

# *The War at Sea*

## **John Lee Jr. (1738–1812)**

**The courageous captain who fantastically escaped from a British prison, with a fortuitous connection, and continued the patriotic fight.**

John Lee Jr., born 1738 in Manchester, started working from an early age on merchant boats as a mariner and, having become a captain by the time the Revolutionary War commenced, entered into privateering.

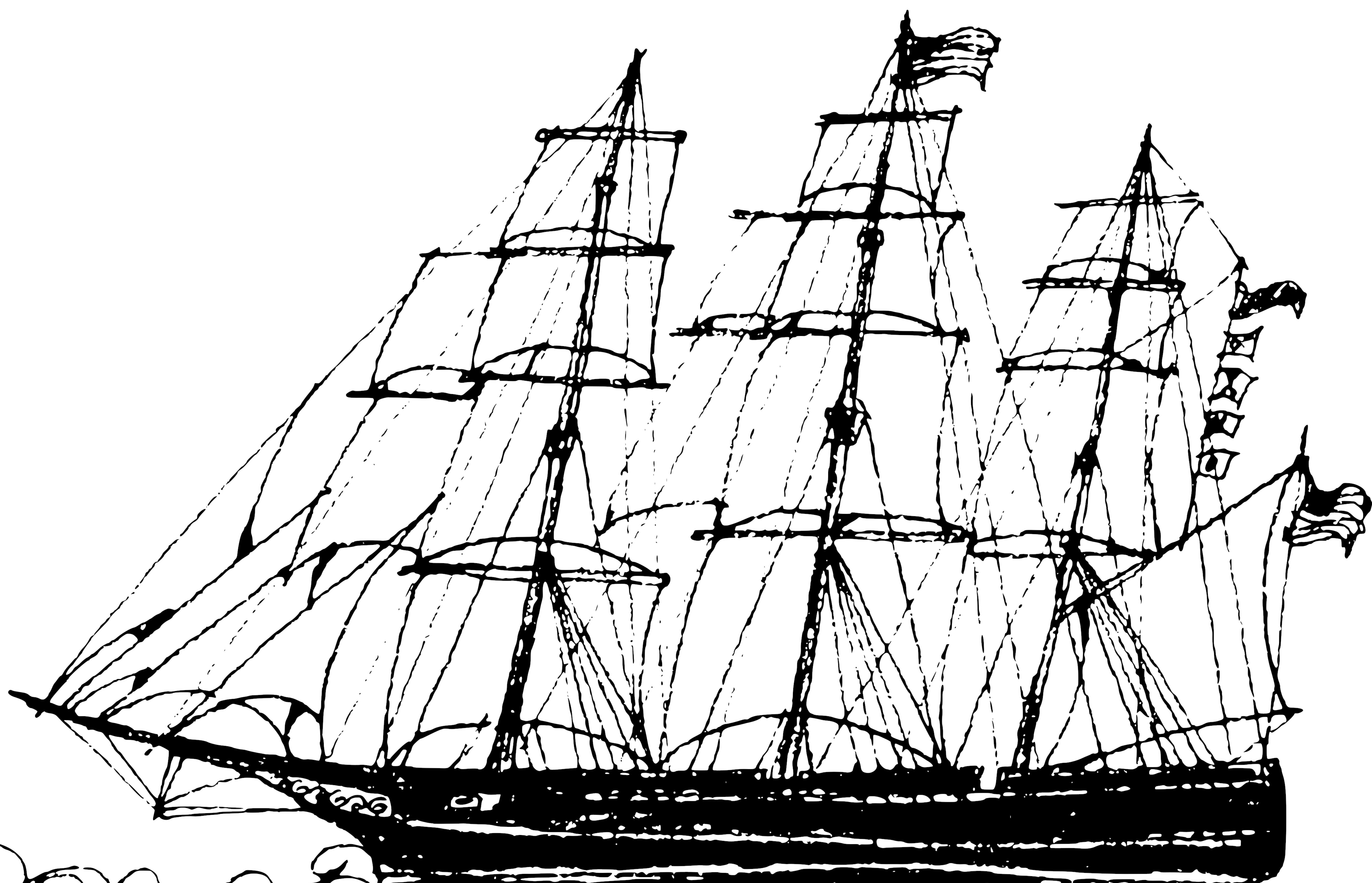
Lee first commanded the privateer schooner “Hawke,” with 6 guns and 30 men, out of Newburyport, and then, on a cruise begun in May 1777, he commanded the larger privateer brigantine “Fancy,” 12 guns, 75 men (May 1777). While cruising for prey, the “Fancy” was captured by a Royal Navy battleship, and Lee and his men were incarcerated at Mill Prison in Plymouth, England.

Immediately, Captain John Lee began plotting his escape. He was badly mistreated while imprisoned in England for nearly two years starting in 1778 (from Mill Prison in Plymouth he was transferred to Forton Prison near Portsmouth). Three times he tried to escape, for which he and a few others were put into solitary confinement with barely any food (called the “Black Hole”).

One day, he received money and instructions from a mysterious stranger. Paying his way out dressed as a prison guard, Captain Lee’s rendezvoused that night with his benefactor, who arranged for his passage to America. The stranger, who at the time remained anonymous, was Gen. John Burgoyne of the British army. While captive in America, Gen. Burgoyne had been well-treated by his warden, Col. William Raymond Lee, Capt. John’s brother, and had promised to do all he could toward securing the latter’s release as a debt of gratitude.

Capt. Lee finished out his wartime career as commander of the privateers “Tom,” “Cato,” “Grand Monarch,” and “Minerva” (1781). After the war he retired to Andover as a gentleman farmer, almost disabled by the privations of his years in jail. His daughter, Hannah, married Major Israel Forster of Manchester.

As the Lee family was large and had many Johns, the featured Capt. John Lee should not be confused with his Manchester contemporaries: his father, Col. John Lee (1716–1789), who fought in the Revolution with the 6th Essex County Regiment, 2nd Company; and John Lee (1761–1796), another privateer (also called Capt. John Lee), who owned the house today addressed at 78 School St.



# *Revolutionary*

# *Manchester*