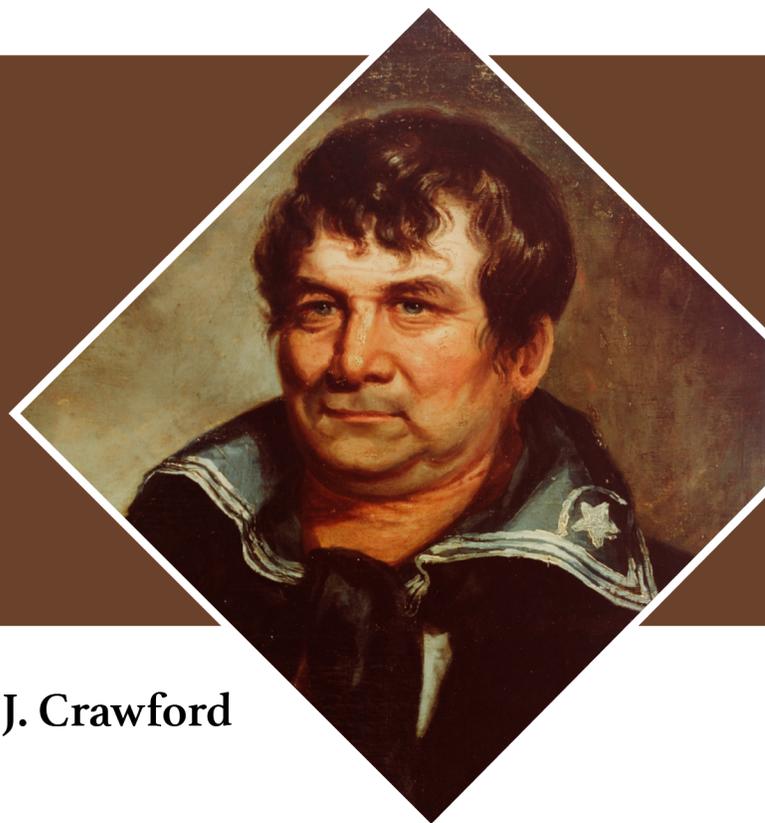


Officers of Peculiar Skill

Petty and Forward Officers of the U.S. Navy
1797–1860



Michael J. Crawford



Naval History and Heritage Command

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Officers of Peculiar Skill

INTRODUCTION

A good Boatswain is a peculiar and rare sort of character

Commodore George C. Read
16 February 1842

Our petty officers in particular, were with one single exception, elderly men of long servitude, and very great experience in the Navy.

“Extracts from a Journal of a Voyage to the West Indies, in the U.S. Ship ———, in 1831–2”
Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser
21 November 1832

Petty and Forward Naval Officers

In 1954, Congressman Donald Ray “Billy” Matthews (D–FL), a U.S. Army veteran of World War II, proposed substituting the title “enlisted officer,” in place of “petty officer” in the U.S. Navy. Matthews objected to the latter term because of the dictionary definition of petty “as small, trifling, inferior.” “I am sure,” he said, these names have no part in the magnificent work that petty officers in our Navy perform.” The army avoided the belittling connotations of the word “petty” by designating its officers of lesser grade “noncommissioned officers.” The congressman’s demarche failed and the Navy retains the designation “petty officer,” a term possessing an ancient and honorable heritage.¹

Webster’s Dictionary defines *petty officer* as “a subordinate officer in the navy or coast guard appointed from among the enlisted men.” The U.S. Navy adopted the term from the British Royal Navy, which, in turn, had adapted the French word *petit* in its sense of inferior, secondary, subordinate, these officers being inferior in grade and subordinate to both warrant and commissioned officers. In the age of sail, petty officers, in contrast to those holding warrants or commissions, were appointed by a ship’s commanding officer and held their posts at the commander’s pleasure. “An Act for the Government of the Navy of the United States,” enacted by Congress and signed by President John Adams on 2 March 1799, provided that “all officers not having commissions or warrants (or appointed commission or warrant officers for the time being), are termed petty, or inferior officers.” The U.S. Navy has employed the term *petty officer* ever since.

The term *forward officers* encompasses boatswains, gunners, carpenters, and sailmakers. In sailing warships, this class of warrant officers quartered and messed together in the forward part of the ship.

¹ Jayne Harder and Kelsie Harder, “What’s Trifling About a Petty Officer,” *American Speech* 29 (1954): 302–303.

Officers, But Not Gentlemen

Given the paucity of personal records of petty and forward officers, to learn what manner of men they were is a more difficult task than that of studying their careers. One way to try to get to know these officers more intimately is to listen to what their superiors said about them. Commissioned officers wrote more than did warrant and petty officers, and much more of their writings ended up preserved in archives than those of their subordinates.

Observing the inferior officers through the eyes of the Navy's officers has its hazards, however. The captains and commodores who wrote their recommendations and administered their discipline judged these men through the distorting lens of class.

Commissioned officers and some warrant officers were "officers and gentlemen." What did a naval officer mean when he identified himself as a gentleman? "Of all the definitions of gentleman," according to Christopher McKee, the historian who has studied the pre-1815 commissioned officer corps the closest,

the one that most closely approximates what the naval officer had in mind when he identified himself with the term is that which describes a man who does not engage in any menial occupation or in manual labor for gain, and who lives by a certain code of behavior thought appropriate to his exalted status.

By this definition, in addition to commissioned officers, sailing masters, midshipmen, and chaplains, all holding their positions in the Navy by warrants, were considered gentlemen. However, a sub-group of warrant officers, the forward officers whom this book discusses, "were never considered gentlemen by their contemporaries. . . . Boatswains, carpenters, sailmakers, and gunners were, in the minds of the gentlemen officers, relegated to a separate and inferior status category." As McKee explains,

The reason is not difficult to see. Each of these "officers" was perceived as engaged in a menial or manual occupation and could not, by definition, be a gentleman. This distinction . . . is nowhere explicitly stated in contemporary records; implicitly it is everywhere, lurking between the lines of any document referring to the holder of one of these four ranks.²

One particularly astute observer, writing in the 1840s, a period long after the years before 1816 to which McKee refers, did explicitly make this distinction between officers who were gentlemen and forward officers, who were not. In the novel *White-Jacket, or the World in a Man-of-War*, published in 1850, Herman Melville set down the impressions he had absorbed during his 14 months as a seaman in the United States frigate *United States* from August 1843 to October 1844. After discussing the wardroom officers (lieutenants, sailing master, purser, chaplain, surgeon, Marine Corps officers, and schoolmaster), Melville writes of the boatswain, gunner, carpenter, and sailmaker.

² Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794–1815* (Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press [NIP], 1991), 34.

Though these worthies sport long coats and wear the anchor-button; yet in the estimation of the ward-room officers, they are not, technically speaking, rated gentlemen. The First Lieutenant, Chaplain, or Surgeon, for example, would never dream of inviting them to dinner. In sea parlance, “they come in at the hawse holes;” they have hard hands; and the carpenter and sail-maker practically understand the duties which they are called upon to superintend. They mess by themselves.³

Naval officers who were among those recognized as gentlemen assumed that the forward officers did not ascribe to the code of behavior of a gentleman. After all, because of the nature of their work, forward officers were not gentlemen. This explains Commodore Jesse D. Elliott’s astonishment that a lowly gunner such as Thomas Ryley should be found expressing high moral sentiments (see Chapter 3). Frequently, in writing recommendations for petty officers aspiring to warrants, a line officer sought to distinguish the candidate by contrasting that sailor’s sterling qualities with the generally base quality of others of his status. For instance, in recommending William Hart for a boatswain’s warrant, Captain J. H. Clack observed that Hart “is a very expert seaman, and what is rarely to be found in a person of his class, is extremely sober and steady.”⁴ In the minds of the gentlemen officers, a deep chasm separated them from forward officers. The nature of that chasm becomes apparent in arguments that Commodore George C. Read made to the Secretary of the Navy in supporting the reappointment of Boatswain William Brown. In November 1841, after 20 years of naval service, including nine as a boatswain, Brown was cashiered for embezzling public property. Early in 1842, Brown persuaded Read to support his petition for reinstatement. Writing the Secretary of the Navy on Brown’s behalf on 16 February 1842, Read suggested that Brown’s crime was no more than was to be expected of men of his class, considering their general low character.

When we consider the general character of the men who fill such stations and the smallness of their pay, we are only surprised that crimes of this kind do not happen more frequently.

Read continued this with the following reasoning:

A good Boatswain is a peculiar and rare sort of character, and when we can obtain such persons, I think we should fall upon Some plan of punishing them for their Sins, other than that of depriving the Service of their usefulness.

William Brown was with me in the Constellation for nearly three years, and made an excellent Boatswain. I cannot Say that he had no faults.—He would, when on shore, drink too much, and I Sometimes had to reprimand him for severity towards the men.

Read’s implied syllogism was that: All good boatswains, despite their faults, are worth retaining in the Navy; William Brown is a good boatswain, in fact an excellent one; therefore, despite his faults, Brown should be restored to his post. Three months later, on 24 May, Read returned to his argument

³ Herman Melville, *White-Jacket, or The World in a Man-of-War* (Annapolis, MD: NIP, 1988), 35.

