

American War of Independence 1776-1783: From the Massachusetts Privateer *Washington* to the French Corvette *le Dragon*.

by Florence Prudhomme

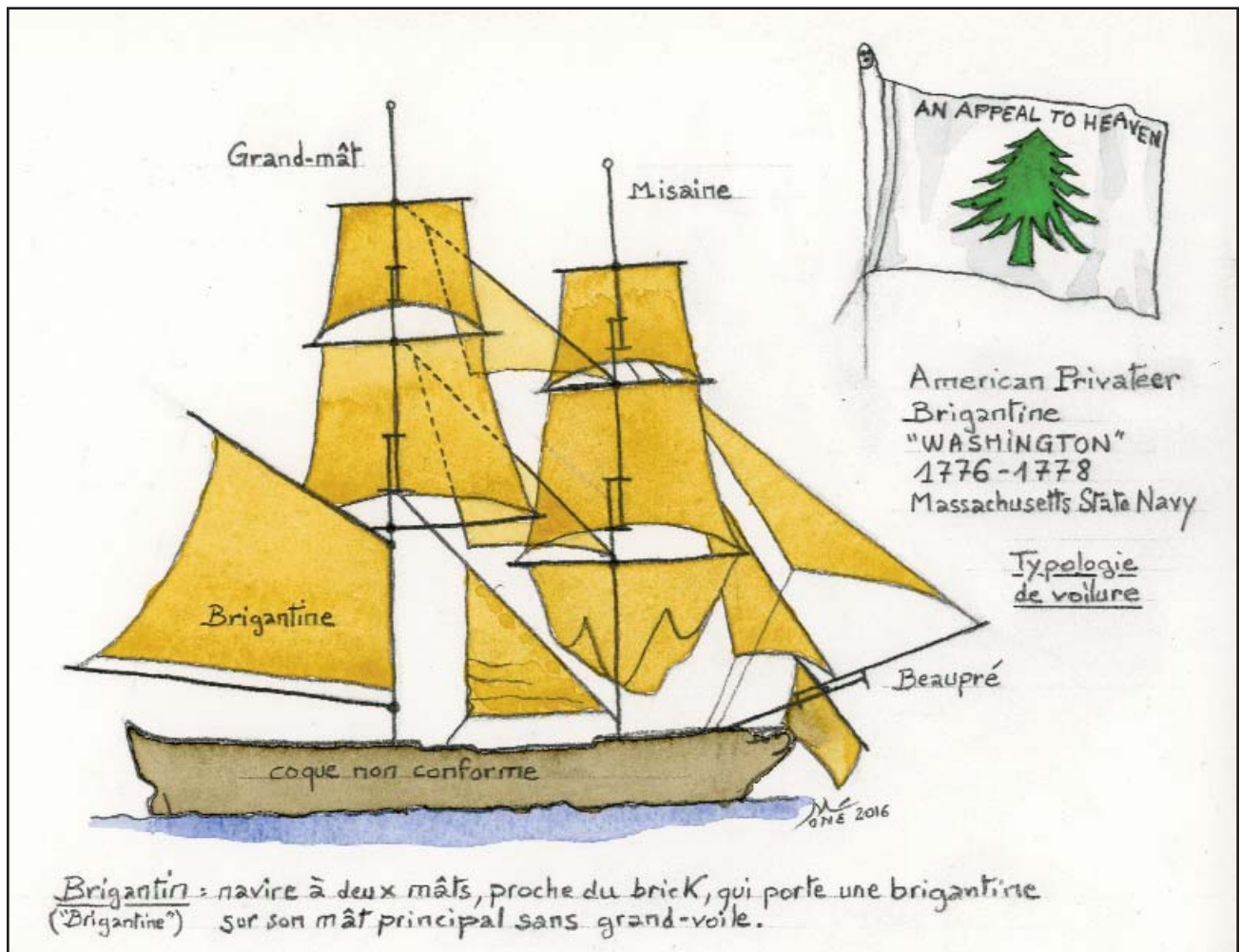


Figure 1, 2, & 3. Comparison of the rigs of the three ships; Massachusetts privateer brigantine *Washington*, British privateer brig *Dragon*, French Royal Navy corvette *le Dragon*. Watercolor by Thierry Moné: author's collection.

Underwater Archaeology in the Service of History

Off the north coast of Hispaniola,
now the Dominican Republic, on

Wednesday January 22, 1783, after a
chase, Chevalier Joseph de L'Espine
(1759-1827) blew up his corvette to pre-
vent it from falling into the hands of the
eighteen-strong squadron of British Rear-

Brick : navire à deux mâts à voiles carrées.
 ("Brig")

