



Haverford Township Historical Society



JOSHUA HUMPHREY (1751-1838)

Compiled by Richard Kerr

[The following is excerpted from History of Delaware County, Pennsylvania by George Smith M.D., published by Henry B. Ashmead in Philadelphia in 1862.]

JOSHUA HUMPHREY, the son of Joshua [Humphrey], and grandson of the immigrant Daniel Humphrey, was born in Haverford township in the year 1751 [June 17]. His mother was Sarah (William) Humphrey, the daughter of Edward and Elinor William, of Blockley [today a section of Philadelphia]. His ancestors were thoroughly Welsh, and all of them Quakers. With only the advantages of such an early education as the common schools of the country afforded at that day, Joshua was apprenticed at a tender age to a ship-carpenter of Philadelphia. Before the completion of his apprenticeship his instructor died, but Mr. Humphrey had made such good use of his opportunities in perfecting himself in his trade, and at the same time by his good conduct had secured the confidence of the family so fully, that he was at once placed at the head of the establishment, and managed the whole business for the widow during several years.

Being possessed of a comprehensive and philosophical mind, he soon came to be regarded as the first shipwright in the country. So much was this the case, that after the adoption of the Constitution, and when it became apparent that our government must be possessed of a navy, Mr. Humphrey was consulted, officially, and his views, which had been communicated to the Hon. Robert Morris, in a letter dated January 6th, 1793, but more in detail to Gen. Knox, then Secretary of War, were, in the main, adopted. [*Lives of Eminent Philadelphians*, p. 588.] The leading ideas of Mr. Humphrey were: "That as our navy must be for a considerable time, inferior in the number of its vessels, to the names of Europe, to compensate for this deficiency in number, our ships should be formidable from their character, and larger in size and armament, and stronger in construction than those of Europe of the same class." He was the first Naval Constructor of the United States, and several of our first ships of war were built under his immediate direction. The marked superiority of our vessels in combats with those of England, of the same class, during the War of 1812, was mainly owing to the adoption of Mr. Humphrey's suggestions. He may justly be called The Father of the American Navy.

The last thirty years of his life were spent on a part of his patrimonial estate [Pont Reading] in Haverford. Here he died in 1838 [January 12], at the advanced age of eighty-seven years, his mental faculties being almost unimpaired to the last. [He was buried at the Old Haverford Friends Burial Ground.]

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