⁴“Hart, William,” ZB Files, Navy Department Library, Washington, DC.

that the Navy should try to keep good boatswains whenever possible. He attempted to strengthen his position by contrasting the serious consequences for the Navy's reputation of restoring a disgraced commissioned officer with the minimal fallout resulting from restoring a disgraced warrant officer:

[I] should be one of the last to advocate the principle that a commissioned officer could disgrace himself and after being dismissed the service, return to it by the aid of friends.— Such charity would bring disgrace upon the service, but the restoration of a Boatswain cannot affect the profession, and I am of opinion that when we find a good warrant officer in the Service, we should keep him if we can.

“The restoration of a Boatswain cannot affect the profession”—presumably because no one expected boatswains to be gentlemen of unblemished honor. Although they were not gentlemen, we can venture to suppose that most forward officers considered themselves men of honor.⁵

The present work analyzes the careers of the U.S. Navy's petty and forward officers in the sea service from its founding to the eve of the Civil War. There is a close connection between the two groups, for forward officers had often perfected their crafts as petty officers, and many petty officers aspired to appointments as forward officers. Given the nature of the sources for such a study, it is impossible to avoid viewing these men from the perspective of their superior officers, but perhaps in the process the reader will get a glimpse of these men from their own points of view.

⁵ “Brown, William,” ZB Files, Navy Department Library, Washington, DC.

PROLOGUE

The Navies of the American Revolution

There I had an opportunity to examine into the duties of every officer from the highest to the lowest. . . . I examined much into the duties of the Purser and Stewards, Quarter Masters, and Quarter Gunners, and other officer's duty.

Christopher Prince, 1774

Ships, arms, facilities, regulations, and administrative structures, however necessary, do not make an effective navy. A navy needs able officers and skilled seamen. What is more, to function effectively, a naval vessel in the age of sail required not merely boatswains, gunners, carpenters, sail makers, coopers, armorers, and like artisans who were familiar with the operations of a merchant vessel, but such specialists who also understood a warship's operations. Although America's maritime settlements boasted skilled seafaring men, the infant navies of the American Revolution lacked personnel—not just commanding officers, but also warrant and petty officers—with the experience and habits, found in long-established navies, required to keep a warship in fighting trim. Studies of the American naval tradition have generally neglected these lesser officers. Operational and biographical studies focus on commanding officers, while studies of life before the mast tend to look at the common sailor. The story of one skilled seaman during the War of Independence illustrates the important role experienced sailors played as lesser officers in helping form newborn navies into professional organizations.

During the American Revolution, several of the revolutionary governments of the colonies (or states, after 4 July 1776) established their own navies to protect their ports, coasts, and trade. The Continental Navy was too small to protect the American coastline from British depredations, and, since that service served the purposes of the united war effort, individual states could not rely on it for merely local defense.⁶ The autobiography of Yankee mariner Christopher Prince provides an opportunity to examine how one of these state navies functioned without the benefit of a tradition, without administrators knowledgeable in the running of a navy, and without officers experienced in the ways of a ship of war.⁷

⁶ There is no study that seeks to answer the question for the state navies—"how did the U.S. Navy learn to be a navy?"—that Christopher McKee examines for the United States Navy in his study of the creation of the U.S. naval officer corps for the period from 1794 to 1815: *McKee, A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession . . .*, 210–15. Scholars have produced a few histories, mostly operational, of a few of the state navies. Charles O. Paullin's *The Navy of the American Revolution: Its Administration, Its Policy and Its Achievements* (1906; reprint ed., New York: Haskell House, 1971), more than 100 years old, explicates the administrative structure of the state navies. The state navies are covered on pages 315–478.

⁷ Christopher Prince, *The Autobiography of a Yankee Mariner: Christopher Prince and the American Revolution*, edited by Michael J. Crawford (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2002).

An examination of how one state navy went about the task of learning to be a navy is a starting point for a study of the rise of American naval competence.

Connecticut was among the earliest of the rebellious colonies to establish a navy. In July 1775, three months before the creation of the Continental Navy, the Connecticut General Assembly “Resolved that two Vessels . . . be immediately fitted out, Armed and furnished, with Officers, Men, and necessary Warlike Stores, for Defence of the Sea Coasts in this Colony, under the care and direction of The Governor and Committee of Council.”⁸ The General Assembly delegated control of the navy to the governor and council of safety, and they, in turn, worked through committees and naval agents. The Connecticut navy’s first warships were the brig *Minerva*, which the colony soon returned to its owner, and the schooner *Spy*. The colony next purchased the brigantine *Defence*, which was armed and ready for sea in April 1776, and contracted for the building of a ship, which would be named the *Oliver Cromwell* after the Puritan leader who overthrew the British king in the English Civil Wars in the 17th century. In addition, the Connecticut navy had on its list at various periods three row galleys, the sloops *Schuylcr* and *Guilford*, and the schooner *Mifflin*.

To create a navy from scratch, Connecticut needed ships, cannon and other arms, a pay system, procedures for dividing shares in prizes, an administrative structure for obtaining and distributing supplies, facilities for fitting out, disciplinary rules, a command structure for issuing and executing orders, and so forth. Like the United States Navy that followed them, the Continental Navy and the state navies of the Revolutionary era turned naturally to the Royal Navy as their model, adapting British naval regulations, rank structure, discipline, customs, and the like to American conditions. But how this transfer of British naval culture took place is difficult to document. In the words of historian Christopher McKee, “it is a process that slips between the solid planks of documented history.” Christopher Prince’s account provides a practical instance of how this process occurred.

McKee finds that petty and other lesser officers who had formerly served in the Royal Navy provided one of the conduits by which British naval know-how was transferred to the later United States Navy. Christopher Prince’s story provides a clear instance of this process during the Revolution.

Christopher Prince served his seafaring apprenticeship under his uncle Job Prince, a prosperous Boston merchant, learning seamanship and the mysteries of navigation. Completing his apprenticeship on his 21st birthday in 1772, Christopher continued in his uncle’s employ as a shipmaster. In June 1774, he was about to take one of Uncle Job’s vessels on a commercial voyage to the West Indies when the Boston Port Act closed the port and prevented him from sailing. An officer of HMS *Asia*, enforcing British authority in the port, hired Prince and his vessel to run errands between Boston and other Massachusetts seaports. The following winter, Prince’s vessel was laid up, but Prince lodged on board *Asia*. “There I had an opportunity,” he writes, “to examine into the duties of every officer from the

⁸ William Bell Clark, et al., eds., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 12 vols. to date (Washington, DC: Naval History and Heritage Command [NHHC], 1964–), 1: 714.

highest to the lowest. . . . I examined much into the duties of the Purser and Stewards, Quarter Masters, and Quarter Gunners, and other officer's duty."⁹

Immediately following the battles of Lexington and Concord in April 1775, Prince sailed from Boston as mate in one of Job Prince's sloops, *Polly*, engaged to carry a Loyalist family of Cambridge fleeing violence in Massachusetts for the safety of England. After depositing the family at the way station of Halifax, *Polly* continued on to Quebec. By the time the ship arrived in Quebec, the American revolutionaries had captured Fort Ticonderoga. Fearing an invasion of Canada, the governor general seized *Polly* in order to employ her as a guard ship in the St. Lawrence River. He offered Prince the choice of prison as a disaffected person or service on board the sloop. Prince chose the latter, under the condition that he would not be required to fight his countrymen. Prince was transferred to HM brig *Gaspee*, stationed at Montreal, and fell into the hands of the Americans when that town capitulated. The next spring, 1776, Prince retreated with the Americans into New York. He participated in the American defense of New York City by sinking block ships in the Hudson between forts Washington and Lee. After the British capture of the city, he traveled by foot to New London, Connecticut, in the company of a young man, Josiah Ware, a saddler by trade, but unemployed.

The two traveling companions arrived in New London early in September 1776, just when the Connecticut navy's newest and largest warship, the *Oliver Cromwell*, a full-rigged ship, was fitting out and recruiting seamen. Prince liked the looks of the vessel and decided to sign on. Ware, however, found that there were no longer any openings for marines, and the only way he could be employed was as a landsman. If Ware signed on as a landsman and Prince as an able seaman, they would have little connection with each other. So, Prince consented to sign on as a landsman, despite the humiliating work for someone who knew his duty "from the trucks to the keel," and the smaller pay he would receive. He served in *Oliver Cromwell* from September 1776 until April 1777. He soon won promotion, first to seaman, then to captain of the main top, and eventually to purser and steward. Prince thus found himself ideally situated to observe and comment on the running of the Connecticut navy. "I had not been on board long," he observes,

before I saw many of the officers were an imposition on the public. Captain Coit who commanded her never made any profession of seamanship. . . . The first and three Lieutenants were complete seamen, but the other was not. The sailing master was no seaman, but he had long been fishing about the Vineyard and Nantucket. Two of his mates were seamen, and one or two of the midshipmen. The Boatswain was completely accomplished for all his duties. There were about thirty men who had entered as seamen, and not more than seven or eight were able to do their duty as such. Quarter Masters and Quarter Gunners ought to be seamen, but it was not so on board that ship.¹⁰

Prince cites several instances of incompetence. One of the quarter gunners was ignorant of the proper bedding of casks stowed in a ship's hold. One of the seamen rated as able could not reeve running

⁹ Prince, *Autobiography of a Yankee Mariner*, 31–32.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 121–22.

rigging without allowing kinks in the rope and ascended to a mast's top through the "lubber's hole," a passage though the center of the platform at the upper part of the mast, rather than ascend outside the platform by the shrouds as practiced seamen did.