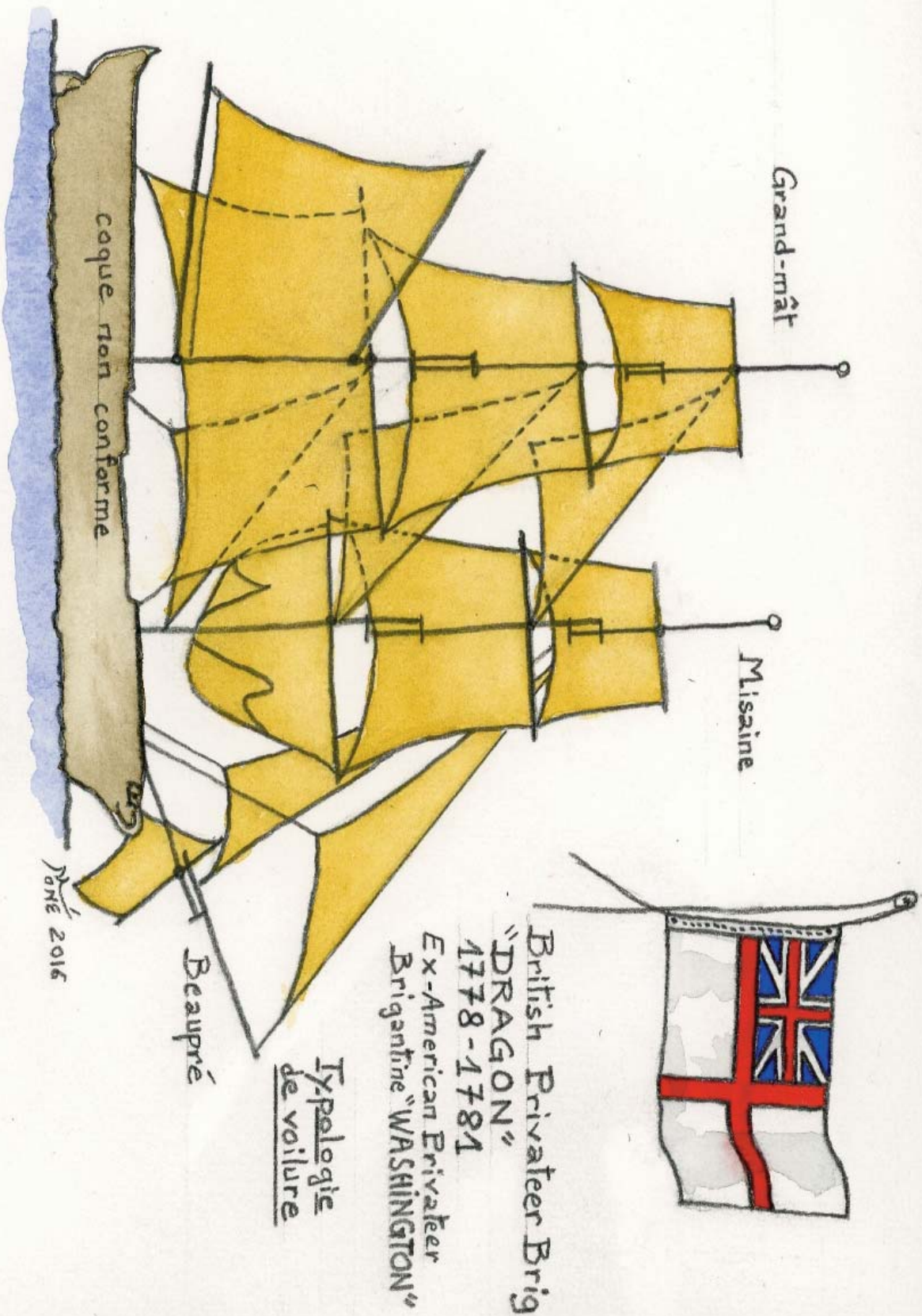


Figure 2.

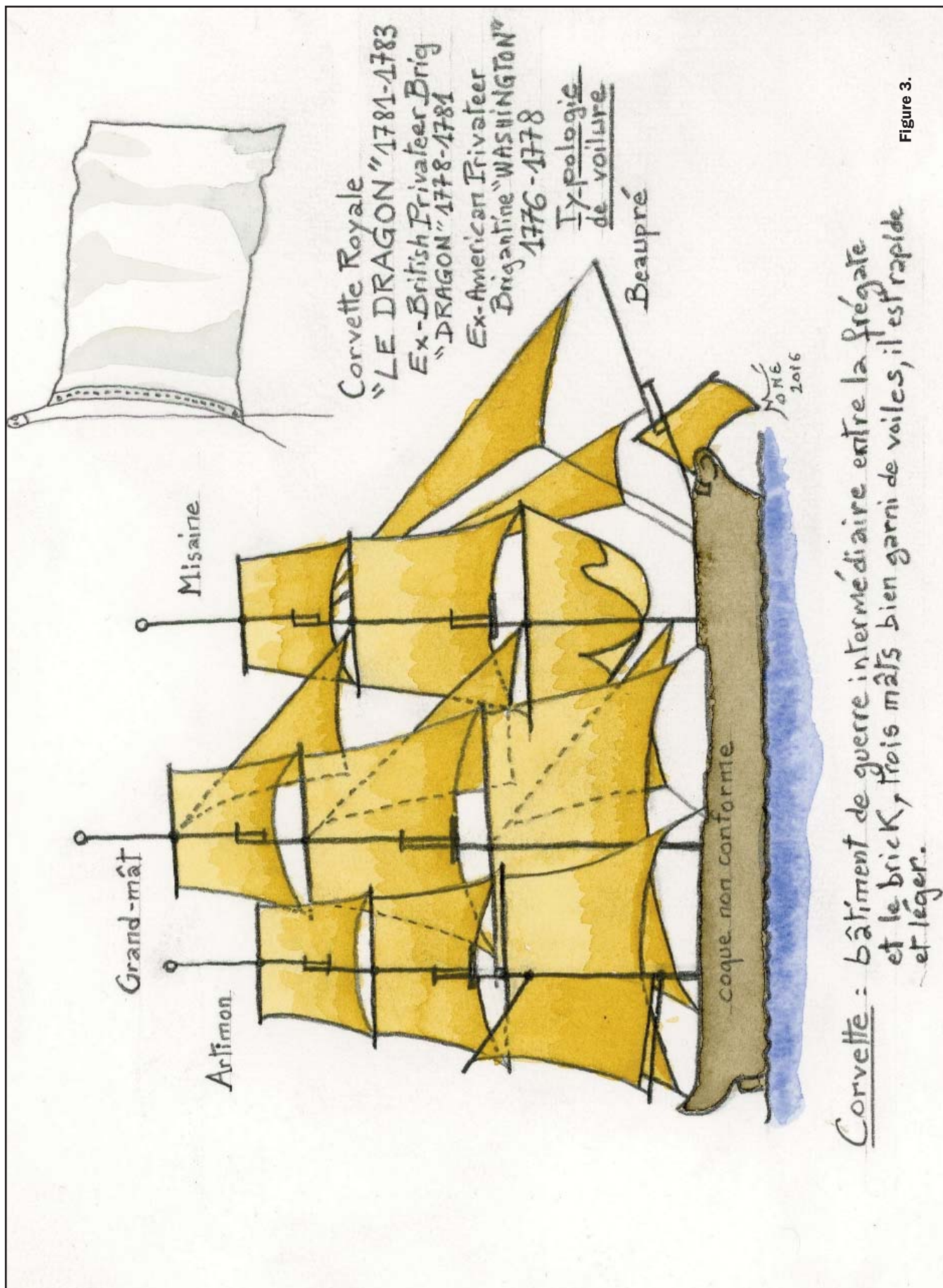


Figure 3.

