while commanding the *United States*, Decatur captured the British frigate HMS *Macedonian* after a sharp naval engagement. The victory brought him national recognition.

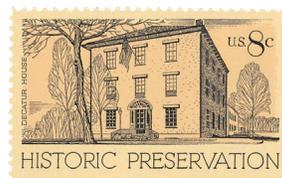
In early 1815, Decatur attempted to break through a British blockade near New York. Although he initially escaped, he was later forced into battle with a superior British force. After sustaining heavy damage and casualties, he surrendered. When he presented his sword to the British commander, it was returned in recognition of his defense. Decatur was held briefly as a prisoner until news arrived that the war had ended.



Stamp pictures Decatur and his friend Thomas MacDonough as well as the USS Saratoga.



Issued for the 150th anniversary of the USS Constitution.



Built two years before his death, the Decatur House was later home to Henry Clay, Martin Van Buren and Edward Livingston.

Soon after, Decatur was sent back to the Mediterranean for the Second Barbary War. In June 1815, he captured the flagship of the Algerian fleet, forcing the Dey of Algiers to agree to American terms. He then secured similar agreements with Tunis and Tripoli. These actions ended tribute payments and attacks on American shipping in the region. Upon returning home, Decatur was widely respected for his leadership and results. He later served on the Board of Navy Commissioners from 1816 to 1820, helping oversee the Navy's development.

The dispute that led to his death had begun years earlier. In 1807, Decatur participated in the court-martial of Commodore James Barron, who had surrendered his ship during the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair with minimal resistance. Barron was suspended from duty for five years. When he later sought reinstatement, Decatur opposed him. The disagreement became personal, and Barron eventually challenged Decatur to a duel.

Dueling, though illegal, was still practiced among officers. The two men met on the morning of March 22, 1820, in Bladensburg, Maryland, a known site for such encounters. Instead of the traditional method of pacing apart, they stood facing each other at close range. Both fired before the count was completed. Each man was hit.

Barron survived his wounds. Decatur did not. He was carried home and died that evening, around 10:30 p.m., at the age of 41. His death stunned the nation. He had been one of the Navy's most capable and recognizable officers. Approximately 10,000 people attended his funeral in Washington, DC, including President James Monroe.

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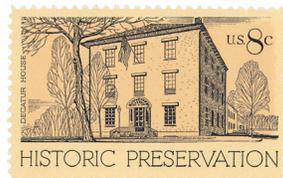


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