The British Empire and the Royal Navy

Regions of Importance to Britain
1. **Nova Scotia**: The Grand Banks fishing grounds yielded tons of dried fish.
2. **New England**: New England was valued for its tall pines for ship masts and spars. Relying heavily on shipping for their livelihood, they also produced naval stores, such as rope and tar.
3. **Mid-Atlantic Colonies**: They exported grains to the Caribbean and to England.
4. **American South**: Tobacco made many merchants in England rich along with the plantation owners. Cotton was important for ship’s sails and clothing.
5. **Caribbean**: Most of the Caribbean Islands produced sugar. They also produced rum and molasses, by-products of sugar production.
6. **Gibraltar**: Gibraltar strategically controls the entrance/exit to/from the Mediterranean.
7. **India**: India was valued for its spices. It was also valued for cotton and gems.

Question: What would England need to maintain such a widespread empire?
   Ships (i.e., a strong navy and a large merchant fleet), men, and money.

Question: What did they need in order to build large and strong fleets?
   Wood (the iron content in most period ships is negligible). England is a very small country, about the size of Alabama (about 50,000 sq. miles)

Question: From where did England get its wood?
   Oak for hulls from its own forests and from North America. Pine for masts and spars from North America and Scandinavia. New England in particular produced a number of naval stores useful to the British. (tall pines for masts and spars, tar, and hempen rope). The Southern Colonies produced cotton, used for making sails. The importance of these goods to the Empire is partly why the British were so upset about the Revolution.

In order to transport these and other goods, Britain had to have a large merchant fleet. American merchants also owned large numbers of ships. Britain needed a strong navy to protect this merchant fleet and its colonies. It had the largest fleet in Europe: the Royal Navy had 270 ships in 1775. By 1783, the Royal Navy had 468 ships of all sizes.

Development of the Continental Navy

Question: Did America have a navy in 1774?
   No, the Americans were British subjects so they would have been protected by the Royal Navy.

Question: What would have been the fastest way for America to acquire a navy?
   To arm merchant ships. America’s first navy was made up of armed merchants and their most famous ship of the Revolution, the Bonhomme Richard, was really a type of merchant ship known as an East Indiaman.
When war broke out, the Continental Congress and the individual states bought and armed ships to create formal, organized navies. Many merchants also sought commissions as privateers. Privateers can be thought of as legal pirates. Privateers were usually small ships that carried just a few guns. Privateers usually did not try to fight the Royal Navy; rather, they sought to capture enemy merchant ships. Privateers made money by selling the ships they captured and their cargoes. Throughout the war, about 2,000 private armed ships sailed for the patriots.

Later the Continental Congress ordered ships to be built specifically for a navy. These ships included everything from small gunboats, such as the Philadelphia, to 32-gun frigates, such as the Alliance. The Continental Navy never built any ships larger than this, although a ship-of-the-line was ordered and started. Even with its privateers, America was badly outnumbered on the high seas until the French (1778), Spanish (1779), and Dutch (1781) joined America against Britain. The Continental Navy reached its pinnacle with about 15 or so ships of all sizes and classes from frigate down in service at one time. Throughout the course of the war, the Continental Navy had between 50 and 60 ships; however, the various state navies amounted to a total of about 130 ships.

Establishment of the Continental Navy

During the Revolutionary War, the fledgling United States would commission a fleet of American privateers that captured more than 1,000 British merchant ships; while landlocked historians have dwelled on George Washington's battle plans, this economic strangulation by sea undeniably helped the colonies win their independence.

Privateering, at its best, was a perfectly honorable profession, a unique blend of profit and patriotism. Typically, a group of investors banded together to finance a privateer mission to capture enemy ships and bring them back to port to be condemned as prizes and sold.

In 1775 Washington chartered the fishing schooner Hannah to raid British shipping of valuable military supplies. Though Washington had no intention of establishing an American navy, the Hannah became the first of eleven vessels chartered to aid the revolutionary cause. Over the six months of the American siege of Boston, "Washington's Navy" captured some fifty-five prizes, provided much-needed supplies to the troops, and boosted the efforts of naval-minded members of Congress who sought to create a national naval force.

Taken from the Wicasset Maine history web page:

Letters of marque were given to any person who equipped a vessel for the defense of the colonies. During the Revolutionary war almost every boat that had not been captured by the English was turned into a privateer. These privateers sailed the seas looking for British merchant ships to capture and seize their cargo.

Most privateers were generally outfitted by a ship owner or a group of ship owners. They sailed on boats called square-halves, known for their speed. The owners provided the ship with her equipment and put a captain in charge. The captain hired a crew and paid for the expenses of the voyage. Any cargo that was captured on their voyage was brought into an American or allied port and sold at auction. Half of the profit went to the ship owners and the rest to the crew.