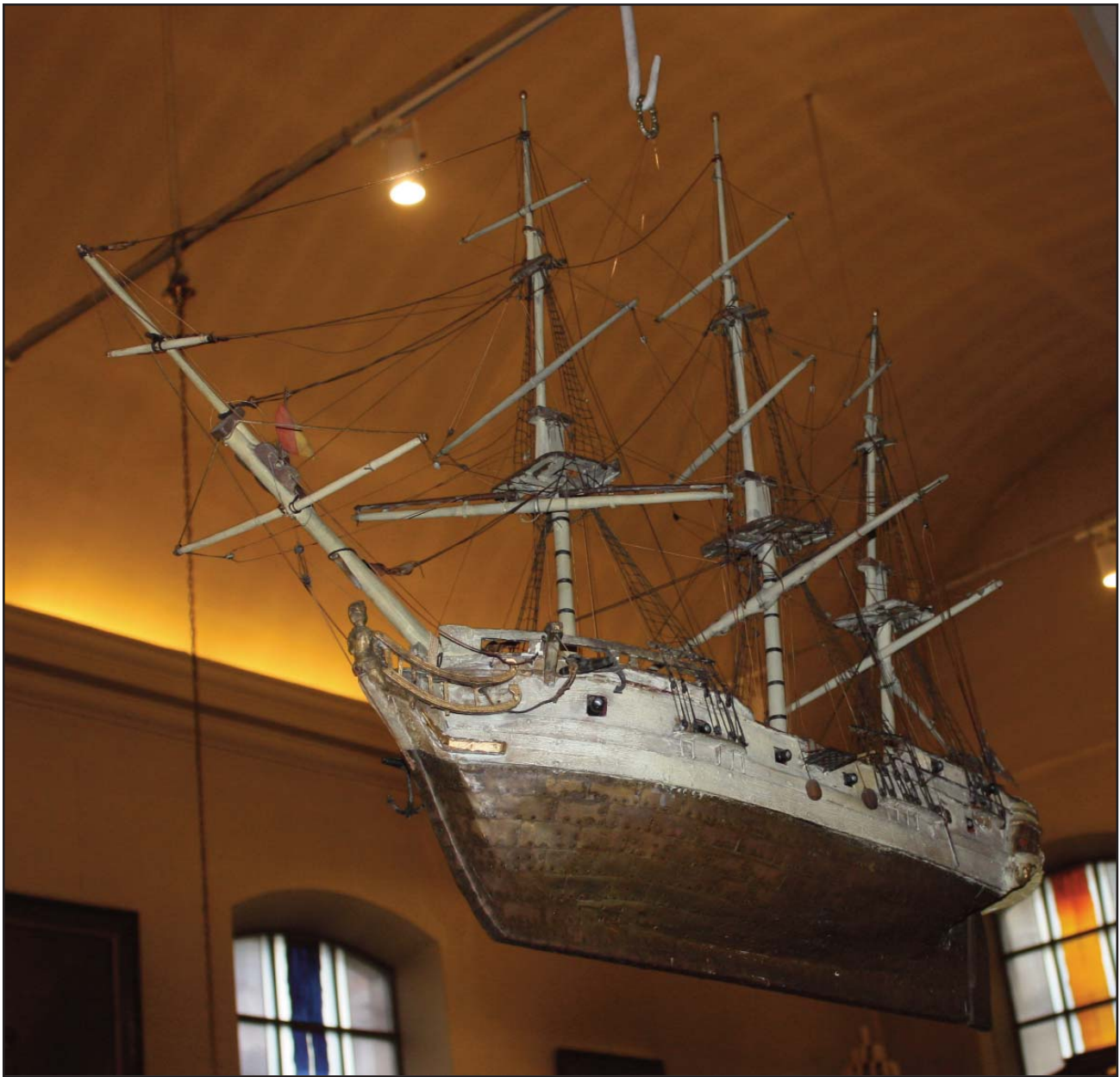


Figure 4. The ex-voto model in the nave of the Capuchin Church at Ostend. Author's photograph.

Admiral Samuel Hood (1724-1812).

More than two hundred years later, a very degraded wreck was reported in the same area. ADMAT-FRANCE—the Anglo-Danish Maritime Archaeological Team, an association specialized in the search for wrecks in the Caribbean, whose French department is in the Institut de Paléontologie Humaine (Institute for Human Paleontology), an association d'utilité publique (charitable organiza-

tion similar to a 501c(3) corporation in the United States) since 1910 under the auspices of the Muséum nationale d'Histoire Naturelle (National Museum of Natural History)—then conducted several dives and tried to identify the wreck using a collection of three elements that were, at first glance, contradictory. In November 2000, on the remains of this ship, which was of typically American construction, divers found several Scot-

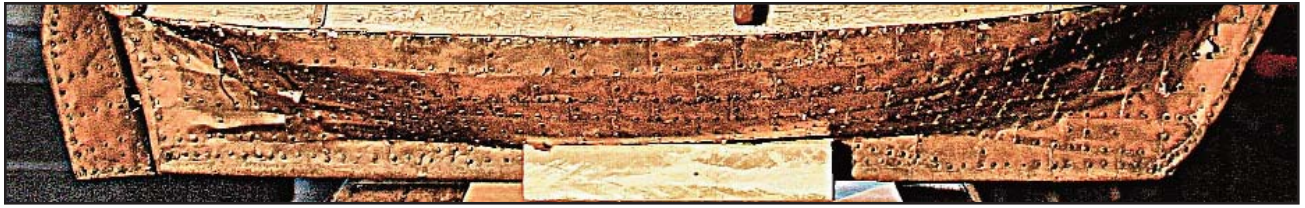


Figure 5. The model's hull and its copper sheathing. Author's photograph.

tish 9-pounder guns cast in 1778 at Carron and a uniform button bearing the number "90" that was identified as specific to the Irish Regiment of Dillon, in the service of France, for the period from 1779 to 1783. This type of button corresponds to the period of the participation of Louis XVI's armies in the American War of Independence.