When he observed a seaman making a botch of tying a stopper knot to secure the anchor cable on deck, Prince made his move to gain promotion for himself and his friend Ware. The commotion resulting from his criticism of the knot brought the boatswain to investigate. The boatswain pronouncing the knot good for nothing, Prince came out pretty boldly and said, "I have examined the seamanship on board this vessel fore and aft, but I will leave the Quarter Deck for I have no business there, but there is but seven seamen on board this ship, forward of the mainmast." I then named every one, "and all the rest are ordinary seamen, and I can teach them their A.B.C."

Prince then demonstrated how to tie the knot correctly and explained to the boatswain, and subsequently to the captain, why he had signed on as a landsman. He offered to accept the post of seaman on condition that Ware was promoted with him. Needing Prince's seamanlike skills, the captain accepted his condition. But first, Prince had to prove his skills further by installing the protective netting around the quarterdeck, the lower netting to hold cork and the upper netting to hold rolled hammocks in the time of action. Prince having completed that task satisfactorily, he and Ware received their promotions. After Prince completed several rigging assignments, Captain Coit appointed him captain of the maintop.

Prince's pre-war experience in HMS *Asia* enabled him to show *Oliver Cromwell's* purser and steward, James Lanphere, how the men were defrauding him by drawing more rations than were due them. He taught Lanphere how to keep accurate records of the messes and the rations due to each. When Lanphere resigned his post, he recommended Prince as his replacement. Prince negotiated terms of employment with Captain Coit on the basis of the practice of the Royal Navy. He delineated

the perquisites of Stewards in the British Navy and Navies of other nations in addition to their wages. And that was, all the bread dust which was not eatable, all the salt remaining in the provision casks after the meat was taken out, and there were always some on board who drank no liquor, and the Steward had the liberty to purchase it of them, which became his own property, and do what he had a mind with them, to sell them, or charge them to the government.

Coit hesitated to consent to these terms until Prince persuaded him by explaining,

I am accountable to you, and the state of Connecticut, for every pound of beef and pork, bread, sugar, tea, coffee, meal, flour, butter, &c., on board, and for every gallon of spirit. Many of these articles turn the scale but once, and I have to turn them hundreds of times. Sometimes the bread-dust and salt does not more than compensate the Steward for his loss on all these articles.

All of this was new to Coit. Upon accepting appointment as *Oliver Cromwell's* purser and steward,

Prince demanded the precaution of “a correct weight and proportion of every article on board.”¹¹

In December, Coit took *Oliver Cromwell* out for a shakedown cruise in Long Island Sound, during which it proved that the ship’s masts and spars were too large. The cruise also revealed an even greater danger to the ship: the sailing master’s incompetence. On several occasions he failed to issue orders necessary to keep the ship from running ashore and the ship was only saved by Lieutenant Michael Mellaly’s initiative. Prince remarks,

The Sailing Master’s ignorance and inability of performing his office threw the ship into great confusion. He was a nice man, but no seaman. He would have made everything harmonious if he had been one of the Lieutenants.¹²

Oliver Cromwell’s captain, William Coit, had no reputation as an accomplished seaman, but had established himself as something of a hero. A graduate of Yale College, class of 1761, this New London merchant and sea captain had, during the autumn of 1775, commanded *Harrison*, one of several armed sloops General George Washington employed to intercept transports supplying British forces stationed in Boston. Before leaving service in Washington’s fleet, he captured two provision vessels, as well as a forage transport and a fishing schooner carrying four Tory pilots who were waiting to direct British transports into Boston Harbor. “Tall, portly, soldierly in bearing, frank, jovial, somewhat eccentric and very liberal,” Coit seems to have been popular with his crew, but had difficulty attracting able subordinates or skilled seamen.¹³

Discontent among the *Cromwell* officers and crew erupted in tragedy about New Year’s Day 1778, when John Dennis, boatswain’s second mate, struck seaman William Garrick on the head with a hoe, fracturing his skull. Garrick later died, and during the last week of March the Superior Court at Norwich convicted Dennis of murder and sentenced him to death.¹⁴ Thus the ship lost two skilled seamen. During the course of the winter of 1777–78, many of the crew, unhappy about the quality of the officers, deserted, while the officers were displeased by Coit’s inability to recruit and retain a crew large enough for them to put to sea. Several of the able officers resigned their commissions to go privateering. The most serious loss occurred when Lieutenant Michael Mellaly left in March. In April, hoping to improve the possibility of dispatching the ship on a cruise, the state council discharged Coit and appointed Seth Harding to command. Most of the officers, including Christopher Prince, then resigned. In June 1777, Harding, having recruited a new crew, took *Oliver Cromwell* out on what proved to be a very successful cruise.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid., 131–32. For the precarious economic status of pursers in the Royal Navy, see N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (Annapolis, MD: NIP, 1986), 87–98.

¹² Prince, *Autobiography of a Yankee Mariner*, 135.

¹³ Henry P. Johnston, *Yale and Her Honor Roll in the American Revolution, 1775–1783* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1888), 226; William Bell Clark, *George Washington’s Navy: Being an Account of His Excellency’s Fleet in New England Waters* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1960), 21–23, 37–45, 66–67, 80–85; quotation from Clark, 21–22.

¹⁴ New London, Connecticut *Gazette*, 10 January and 4 April 1777; Clark, et al., eds., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 7: 914, 1284–85. According to Prince, Dennis suspected Garrick of cuckolding him. Prince, *Autobiography of a Yankee Mariner*, 137.

¹⁵ Lewis F. Middlebrook, *Maritime Connecticut during the American Revolution, 1775–1783*, 2 vols. (Salem, MA: Essex

The Royal Navy had had a few centuries to evolve a system of training and identifying commanders with leadership abilities, line officers practiced in combat, lesser officers knowledgeable in naval practices, petty officers skilled in their crafts, and seamen habituated to prompt understanding and execution of orders. To be effective, the Connecticut navy had to do likewise, that is, in Christopher McKee's words, "learn to be a navy," in the course of only a few months. Christopher Prince's experience documents the difficulties the Connecticut navy faced in the attempt, and the means by which it overcame some of them, emphasizing with an unaccustomed focus the crucial importance of the officers who stood between those in command and the body of the people.

Institute, 1925), 1: 82–83, 88–91.

CHAPTER ONE

Creating a Navy

1797–1801

In the Organization of our Infant Navy, much more is to be done, by every Officer, than in an established Navy, where every subordinate Officer is well acquainted with his Duty; hence arises the Necessity of very great Attention to place every Thing on a proper Establishment.

Captain Thomas Truxtun to
Lieutenant William Cowper
October 1798

February 1800 found the 12-gun United States schooner *Experiment* cruising along the southern coast of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. Its mission was the protection of American-flagged merchantmen against depredations of French privateers. On 4 February, there were above 40 prisoners from captured vessels on board the schooner, which, having detached officers and men to the prizes, was short-handed. At about 11:00 that night, off the harbor of Benet, a large unidentified vessel approached *Experiment* out of the darkness. Lieutenant William Maley, *Experiment's* commanding officer, roused his boatswain, Thomas Tickner, from his sleep to call all hands to quarters. On deck, Maley's order to have the flying jib loosed to clear the bow gun for action remaining unfulfilled, Tickner repeated the order. No one came forward to do the job, so the boatswain himself climbed out onto the jib-boom. When the strange sail came within musket shot, Maley had the bow gun fired, but instead of heaving to, the stranger responded with a volley of musketry and the fire of one or two deck guns. Maley immediately ordered a broadside, but only six or eight men stood to their quarters, and only three or four of *Experiment's* guns were ready for action. Maley's standing orders were that every night the captain of each gun make certain powder horns, cartridges, and slow match were in their proper places and report to the officer of the watch on deck that everything was in order. Those orders had been neglected the evening of 4 February, and several guns were missing their match and powder horns. Quartermaster George Diggs found some powder horns below and handed them up through the skylight. Carpenter's Mate Philip Emerick was the only man on board belonging to the aftermost gun on the quarterdeck and on his own could not get his gun to bear on the enemy. Maley, wounded in his right hand, used his left to elevate the gun, and together the two managed to fire the gun twice. Meanwhile, Lieutenant Joshua Blake, at the next gun, took shelter behind a shot locker and gave Seaman George Weaver, who had to search for match, little help in firing their gun. Despite Maley's repeated orders, *Experiment* fired altogether only five or six guns. With the enemy returning the schooner's fire with musketry and cannon shot, Maley ordered *Experiment* hove about to seek

assistance from the officers and men in the prizes. The stranger stood in for the land and escaped into the night.¹⁶

The U.S. schooner *Experiment*'s experience in a sudden hostile night action illustrates how essential to success were adept and diligent warrant and petty officers. While, "in consequence of the neglect of the Gunner," as Lieutenant Maley later concluded, "the men would not stand to their quarters,"¹⁷ it was the prompt action of boatswain, quartermaster, and carpenter's mate that avoided an absolute disaster.