Armed with this information, research was undertaken at the French Na-

tional Archives where the *Campagnes aux Ameriques* (Campaigns in the Americas) archive provided a report by Chevalier de L'Espine on his naval action on January 22, 1783. This important document linked the area where his ship sank to the location of the excavation wreck site, since he indicated that the final position of his corvette lay between *Pointe Isabellique* and *Pointe de la Grange*; two characteristic points that served as day-



Figure 6. The six-pointed star carved on the model's stern. Author's photograph.



Figure 7. One of the 13 six-pointed stars of General George Washington's command pennant. Courtesy of the Museum of the American Revolution, Philadelphia.

marks for navigators approaching the reef-lined coast along the north of Hispaniola. Having left Brest in France a month earlier in command of the Royal corvette, *le Dragon*, L'Espine was ordered to transport as discreetly and as quickly as possible Captain de Courrejeolles of the Engineer Corps, carrying a letter of the highest importance to be delivered in person to General de Bellecombe. (From 1781 to 1785, Pierre Guillaume Sarrazin de Bellecombe (1728-1792) was "Governor of Santo Domingo, Lieutenant-General of the French Windward Islands, and inspector-general of the troops, artillery,



Figure 8. The pennant with 13 six-pointed stars flown at General George Washington's command post (George Washington's Headquarters Flag). Courtesy of the Museum of the American Revolution, Philadelphia.

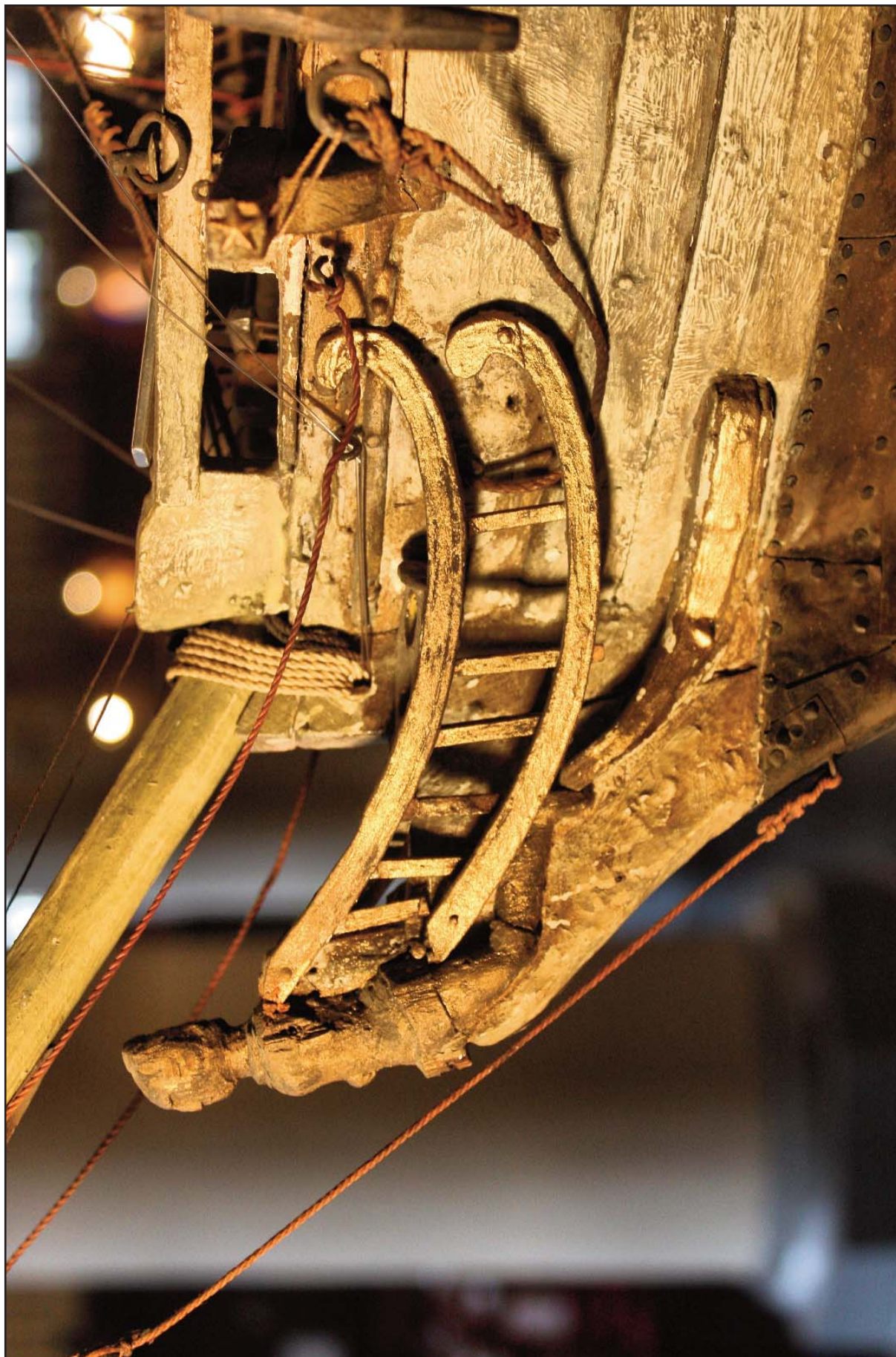


Figure 9. The figurehead of the model. It is difficult to say whether this sculpture was an incomplete carving or the result of damage. Author's photograph.



Figure 10. A representation of the figurehead of the privateer brigantine *Washington*. Only new research diving on the wreck could reveal the presence of a figurehead located under the bowsprit. Watercolor by Thierry Moné: author's collection.