Skilled Sailors

Operating and maintaining a large wooden sailing vessel required skills developed through years of training and practical experience. No sane shipmaster weighed anchor without able subordinates: A trusty boatswain to keep the masts and yards properly rigged; expert petty officers to oversee the bending on of sails, the reeving of blocks, the splicing of lines, and the constant adjusting of sails according to changes in wind and tide; a good carpenter to keep the hull watertight and to fish, repair, and replace spars; a practiced sail maker to repair and replace split sails or those carried away in heavy weather; and a capable cooper to prevent barrels from leaking, which could lead to shortages of rations and spoilage of cargo. In emergencies, seamen had to understand and adeptly execute orders barked in a few clipped monosyllables. More than the success of a voyage, the lives of everyone on board hung in the balance between the challenges of the sea and the crew's skill.

It took two years at sea to transform a landsman into an ordinary seaman who could hand and reef sails, knot and splice lines, and steer a vessel. It took another two or three years to turn an ordinary seaman into an able seaman. After two years in fishing vessels, Christopher Prince could hand, reef, knot, splice, and steer. Nevertheless, when he moved to merchant ships trading between New England and the West Indies, he was neither considered to be, nor paid as, a seaman. Only after two more years of seafaring would Prince develop into "a complete seaman" and earn the privilege of being treated as such. Recognizing the value of seafaring experience, the Navy Department eventually formalized the prerequisite of time spent at sea in the regulations for the recruiting service. As of 1 July 1839, the Navy required that recruits rated as ordinary seamen have been two years and those rated as able seamen five years at sea. The development of specialized skills, such as those of boatswain, carpenter, and sailmaker, required several additional years of apprenticeship.¹⁸

The apprentice seaman learned the purpose of each of the ropes that created the maze of lines composing

¹⁶ Statements of Midshipman Thomas Gordon, Boatswain Thomas Tickner, Quartermaster George Diggs, Carpenter's Mate Philip Emerich, and Ordinary Seaman George Weaver, USN, and extract from journal of U.S. schooner *Experiment*, in United States Office of Naval Records and Library, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War Between the United States and France: Naval Operations from February 1797 to December 1801*, edited by Dudley W. Knox, 7 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office [GPO], 1935–38) [hereafter cited as *Naval Documents of the Quasi-War*], 5: 185–89, 194.

¹⁷ *Naval Documents of the Quasi-War*, 5: 194

¹⁸ Daniel Vickers and Vince Walsh, *Young Men and the Sea: Yankee Seafarers in the Age of Sail* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), 88; Christopher Prince, *The Autobiography of a Yankee Mariner*, 19–20; K. Jack Bauer, ed., *The New American State Papers, Naval Affairs*, Vol. 7, *Personnel* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1981), 55.

a ship's standing and running rigging—stays, braces, guys, halyards, bowlines, lifts, sheets, and so on. He also became adept at working with rope, servicing, knotting, hitching, bending, seizing, and splicing.

The seaman mastered an array of knots, hitches, and bends. A popular seamanship instruction manual published in the early 19th century gave instructions on making the following:

Knots: wall, Matthew Walker's, single diamond, double diamond, sprit-sail sheet, stopper, shroud, French shroud, buoy rope, overhand, bowline, running bowline, and reef;

Hitches: timber, rolling, magnus, blackwall, and catspaw (common hitches not described in the manual include the half, clove, roband, midshipman's, and marling);

Bends: sheet, fisherman's, and carrick.

In addition, the seaman learned the specific uses for each of these knots, hitches, and bends.¹⁹

The seaman also practiced the arts of crowning, seizing, stopping, nippering, pointing, and grafting rope. With rope he moused hooks and made grommets and cringles and a variety of chafing gear, such as puddings, gaskets, and mats. He learned several splices, such as the short, the long, the cut, the horseshoe, and the eye, the Flemish eye, and the spindle eye. The knife, the fid, and the marlinespike constituted the sailor's essential rope-working tools.

The sailor's knife was designed for cutting, not stabbing: the tip blunt, the cutting edge straight or slightly curved, the blade short and wide, and wedge shaped, with a thick back. The handle was hefty, shaped for grasping, and wide enough to prevent turning in the hand, and had a hole in its end for a lanyard. The sailor carried his knife on a lanyard around his neck or in a sheath behind him at the beltline, where it was readily accessible to his dominant hand.²⁰

The fid is a conical pin of hardwood that tapers to a point and is used to open strands of rope in the process of splicing. The marlinespike is made of iron and is shaped essentially like a fid, but usually with a raised knob on the blunt end and sometimes a turned point, and is used for the same purpose. The fid does less damage than the marlinespike to natural fibers and, having a wider taper, creates larger openings between strands, making large-diameter rope easier to work with. Both tools can be used as well as levers for pulling a seizing tight by taking a hitch about the point.²¹

¹⁹ Darcy Lever, *The Young Sea Officer's Sheet Anchor: Or a Key to the Leading of Rigging and to Practical Seamanship* (1808); reprint ed., John H. Harland, ed. (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1998), 5–9.

²⁰ Hervey Garrett Smith, *The Arts of the Sailor* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1968), 18–21. Testimony in the 1799 murder trial of Seaman George Galligher stated that his knife usually hung by a lanyard around his neck. RG 125, NARA, No. 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 23; John E. Horsly, *Tools of the Maritime Trades* (Camden, ME: International Marine Publishing, 1978), 182; Lever, *Young Sea Officer's Sheet Anchor*, 3.



Knife, marlinspike, and fid. Courtesy USS *Constitution* Museum, Boston, MA. Photographs by Harrie Sloodbeck.

Ropes could be rove through a dozen different kinds of blocks, as well as hearts, euphroes, and trucks, and be attached to deadeyes and cleats. Seamen learned how to rig ropes and blocks into a variety of tackles for specific purposes.

A sailor who “knew the ropes” had only passed the first stage along the path to complete seamanship. A seaman’s routine duties at sea of changing and adjusting sails and spars required a substantial level of skill. Performing those duties aloft in a gale put that skill to the test (see text extract below). Making major repairs at sea required an even greater level of expertise. Emergencies might require seamen to re-rig a ship completely: Get in the lower masts and bowsprit; sway up the topmasts; set up the standing rigging; attach the yards with lifts, geers, and braces; and bend on the sails with their clew lines, buntlines, slab lines, bowlines, reef tackles, and halyard, sheet, and tack lines.

Compared with a merchantman, a warship in the age of fighting sail required an even wider range of skilled under-officers: mates to assist the boatswain, carpenter, and sailmaker; a master gunner, his mate, and their crew of quarter gunners to keep the cannon in readiness; an armorer to repair muskets, swivel guns, swords, and pikes; a master-at-arms and ship's corporals to enforce discipline; quartermasters to aid the sailing master and to attend to the helm, binnacle, and signals; a coxswain to take charge of the captain's boat and its crew; captains of the forecastle, tops, after-guard, and hold to lead the crewmen at those stations; yeomen to keep inventories and records of receipts and expenditures of supplies; and stewards to help the purser with distribution of provisions.

Like the crews of merchantmen, crews of naval ships needed expertise to react promptly to the violence of nature; deliberately sailing in harm's way, they had to be adept at responding as well to the violence of man.

* * *

To shift a topsail in a gale?

The sail is furled, and before the robands are all cast off several good stops are passed around it.

The sail is sent down to windward, either by the buntlines, or the topgallant yard rope, passed around the body of the sail.

Unbend the gear. Cast off the robands, and keep fast the head earings.

Pass the lee head earing into the top, and rouse the lee side of the sail over to windward; lower the sail clear of the top, to windward, ease away the weather earing, and lower into the weather gangway.

If necessary, a line can be bent to the sail, to guy it down clear.

The new sail can be sent aloft by the topgallant yard rope, sail burton or buntlines.²²

* * *

Recruiting the Navy's First Forward and Petty Officers

In 1797, commissioned officers of the United States Navy began recruiting crews for the Navy's first warships. They sought skilled sailors for a naval force that was suddenly and rapidly expanding. As a newly established organization, the Navy struggled with challenges in recruiting the substantial number of skilled sailors needed to serve as forward and petty officers.

The Navy's forward officers consisted of the four warrant officer rates of boatswain, gunner, carpenter, and sailmaker. They were designated forward officers because they berthed adjacent to each other in

22 Lt. Emory H. Taunt, USN, *Young Sailor's Assistant in Practical Seamanship* (Washington, DC: 1883), 341.

small cabins forward of the mainmast and shared a mess. They held warrants signed by the President and served during good behavior. Petty officers, in contrast, were appointed by a ship's commanding officer and held their posts at the commander's pleasure.

In 1794, three years before recruiting began and in response to attacks on American commerce by corsairs of North Africa's Barbary Coast, Congress authorized a navy of six frigates. President George Washington determined to have those frigates purpose-built, rather than to purchase merchant ships and convert them for naval purposes. However, treaties with the Barbary states led to the suspension of construction of three of the frigates in 1795.