Figure 11. The copper plate with the coat of arms of Louis XVI's Navy, attached to the stern of the model. Author's photograph.

militia and fortifications of the said islands". Captain de Courrejeolles (1736-1805) was an unusual officer, who was both the author of several inventions and a warrior capable of fulfilling the most perilous missions. This "Vauban of the Americas" exercised his talents in

Louisiana and in the Caribbean, in Santo Domingo in particular.) This encrypted letter from the Minister of the Navy ordered Bellecombe to place at Courrejeolles' disposition the means necessary for the capture of the Turks Islands north of Hispaniola. (The Turks and Caicos Is-



Figure 12. The copper plate engraved “1783”, fixed to the port side of the model. Author’s photograph.

lands are now a British overseas territory.) These islands had strategic importance because of the presence of the Grande Saline (a large salt lake on Grand Turk Island) which would have allowed the King of France to ensure the monopoly over salt in the Caribbean zone.

An English *Dragon* Sailed from Brest to Boston

The two-masted Liverpool privateer *Dragon* was captured off Brest on September 12, 1781. At that time the English privateer was armed with fourteen British 6-pounders. The French frigate *la Friponne*, aboard which then-*enseigne de vaisseau* Joseph de L’Espine was serving at the time, was credited with this prize.

After its capture, the English two-masted *Dragon* was modified by the addition of a mizzenmast and became the French corvette *le Dragon*. In April 1782, de L’Espine was sent with his corvette to

the Americas, carrying a courier for General Rochambeau. Because of heavy seas, and the state of its hull, which was taking on water from all sides, the corvette failed to reach Philadelphia and made a forced stopover of more than three months in Boston. On May 24, 1782, *le Dragon*, then armed with sixteen 4-pounder guns and four 6-pounder howitzers, was moored in Boston Harbor at the Ballard Wharf on Ship Street (now Commercial Street). (This armament indicates that the transformation into a corvette was accompanied by a modification of the type of artillery. However, none of these new pieces of artillery corresponds to those found in the wreck, which were 9-pounders. The artillery was modified again when the hull received copper sheathing at Brest.) This shipyard within the great Massachusetts port restored the operational effectiveness of the corvette by completely rebuilding the hull, including replacing frames, part of the keel, and the bowsprit. (Record of the ship carpenter

Joseph Clarck, Boston, May 1782) Following this, L'Espine's corvette returned to Brest where the brand-new hull of American white oak planks was quickly sheathed with copper, thus protecting it from the attack of shipworms in tropical seas and increasing its speed.

When the Privateer *Washington* Turns into *Dragon*

While searching the archives of the Royal Navy, we realized that the Liverpool privateer brig *Dragon* was itself a captured vessel. This is also confirmed by Lloyd's registers which recorded the privateer for the years 1779 and 1780, stating that it was of American construction. (The brig *Dragon* was not yet on the registers of 1778, and was no longer on those of 1781.) By picking up the lists of American prize vessels of the year 1778, all clues lead back to a single ship, built in the State of Massachusetts in 1776: the privateer brigantine *Washington*.

On May 30, 1778, when the ship left Plymouth, Massachusetts, commanded for a few days by Captain Nathaniel Wardell, the privateer brigantine *Washington* was captured by Captain John Mulligan's British (ex-French) frigate *Blonde*. Sent to Halifax, Nova Scotia, the vessel was declared a legitimate prize and sold. Acquired by the shipowners Warren & Co. of Liverpool (England), the brigantine underwent some modifications before being put into service as a privateer brig under the name of *Dragon*.

Between September 1778 and August 1781, the Liverpool privateer *Dragon* captured at least five enemy ships, including the French privateer *la Modeste* in February 1779, before being captured by the French on September 12, 1781 and incorporated into Louis XVI's navy.

A *Washington* with an Impressive Record

The privateer brigantine *Washington* was commissioned on October 3, 1776 at the Beverly shipyard north of Boston, Massachusetts. It was armed with twelve 6- and 8-pounders, six swivel-guns and four blunderbusses. The captain, Elias Smith, distinguished himself by capturing nine enemy ships within a single year. His successor in 1777, Captain Nicholas Ogleby, recorded no prizes during the six months of his command. The last captain of the privateer *Washington*, Nathaniel Wardell, was captured when he first put to sea.

The known technical characteristics of the French corvette *le Dragon* match the main characteristics of the Massachusetts privateer brigantine *Washington*. Examination of the different types of brigantines constructed during the same period by American shipyards reveals that *Washington* was similar to the privateer brigantine *Fair American* of 1776, a name carried by many American ships of the period. The latter was armed with fourteen guns arranged on a single deck about 21 meters long by 7.3 meters wide (69 feet by 24 feet).

A Belgian Surprise Visitor in the Form of an Ex-Voto

Research in the archives revealed the three lives of the American brigantine *Washington* from its origin in 1776 to its end in 1783, becoming in turn the English brig *Dragon* and, eventually, the French corvette *le Dragon*. No plan for the ship was located in the American, British, or French archives, and the

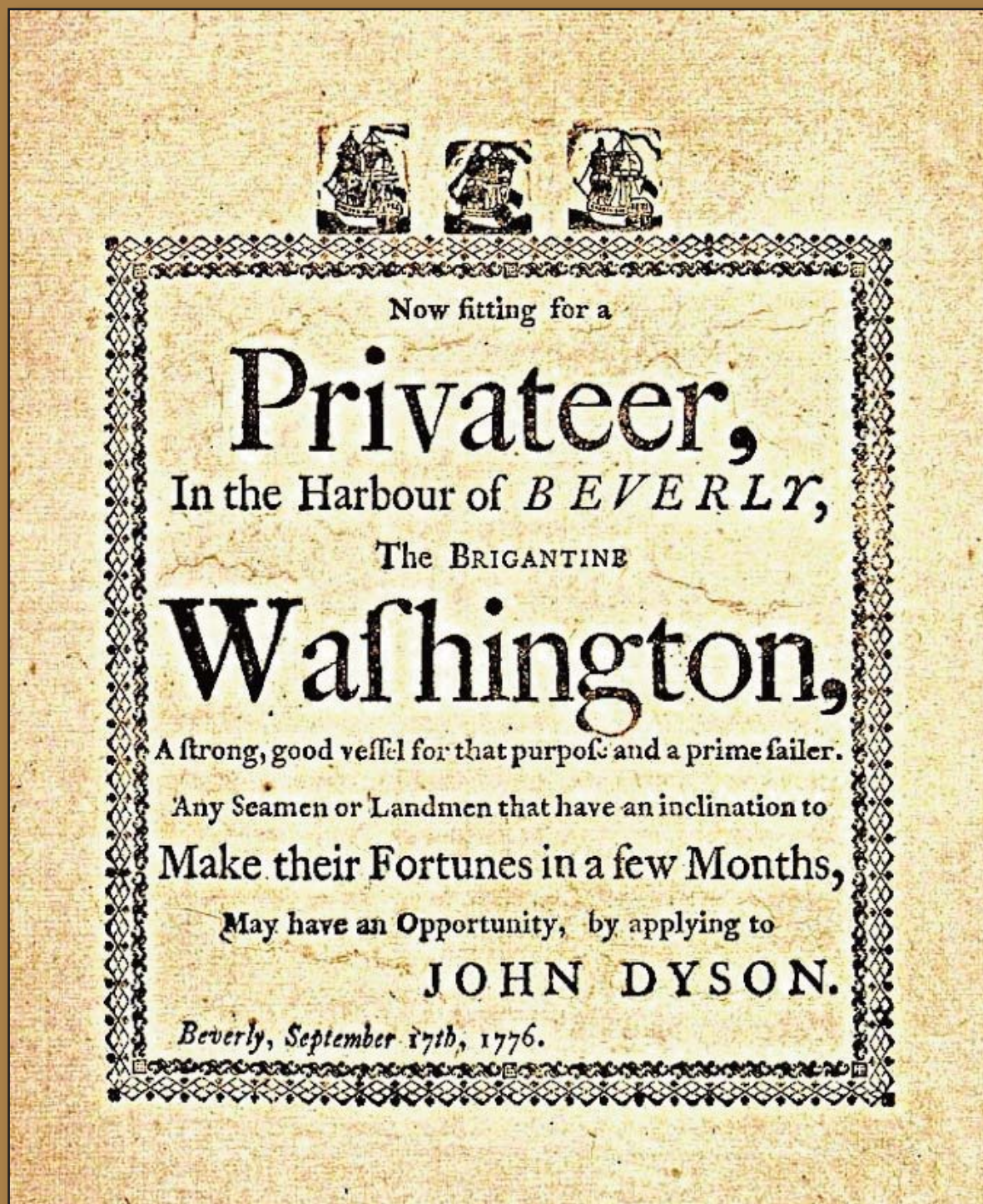


Figure 13. A poster for the initial recruitment of the crew of the privateer brigantine *Washington*, dating from 1776.

wreck of the blown-up corvette provides little information. However, an enigmatic ex-voto dated 1783 could possibly

be a three-dimensional representation of the corvette *le Dragon*.

In the Belgian Church of the Ca-

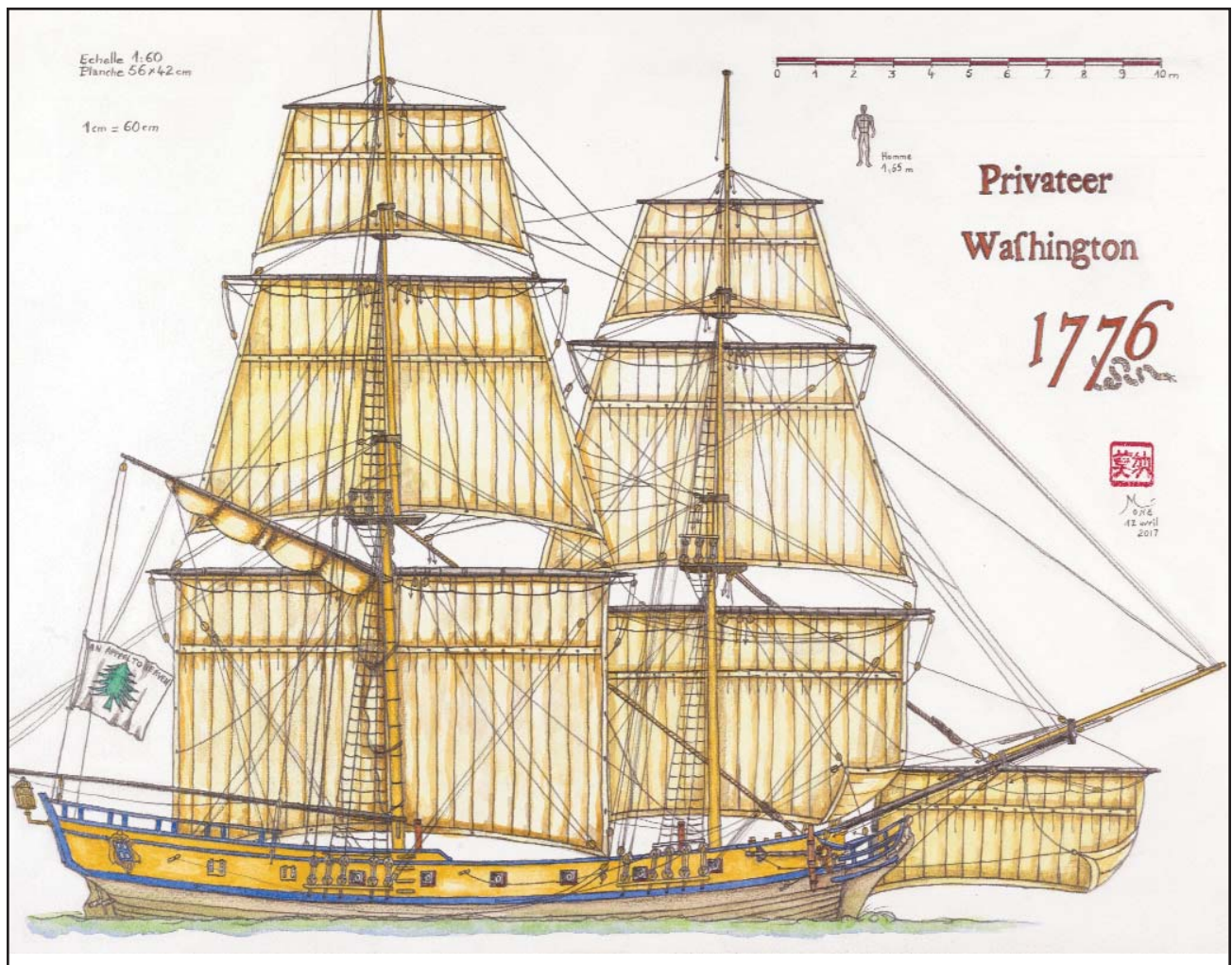


Figure 14. A representation of the privateer brigantine *Washington*, based on the plans of the brigantine *Fair American*. This sketch shows the flag of the Navy of the State of Massachusetts in 1776. Watercolor by Thierry Moné: author's collection.