The subsequent expansion of the U.S. Navy developed out of the conflict between Great Britain and revolutionary France. War broke out between those two powers in 1793, and soon thereafter each of those belligerents began interfering with neutrals trading with its enemy. As major carriers in the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea, American merchants fell victim to depredations by both countries. Jay's Treaty, in 1795, accommodated some of the differences between the United States and Great Britain, but angered the French, who saw the treaty as an abrogation of the commitments to France that the United States had made during the War of Independence in the 1778 Treaty of Alliance. The French intensified their attacks on American merchantmen, moving Congress in the summer of 1797 to prepare to defend American commerce by authorizing the President to man and employ the three frigates that had been or were soon to be launched—*United States* in Philadelphia on 10 May, *Constellation* at Baltimore on 7 September, and *Constitution* at Boston on 21 October. On April 27 of the following year, outraged by the XYZ Affair, in which agents of the French government demanded a bribe before the differences between France and the United States could be negotiated, Congress authorized the President to acquire, arm, and man an additional 12 vessels of up to 22 guns each. Three days after this authorization, Congress created the Department of the Navy to administer the expanded naval force—until then the Secretary of War had overseen naval affairs. On 24 May 1798, *Ganges*, a Philadelphia-built merchant ship, purchased and subsequently fitted with 26 nine-pounders—that is, cannon that fired shot nominally weighing nine pounds—became the United States Navy's first warship to get to sea. Four days later, on 28 May, Congress authorized the public vessels of the United States to capture armed French ships, commencing the undeclared naval war with France known today as the Quasi-War.²³

In June of 1797, when the entire Navy of the United States consisted of two 44-gun frigates and one of 36 guns, all still being built or fitting out, the Department of War calculated that the Navy's manning requirements amounted to 1,030 officers, seamen, and Marines. This number included 12 forward warrant officers and 82 petty officers. The 1794 act to provide a naval armament authorized each

²³ Michael J. Crawford and Christine F. Hughes, *The Reestablishment of the Navy, 1787–1801: Historical Overview and Select Bibliography*, Naval History Bibliographies, No. 4 (Washington: D.C.: Naval Historical Center, 1995) (also available online at the NHHC website, www.history.navy.mil) provides a convenient summary of the events surrounding the creation of the U.S. Navy. For the diplomacy of the Quasi-War, see Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi-War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France, 1797–1801* (New York: Scribner, 1966). For the U.S. Navy in the Quasi-War, see Michael A. Palmer, *Stoddert's War: Naval Operations during the Quasi-War with France, 1798–1801* (Charleston, SC: South Carolina University Press, 1987).

frigate to employ a boatswain, a gunner, a carpenter, and a sailmaker, and each ship was to have as petty officers two master's mates, a captain's clerk, two boatswain's mates, a coxswain, a sailmaker's mate, two gunner's mates, a yeoman of the gunroom, one quarter gunner for every four guns (amounting to 11 for each of the 44s and nine for the 36-gun frigate), two carpenter's mates, an armorer, a steward, a cooper, a master-at-arms, and a cook.²⁴ By December 1797, several of the frigate *United States's* officers had been appointed and part of the crew enlisted, but a contagious fever striking those on board had halted progress in readying the frigate for sea. *Constellation* was ready to receive officers and crew, and *Constitution* was expected in a short time to be ready to receive officers and crew.²⁵

A year later, in December 1798, seven months after Congress had authorized warfare against French armed ships, warships in service included, in addition to the frigates *United States*, *Constitution*, and *Chesapeake*, four 24-gun ships, three vessels of 20 guns, four of 18, one of 14, and eight cutters of the Revenue Service that had been placed under the orders of the Secretary of the Navy. Together, these warships required more than 3,500 officers and men, including forward and petty officers in proportion. Under construction were five frigates, eight ships, and eight galleys, all of which would need officers and men.²⁶ By the time the Quasi-War ended in early 1801, the Secretary of the Navy exercised responsibility over nearly 30 warships, 700 commissioned and warrant officers, and 5,000 seamen.

The law provided that, as warrant officers, forward officers would receive their appointments from the President of the United States.²⁷ In all practicality, President John Adams, or any President for that matter, could not be expected personally to select suitable seamen for the posts of boatswain, gunner, carpenter, and sailmaker, or to know candidates' individual merits. In practice, therefore, in most instances the commanding officers chose their own forward officers. In issuing the earliest recruiting orders, Secretary of War James McHenry instructed captains to select proper persons for those positions and to forward their names so that they could be laid before the President.²⁸ Taking over administration of naval affairs in mid-June 1798, Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert continued McHenry's practice of deferring to commanding officers for the nomination of most of the lesser officers, reserving to himself the nomination of lieutenants, surgeons, midshipmen, masters,

²⁴ "An estimate of the Pay and Subsistence of the Captains and crews of the Frigates *United States* and *Constitution*, of forty-four guns each, and the *Constellation*, of thirty-six guns," enclosed in James McHenry to the House of Representatives, 16 June 1797, in U.S. Congress, *American State Papers: Documents Legislative and Executive, of the Congress of the United States, Naval Affairs*, Vol. 1, selected and edited by Walter Lowrie and Walter S. Franklin (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1834), 29–30.

²⁵ "State of the Frigates *United States*, *Constitution*, and *Constellation*," enclosed in James McHenry to House Committee on the Protection of Commerce, 26 December 1797, in *ibid.*, 32; 3d Cong., 1st sess., ch. 12, *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 1 (1845), 350. The act of 1 July 1797 authorizing manning and employment of *United States*, *Constitution*, and *Constellation* duplicated the 1794 act's directions concerning the numbers and ratings of commissioned, warrant, and petty officers. 5th Cong., 1st sess., ch. 7, *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 1 (1845), 523.

²⁶ Benjamin Stoddert to the House of Representatives, 24 Dec. 1798, with enclosures, in *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, 1: 57–63.

²⁷ An Act providing a naval armament, 1 July 1797. 5th Cong., 1st sess., ch. 7, *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 1 (1845), 523.

²⁸ James McHenry to Thomas Truxtun, 16 March 1798, Samuel Nicholson, 5 May 1798, John Barry, 5 May 1798, Richard Dale, 11 May 1798, and Stephen Decatur, 15 June 1798, in *Naval Documents of the Quasi-War*, 1: 42–44, 65, 69, 72, 116–18.

and master's mates only. Stoddert assured his commanders that those they named for the remaining positions, "I will nominate them to the President; and have no doubt but they will be confirmed in their respective offices."

Confident that the President would approve the forward officers' appointments, Stoddert instructed commanders to receive the men on board in the stations to which they had been nominated. When circumstances required such men to sail on a cruise before receiving their warrants, Stoddert authorized their acting under temporary appointments, "which will intitle [sic] them to the same emoluments, as if they were regularly appointed and commissioned." He went so far as to authorize captains to give the acting warrant officers assurances of their being confirmed in their appointments on their return from the present cruise.²⁹

The principal cases in which commanding officers were not given the privilege of naming their own forward officers were those of the so-called subscription warships. These were armed vessels built for the Navy under provisions of an act of 30 June 1798 giving the President authority to accept ships on loan from private citizens, who would be paid in interest-bearing government bonds. Residents of three ports in Massachusetts (Newburyport, Salem, and Boston), of New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, of four port towns in Virginia for a single ship (Richmond, Manchester, Petersburg, and Norfolk), and of Charleston subscribed to the building of ships under this act. The Adams administration found it politic to allow the subscribers to recommend the men who would hold commissioned and warrant positions in those ships.³⁰ Because they were primarily merchants and masters of vessels involved in overseas commerce, subscribers were in a position to know qualified, local sailors suitable for those posts. "In order that the Ship building by the citizens at Charleston, should be officered in full time," Stoddert wrote the Navy agent in South Carolina,

I have the Honor to request, that you will call on the Committee for building that Ship, and get them to send a list of the names of such gentlemen, as they think best qualified for the different appointments,—The President has in all similar cases paid great respect to the wishes of the Gentlemen who so liberally contribute their money for the public service—and will not pay less respect to the Gentlemen of Charleston.³¹

Stoddert assured the Salem, Massachusetts, merchants' committee for building the frigate *Essex* that

²⁹ Benjamin Stoddert to Samuel Nicholson, 6 July 1798, John Brown, 30 August 1798, Thomas Williams, 8 September 1798, commanders of galleys, 11 September 1798, Alexander Murray, 12 September 1798, Capt. John Adams, 17 September 1778, Moses Brown, 4 October 1778, Daniel McNeill, 12 January 1799, Christopher R. Perry, 7 May 1799, and Moses Tryon, 11 September 1799. *Ibid.*, 1: 172, 358, 381–82, 388–89, 398–99, 412–13, 490–91, 2: 231, 3: 149; 4: 177.

³⁰ Frederick C. Leiner, *Millions for Defense: The Subscription Warships of 1798* (Annapolis, MD: NIP, 2000); Benjamin Stoddert to Moses Brown, 4 October 1778; Charles Goldsborough for Stoddert to William Bartlett, agent for building the *Merrimack* at Newburyport, Massachusetts, 31 October 1798; Bartlett to Stoddert, 6 November 1798; Stoddert to Brown, 3 December 1798; Stoddert to David Sears, one of the Committee for building the Ship in Boston, to be called the Boston, 18 December 1798; Stoddert to President John Adams, 3 July 1799; Edward Preble to Stoddert, 21 November 1799. In *Naval Documents of the Quasi-War*, 1: 490–91, 574, 2: 8, 60, 97, 3: 464, 4: 435.

³¹ Benjamin Stoddert to William Crafts, 9 January 1799, in *ibid.*, 2: 225.

the persons they might nominate as third lieutenant “and such inferior officers as you judge proper” would be named to the President, who would no doubt appoint them.³²

After the President signed a warrant, the Secretary of the Navy forwarded it on to the commanding officer with the admonition that before he delivered the warrant the recipient must indicate his acceptance in writing and take the oath of allegiance.³³

The question of qualifications of both forward officers and petty officers was crucial. Finding good men proved problematic. Commanding officers of the Navy’s first ships identified “suitable characters” for forward officers and for petty officers by separate mechanisms, the former through professional networks, and the latter through the naval rendezvous.

To identify boatswains, gunners, carpenters, and sailmakers they relied on men’s reputations as skilled and reliable craftsmen. Since the United States Navy drew most of its first commanding officers from the community of merchant captains, those officers knew some potential forward officers through personal experience. For others, they could consult sea captains in the seaboard’s principal ports. The President signed the act authorizing the manning of the first three frigates on 1 July 1797. Shortly thereafter, Captain John Barry, USN, who had the command of the frigate *United States*, wrote to the Secretary of War. “I understand that the Appointment of Officers for the Frigates is shortly to take place,” he began. “I beg leave to inform you that from my own Knowledge and the recommendation of others I have reason to believe the undermention [sic] Gentlemen will make as good Officers as any that have made application for appointments in the Navy, and if agreeable should be glad to have them appointed to the Frigate *United States* as follows.” Barry then listed the names of men he recommended for his lieutenants, surgeon, lieutenants of marines, purser, midshipmen, and surgeon’s mates, ending with his recommendations for boatswain and carpenter. Barry was a sea officer of vast experience, having sailed merchantmen out of Philadelphia on transatlantic voyages in the decades before the War of Independence, proved his patriotism and heroism as a captain in the Continental Navy during that war, and returned to the merchant service after retiring the last Continental Navy vessel from service in 1785. Barry did not restrict his recommendations to men from his hometown of Philadelphia but included men from states as far separated as Vermont and Virginia, as well as from the cities of Boston, New York, and Savannah. Since the men he nominated for boatswain’s and carpenter’s warrants, Robert Wilbron and Henry Robertson, were Philadelphians, Barry could have known their abilities and characters first hand.³⁴

When naval officers could not find suitable forward officers, the department could turn to the Navy agents in the various ports. “The United States and Congress are also without Carpenters,” the Secretary of the Navy wrote the Navy agent in Baltimore. “It will be a very desirable thing if you

³² Benjamin Stoddert to William Gray, 5 September, 1799, in *ibid.*, 4: 162.

³³ Benjamin Stoddert to Silas Talbot, 29 November 1798, Daniel McNeill, 12 January 1799, Christopher R. Perry, 22 April 1799, Moses Tryon, 11 September 1799, Henry Geddes, 20 November 1799. *Ibid.*, 2: 56, 231, 3: 85, 4: 177, 432–33.

³⁴ John Barry to James McHenry, undated but docketed “July 1797,” Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

could obtain two such as you could recommend as worthy of receiving warrants—a good boatswain is also wanted.”³⁵

Professional networks were not always efficient means for identifying forward officers. The manning of the frigate *Insurgent* in the second summer of the Quasi-War is a case in point. *Insurgent* was the former French navy frigate *L'Insurgente*, which had been captured by the U.S. frigate *Constellation*, (Captain Thomas Truxtun), and purchased into the U.S. Navy. As of June 1799, it was at Hampton Roads preparing for sea, Captain Alexander Murray had been given the command, and recruiting was under way. On 23 June, before Murray's arrival to take command, Truxtun had ordered *Insurgent*'s lieutenant to engage for the frigate a boatswain and a carpenter, both to be honest, sober, and trustworthy. Despite the temporary stopping of recruitment for U.S. ship *Baltimore*, also in Hampton Roads, to eliminate competition for men, a month later *Insurgent* still had none of its forward officers. Expecting to sail on a cruise to Europe in a couple of weeks, Murray sent to New York for a boatswain and a gunner. They did not arrive until 10 August. On 11 August, just three days before the ship would weigh anchor, Murray reported, “I have never yet been able to get a Carpenter or Sail Maker, but hope to get the former to day by some means or other.”³⁶

Sometimes, the Navy found the skilled men it needed for its forward officers among the ratings. In spring 1799, U.S. brig *Richmond*'s boatswain, carpenter, and gunner were all men promoted from among seamen engaged the previous November.³⁷

Petty officers, in contrast to the forward officers, were to be appointed by the commanding officers of the vessels in which they were to be employed. Even in the cases of the subscription warships, captains appointed their petty officers.³⁸ This made excellent sense, since a petty officer, possessing nothing like a commission or warrant, held his rate at the pleasure of the captain. When turned over into the ship of a commander other than the one with whom he entered, a petty officer was not to be rated on the ship's books in a worse quality, or lower degree or station, than he served in the ship from which he was removed.³⁹ With that one exception, a captain exercised the power to disrate any petty officer under his command at any time and for any reason, or for no apparent reason whatsoever.

In general, commanding officers selected their petty officers from among the seamen recruited at naval rendezvous. A recruiting officer would open a recruiting station at a waterfront tavern, or other

³⁵ Robert Smith to John Stricker, 15 December 1801, in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War*, 6: 308.

³⁶ Thomas Truxtun to Josiah Fox, 23 June 1799, Alexander Murray to Benjamin Stoddert, 27 July 1799, in *ibid.*, 3: 388, 351–52.

³⁷ Muster Roll of U.S. brig *Richmond*, 6 October–10 December 1799, in *ibid.*, 4: 512.

³⁸ An Act providing a naval armament, 1 July 1797. 5th Cong., 1st sess., ch. 7, *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 1 (1845), 523; Benjamin Stoddert to Patrick Fletcher, 6 October 1798, Christopher R. Perry, 12 October 1798, Thomas Tingey, 13 October 1798, Silas Talbot, 29 Nov. 1798, David Sears, 18 December 1798, John Coffin Jones, 16 May 1799, William Maley, 3 October 1799, Edward Preble, 25 October 1799, Samuel Barron, 28 February, 1800, in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War*, 1: 501, 524–25, 527, 2: 56, 97, 3: 189, 4: 252–53, 319, 5: 252–53.

³⁹ An Act for the government of the Navy of the United States, 2 March 1799. 5th Cong., 3d sess., ch. 22, sec. 1, art. 12, *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 1 (1845), 622; An Act for the better government of the navy of the United States, 23 April 1800, 6th Cong., 1st sess., ch. 33, sec. 1, art. 30, *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 2 (1845), 45.

convenient common gathering spot of sailors, sometimes hiring “music,” that is, a fifer and a drummer, to attract attention. Those who signed the articles of enlistment he would tentatively rate according to the level of their experience, boys, landsmen, ordinary seamen, able seamen, and, provisionally, petty officers. No promise of petty officer rate made by a recruiting officer was binding since every such commitment was contingent on the captain’s approval. “Try to get some good smart active fellows for Petty Officers,” Captain Alexander Murray instructed Lieutenant Jeremiah Barton recruiting for the frigate *Insurgent*, “engaging them conditionly [sic] till I see them & know their qualities.”⁴⁰ Similarly, Captain Thomas Truxtun told Lieutenant Isaac Chauncey, recruiting for the frigate *President*, “The Petty officers must be sent to me, so soon as they are selected in order that I judge of their qualifications.”⁴¹

In essence, captains Murray and Truxtun were echoing the Navy’s regulations. Those regulations required the commander to learn from the recruiting officers the identity of the men “who shew the most zeal and intelligence.” The commander was then to interview each recruit concerning his experience in seagoing cruises and in naval engagements in order to determine “what post each is fittest for.”⁴²

During the Quasi-War, recruiting was often slow, delaying ships’ sailings weeks beyond the dates they had been ordered to sea. The problem became so common that Secretary of the Navy Stoddert began routinely urging his captains to sail well short, as much as 15 percent, of their complements.⁴³

The problem confronting recruiting officers was not so much that of finding enough men to fill a ship’s complement as it was finding enough experienced seamen to operate a warship safely and competently. A 44-gun frigate, for example, required some 400 hands in order to serve all the guns during a hostile engagement, as well as to man the various support stations. Landsmen could be trained to serve the guns, to operate pumps, to carry fire buckets, and to perform similar tasks. But to sail the ship, to keep the ship in trim and in repair, and to maintain order and discipline among the crew, the commanding officer had to rely on a corps of skilled sailors. For their first wartime cruises, Secretary of War McHenry authorized the 44-gun frigate *Constitution* 150 able seamen and 103 midshipmen and ordinary seamen, and the 36-gun frigate *Chesapeake* 130 able and 90 ordinary seamen.⁴⁴ Secretary of the Navy Stoddert allowed the 14-gun schooner *Retaliation* 30 able and 20 ordinary seamen and boys. Acknowledging the difficulty of recruiting able seamen in sufficient numbers, Stoddert instructed *Retaliation*’s recruiting officer,

By ordinary Seamen is usually meant Landsmen, but there is a Class of Men who tho’ not equal to able Seamen are not very much inferior, Men who have perhaps been many voyages

⁴⁰ 27 June 1799, in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War*, 3: 411.

⁴¹ 7 July 1800, in *ibid.*, 6: 121–22.