puchins at Ostend, a model suspended from the vaulted ceiling displays some intriguing points in common with our corvette. (The deep-sea captain Freddy Van Daele self-published a booklet, *L'Énigmatique maquette d'Ostende, <le Dragon- 1783>* (The enigmatic Ostend model, *le Dragon* – 1783) in 2015.) In March 2017, the rector of the church authorized both photography and the on-site study of the model.

This ex-voto has a three-masted hull, and is sheathed with genuine copper plates, something rare enough to be noted. The model appears to have been made to a scale of 1:39 and its propor-

tions correspond to those of the corvette *le Dragon* of 1783. The presence of a forecastle and quarterdeck conforms to the description of the ship's carpenter in Boston. On the other hand, since the model has been restored many times, it is difficult to say which elements could have been added or modified by certain non-expert hands. Thus, the guns are quite out of proportion and bronze embellishments have obviously been added to the hull. In 1999, one of these additions adorning the stern broke by accident when the ex-voto fell to the floor of the church, thus unveiling a star carved in the wood with six branches of very

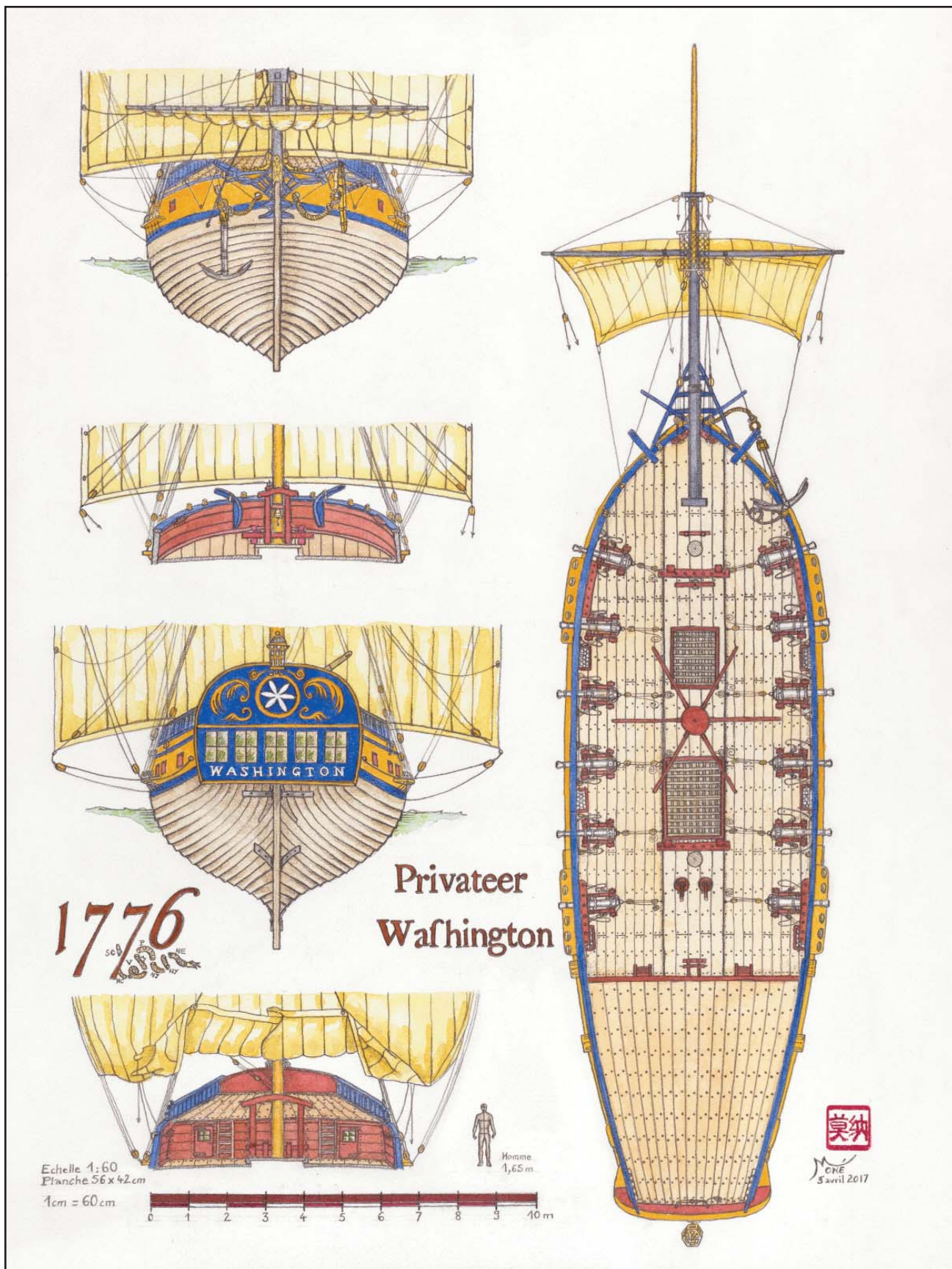


Figure 14. A representation of the privateer brigantine *Washington*, based on the plans of the brigantine *Fair American*. Watercolor by Thierry Moné: author's collection.