⁴² U.S. War Department, *Marine Rules and Regulations* ([Philadelphia]: John Fenno, 1798; reprinted unaltered, Boston: Printed by Manning & Loring, for William T. Clap, 1799) [hereafter cited as *Marine Rules*], 3–4. Note that the word *marine* in the title was used synonymously with *naval*, and did not refer exclusively to the Marine Corps. I have used the latter edition of the *Marine Rules* in a copy in the Navy Department Library.

⁴³ Palmer, *Stoddert’s War*, 138–39.

⁴⁴ James McHenry to Thomas Truxtun, 16 March 1798, and to Samuel Nicholson, 5 May 1798, in *Naval Documents of the Quasi-War*, 1: 43, 65.

at Sea, and yet would not ship for able Seamen. Should you find it impracticable to procure the full Complement of able Seamen, you must substitute some of those.⁴⁵

On 27 May 1799, when Thomas Truxtun received authorization to begin recruiting for *Constellation*'s second wartime cruise, Stoddert left the proportions of able and ordinary seamen to the captain's judgment.⁴⁶ Three weeks later, *Constellation* had signed on all the ordinary seamen and boys it needed, but still required 30 able seamen and 19 petty officers (one master's mate, carpenter's mate, gunner's mate, and armorer, seven quartermasters, and eight quarter gunners). Truxtun admonished his recruiting officers, "You will on no Account ship any indifferent Men, nor Ordinary Seamen or Boys, the Seamen wanted are all able."⁴⁷

A combination of factors explains the Navy's recruiting difficulties during the Quasi-War. The United States began as a maritime nation. A significant proportion of its population lived within the scent of sea water, and many of those who lived by the sea made their livings by seafaring. As late as a quarter century later, seamen still formed the second largest occupational group in the United States. Only farmers outnumbered them.⁴⁸ During the mid-1790s, America's advantages as a neutral carrier stimulated the growth of American seaborne commerce. Goods carried into and out of America through its ports, primarily in American-flagged ships, increased 5.6 times between 1790 and 1807.⁴⁹ All these factors created a pool of skilled labor from which the Navy could draw. Still, the number of American sailors was finite,⁵⁰ 80 percent were semi- or wholly illiterate,⁵¹ and the Navy had to compete with the prospering American commercial fleet for those men. Furthermore, the sailors who had developed their seafaring skills through enough years of experience to serve as petty officers were only a percentage of all sailors, and those who could serve as forward officers were but a small percentage of the latter group. In 1800, seafaring was a young man's profession. After a few years, most seamen gave up going to sea in favor of farming or some useful trade ashore. The grizzled old salt of 35 was a rarity.⁵²

During its first war, the United States Navy struggled under the disability of being a new service. It had no corps of sailors who regularly re-enlisted and no established networks of veterans who could sign up friends and acquaintances. Lacking a long and distinguished history, the Navy had no heritage whose glorious aura could draw recruits.

Just as several of the officers who received commissions in the newly established Navy had served at

⁴⁵ Benjamin Stoddert to Henry Kenyon, 8 August 1798, in *ibid.*, 1: 281.

⁴⁶ Benjamin Stoddert to Thomas Truxtun, 27 May 1799, in *ibid.* 3: 261.

⁴⁷ Thomas Truxtun to John Carson, 17 June 1799, in *ibid.*, 3: 352.

⁴⁸ Christopher Clark, *Social Change in America: From the Revolution Through the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 98.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁰ In 1814, during the War of 1812, and after 16 years of population growth after the beginning of the Quasi-War, the Secretary of the Navy calculated that the service could not recruit beyond 12,000 men, including officers, commissioned and warrant, seamen, able and ordinary, and boys. William Jones to James Madison, 26 October 1814, in Michael J. Crawford, et al., eds., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, Vol. 3, 1814–1815, *Chesapeake Bay, Northern Lakes, and Pacific Ocean* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 2002), 632.

⁵¹ Clark, *Social Change in America*, 98.

⁵² Vickers and Walsh, *Young Men and the Sea*, especially Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

sea in the War of Independence, either in the Continental Navy or in privateers, some enlisted sailors of the Quasi-War could have seen service in the American Revolution. William Mahy, who fought as a soldier in the revolution, as well as in the U.S. Army in the Indian wars of 1793–94, for instance, would serve as a U.S. Navy petty officer both in the war with Tripoli in 1803 and in the War of 1812.⁵³ Mahy's must have been a rare case. Few of the common sailors who had seen naval action in the American Revolution 20 years earlier would have been young enough in 1798 to enlist in the U.S. Navy. One warrant officer in the Quasi-War Navy, at least, had a family tradition of United States naval service. Jacob Nutter, of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, held a warrant as gunner from January 1799 to February 1800, serving in *Portsmouth*. Another Jacob Nutter of Portsmouth, perhaps an uncle, had been a quartermaster in Continental Navy frigate *Alliance*, and a Henry Nutter, also of Portsmouth, had held an appointment as midshipman in Continental Navy frigate *Raleigh*.⁵⁴

To lure skilled sailors to enlist, the Navy offered: steady employment; pay of \$17 a month for able seamen, and slightly more for petty officers; a relatively short enlistment of 12 months; signing bonuses of a couple of dollars; advances of a couple of months' pay; the prospect of a share in the prize money for enemy merchant ships they might capture; the promise of adventure; and the appeal of patriotism. Naval officers employed the last-named incentive freely in recruiting advertisements, such as in that issued by Captain Samuel Nicholson, addressed to "able-bodied and patriotic Seamen," which included the following words designed to flatter recruits:

A glorious opportunity now presents to the brave and hardy Seamen of New-England, to enter the service of their country—to avenge its wrongs—and to protect its rights on the ocean. Those brave Lads, are now invited to repair to the FLAGG of the Constitution now flying at the above rendezvous; where they shall be kindly received, handsomely entertained, and may enter into immediate Pay.⁵⁵

Given the Navy's difficulties in finding experienced men, recruiting officers frequently found themselves negotiating with potential petty officers. Recruiting for the frigate *Congress*, Lieutenant Joseph Saunders reported: a Mr. Davis, who had agreed to serve in the frigate as a boatswain's mate, requested permission to serve as a gunner's mate instead; William Williams, who had applied for but then declined the post of gunner, accepted the offer to serve as a master's mate; Saunders told a Mr. Copeland, who had served in *Constitution*, that he could have the office of master-at-arms if the post had not been filled and if the captain approved; and a man by the name of Hunt sought the position

⁵³ Journal of the House of Representatives, 23 Dec., 1822, where he is identified as William Maby; Department of the Navy, Office of Naval Records and Library, *Register of Officer Personnel United States Navy and Marine Corps and Ships' Data 1801–1807* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1945), 35.

⁵⁴ The 1800 federal census of New Hampshire indicates that the Jacob Nutter (born 1747) who had served in *Alliance* and his son, Jacob Jr. (born 1775), were living in Kittery, Maine, while a third Jacob Nutter resided across the river in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Family histories contain no suggestion that either the first or the second mentioned of these men held a warrant in the United States Navy. The relationship of the third Jacob Nutter to the first and second is unknown. References to Jacob Nutter, quartermaster, Continental Navy, are scattered in a number of sources, summarized in the file on him in the ZB Files, Navy Department Library, Washington, DC. For Henry Nutter, see Clark, et al., eds., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 12 : 791.

⁵⁵ Samuel Nicholson, recruiting advertisement, 12 May 1798, in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War*, 1: 73–74.

of armorer, but not having the captain's orders to ship an armorer, Saunders was entering Hunt as an ordinary seaman.⁵⁶

Despite their compelling need for petty officers, commanding officers could be particular about the men their officers recruited. Instructing Lieutenant John Archer to recruit several petty officers, Thomas Truxtun named two men he specifically did not want: "One Master's Mate (do not sent Malat) . . . One Armourer (do not send Dewney)."⁵⁷

From the start, the Department of War established a policy that "No Negro, Mulatto or Indian" would be enlisted in the Marine Corps. In contrast, the Quasi-War Navy did not have a blanket policy excluding seamen of color, although in some cases Navy recruiting officers were instructed to sign on no Negroes or mulattoes.⁵⁸ Given the Navy's requirements for skilled sailors, and given that about a fifth of American sailors were blacks, it should not be surprising if there were some black petty officers in the Navy during the Quasi-War. Navy personnel records, such as muster rolls and payrolls, give no indication of a sailor's race. It is usually only the casual mention in records of a freer form, such as testimony in courts of inquiry, that reveals that an individual sailor was a black man. Thus it is impossible to determine the percentage of petty officers in the Quasi-War who may have been blacks. All one can say with confidence is that some petty officers in the Quasi-War Navy were blacks. The clerk recording testimony in a court of inquiry in February 1800 identified George Diggs, the *Experiment* quartermaster we met at the beginning of this chapter, as "a free man of Color."⁵⁹

Establishing Duties, Routines, and Regulations

"The crew being completed and embarked on board a ship or vessel of the United States, the Commander will order the quarter-bill to be made out." The quarter bill established for everyone on board his station and duties during quarters, when all hands were called for major sailing evolutions, battles, inspections, fire drills, and the like. Next, the commander drew up the boarding list, drawing boarders from different posts so as not to weaken one more than another. With the quarter bill established, the watch list and mess list could be set as well, for the men who worked together or served the same gun were to serve in the same watch and eat in the same mess.⁶⁰ With the quarter bill and boarding, watch, and mess lists set and posted, the ship's company could enter into the regular routine of their duties.