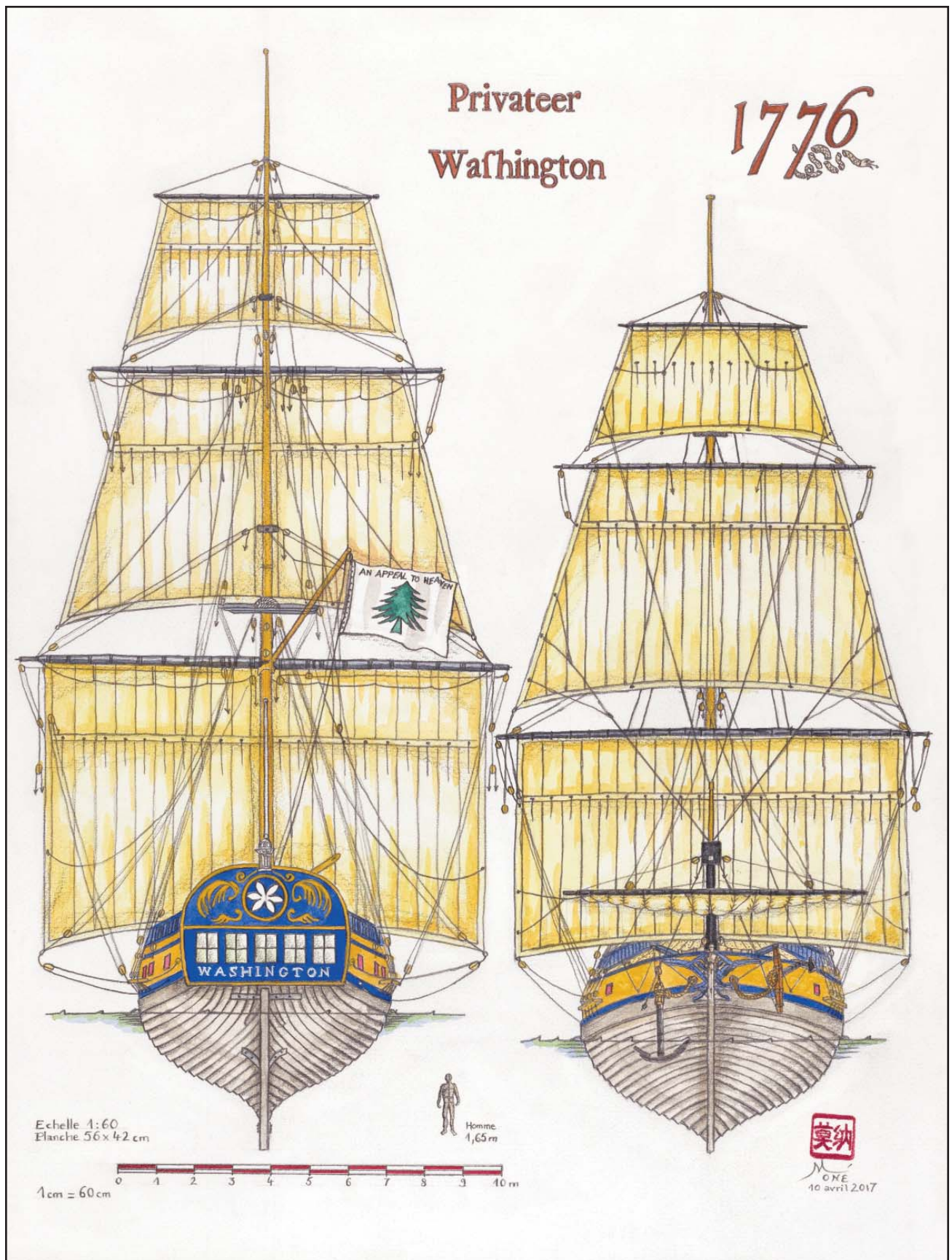


Figure 15. A representation of the privateer brigantine *Washington*, based on the plans of the brigantine *Fair American*. Watercolor by Thierry Moné: author's collection.

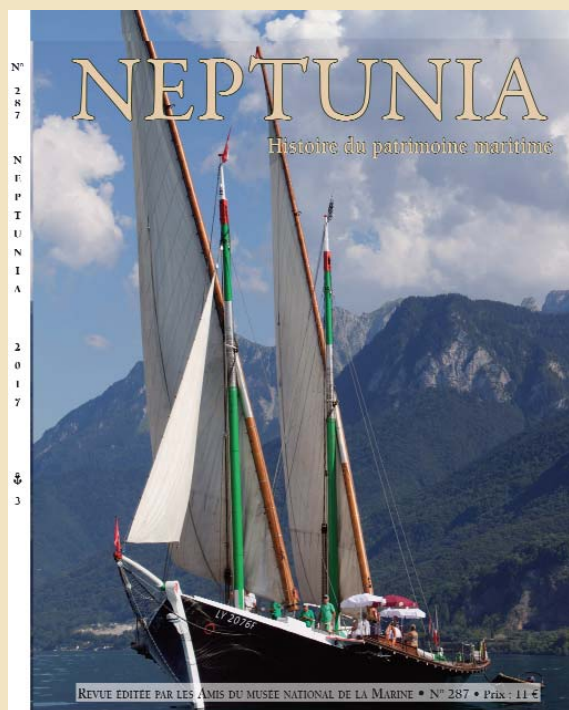
distinctive form. Remember that the brigantine *Washington* was built in 1776 in one of the thirteen founding states, in this case, Massachusetts. The shape of the star resembles that of certain stars used on the first American flags and, in particular, on the famous pennant of General George Washington's command post. Moreover, despite its poor state of preservation, the figurehead could have represented the general. Furthermore, the arms of the French Royal Navy appear on the stern castle and a drawing in the cabin reproduces the coat of arms of the maternal side of L'Espine's family. Finally, a copper plate fixed to port bears the engraved inscription "1783". Up to now, research has not yet determined when and how this ex-voto arrived in the Church of the Capuchins at Ostend.

Even though there are several indications that it may be a representation of the French corvette *le Dragon*, formerly the British brig *Dragon*, and itself the former Massachusetts privateer brigantine *Washington*, it is not possible today to state definitively that the ex-voto in Ostend represents the French corvette *le Dragon*.

In a near future, the hypothesis here formulated could be confirmed or reversed by new indicators emerging from the archives or by the excavation of the prow of *le Dragon* in the Dominican Republic. Thus, only a new research campaign could reveal the presence of a possible figurehead, perhaps an effigy of George Washington.

Neptunia

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