Three sources defined the duties and chain of reporting of the forward and petty officers in the early Navy of the United States: These were custom, Navy-wide regulations, and the instructions of individual commanding officers.

Over the course of the previous three centuries, European navies developed and refined shipboard organization and routines, so that by the time of the establishment of the United States Navy these

⁵⁶ Joseph Saunder (or Sanders) to James Sever, 12 September and 13 October 1799, in *ibid.*, 4: 178–79, 282.

⁵⁷ Thomas Truxtun to John Archer, 17 June 1799, in *ibid.*, 3: 352.

⁵⁸ Benjamin Stoddert to Henry Kenyon, 8 August 1798, in *ibid.*, 1: 281.

⁵⁹ Statement of George Diggs, 4 February 1800, in *ibid.*, 5: 187.

⁶⁰ *Marine Rules*, 3–4.

had become standard practice. In organizing itself, the United States Navy drew on those traditions, especially as embodied in the Royal Navy, the sea service with which the former British colonists were most familiar. Although few forward and petty officers in the U.S. Navy of the Quasi-War era would have been veterans of the Continental and state navies of the War of Independence, of the thousands of seaman who served in the Quasi-War Navy, it is likely that some had seen more recent service in the British navy. According to Midshipman John Roche Jr., as the frigate *Constitution* prepared in Boston Harbor in June 1798 for its shakedown cruise, most of the petty officers, “such as quartermasters, master’s mates, gunner’s [mates], master-at-arms, etc.,” were English or Irish sailors who had filled “the same berths on board British men-of-war.”⁶¹ In any event, the traditions of the sea service were well enough established that every able seaman would have had a general idea of what duties a boatswain, gunner, carpenter, sailmaker, and their mates, and such petty officers as master-at-arms, armorer, cooper, quartermaster, quarter gunner, and captains of the tops, forecandle, and after guard were expected to perform.

Throughout the duration of the Quasi-War, the official document that defined the duties of naval officers, from the commodore in command of a squadron down to the ship’s cook, was the *Marine Rules and Regulations*. This document was drawn up by Secretary of War James McHenry, with the advice of captains John Barry and Thomas Truxtun, approved by President John Adams, and published by the Department of War early in 1798.⁶² In structure and content, the *Marine Rules* is largely a distillation and adaptation of the 13th edition of the British navy’s *Regulations and Instructions*, published in 1790.⁶³

The *Marine Rules and Regulations* specified the duties of the four forward officers, boatswain, gunner, carpenter, and sailmaker, and of their mates, who were petty officers, and those of three of the other petty officers, armorer, master-at-arms, and cook.

Ships’ captains supplemented the *Marine Rules* with internal regulations. Among the commanding officers of the Quasi-War era, Thomas Truxtun was the most concerned with regularizing professional standards at the service’s beginning, as he told *Constellation*’s lieutenants and sailing master, “We have an Infant Navy to foster, and to organize, and it must be done.”⁶⁴ His written directives reveal the high expectations he had of those who served under his command.

Of the Duties of Boatswains and Their Mates

The *Marine Rules and Regulations* charged the boatswain and his mates with insuring that the masts and yards, rigging, cordage, cables, and anchors, whether in use or in stowage, were in their proper

⁶¹ “*Constitution* and the Quasi-War with France: The Letters of John Roche, Jr., 1798–1801,” *American Neptune* 27 (1967): 138 (19 June 1798).

⁶² Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 543, note 12; *Marine Rules*.

⁶³ Great Britain, Privy Council, *Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty’s Service at Sea, Established by His Majesty in Council* (13th ed.; London, 1790).

⁶⁴ Thomas Truxtun to the Sea Lieutenants and Master, Ship *Constellation*, 27 June 1798, in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War*, 1: 144.

places and in good condition, and with keeping an account of the receipt and expenditure of such articles. The sailing master was the boatswain's and his mates' chief superintendent, although they also took orders from the naval lieutenants. The clause in the published regulation, "He and his Mates are to assist in relieving the watch, and see that the working of the ship be performed with as little confusion as may be," conveys only a vague idea of the boatswain's role as foreman in directing the work of the ship's company.⁶⁵

In instructing *Constellation's* boatswain, Abraham Long, Thomas Truxtun amplified the directives in the *Marine Rules and Regulations*. Long was to insure that the masts were supported by the standing rigging so that each would "sustain a proportional effort" when the masts were put under stress. He was to take care that the running rigging was set up properly and the sails correctly fitted, securely bent, and, when ordered, well furled and reefed. Long and his mates were "to carry and wind a call," that is, to carry a boatswain's whistle, hung on a lanyard around the neck, and pipe appropriate calls on it. With the call they were to turn up the watch, or, as occasion demanded, all hands, and to summon the crew to their duty.⁶⁶

Written several decades later, the evocation by William N. Brady, Sailing Master, USN, of the image of the boatswain "turning up the hands" is timeless in its application)

In calling up the hands, or calling the crew to the performance of their duties, the boatswain too often indulges in piercing pipes and drawling tones of superfluous length. Boatswains have a singular propensity to demonstrate the soundness of their lungs, by an endless protraction of a note on their piercing pipes. They should not be so fond of supplying the place of sea birds. This is not the worst feature in their taste; for when at last they utter the required summons, they give it forth in tones so drawling, that the first words are often forgotten before the last are out.

Note.—A-l-l h-a-n-d-s a-b-o-u-t-s-h-i-p.—This lengthy summons, and a longer-winded whistle, and each pipe and phrase three times repeated by the boatswain and his mates, the ship may be ashore before the leader of the band is convinced how dearly he has paid for his whistle.⁶⁷

The boatswain and his mates were, in Truxtun's words, to "compel a manly exertion in the Crew on all occasions, and to punish (as orders may be given) where it is deemed Necessary."⁶⁸ Although the symbol of the boatswain's office was his call, it just as well could have been a rope's end, called a colt, which he used to "start," or strike smartly, seamen slow to perform their tasks, or even the "cat", or cat-o-nine-tails, with which his mates flogged sailors in the usual form of judicial punishment.

⁶⁵ *Marine Rules*, 27, "Regulations respecting the Duties of Officers at Sea," articles CVII–CVIII, and 33–34, "Of the Boatswain."

⁶⁶ Thomas Truxtun to Abraham Long, [31 May 1798], in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War*, 1: 144.

⁶⁷ William N. Brady, *The Kedge-Anchor; or, Young Sailor's Assistant*, 18th ed. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1876), 246–47.

⁶⁸ Thomas Truxtun to Abraham Long, [31 May 1798], in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War*, 1: 144.



George Brown, Boatswain's Mate. *The Naval Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (November 1836), 516.

Truxtun's practice when all hands were called, except for battle stations, was to have the master direct the boatswain to give his first mate any work to be done on the foremast and bowsprit, and his second mate the work on the main and mizzen masts. These duties included everything to be done or repaired "from the Top Gallant Mast's heads down, as well as the Jib Boom, Gaff and what relates to the Cables, Sails, Anchors, Boats, &c." The boatswain's mates were to oversee the cleaning of the ship and any work below decks under the direction of the midshipmen and master's mates.⁶⁹

In times of battle, Truxtun appointed the boatswain and his mate to lead a team of men in repairing damage to the rigging in the forward part of the ship, while the master and his mates did the same aft, and in a boarding action the boatswain and his mates forward and the master and his mates aft were to grapple the enemy ship and lash it fast.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Thomas Truxtun to the Sea Lieutenants and Master, Ship *Constellation*, 27 June 1798, in *ibid.*, 1: 144.

⁷⁰ Thomas Truxtun, Order of Boarding, 23 Aug. 1800, in *ibid.*, 6: 278–79.

* * *

The Boatswain's Mate.

By a Brother Cruiser.

There stands the outer man of George Brown—Boatswain's Mate, in the United States Navy!—a perfect specimen of a true American Seaman; and a better fellow than whom, never piped to grog or reigned at a gangway. . . .

The chain you see slung around his neck, is of solid silver: it is his "regalia"—the insignia of his office. No Lord Mayor of London was ever more proud of his chain, than is George Brown of that and its appendage. Look where it falls over his thumb. You see, stretching from the "breeching" to the "quoin,"⁷¹ a crooked silver tube. This is his "call"—his harmonicon—his shepherd's pipe, with which he entices the sheep, from that lazy fold, the birth deck; with which he discourseth in music that has no gamut; nay, that hath no parallel but itself, in this or any other world. . . . Hang your hurdy gurdies and music grinding machines, but give me the shrill clear note of a boatswain's call, piping all hands to reef topsails in a midwatch, insinuating its beautiful sound to the auditories of a poor devil, just turned in, and walking it off in a ten knot sleep!

. . . . From his entré [sic] in the service on board the gallant Constitution—where as powder boy, he acquired credit for his agility—he gradually worked his way upwards in rank, from the cleaner of a priming wire, to the furbisher of a cutlass, from first captain of a gun, to first captain of the foretop, till the next step in promotion, put him in rightful possession of the "Colt" and "Call."

. . . . The last we heard of him . . . he is to emanate with all the dignity and long "toggerly" of a regular-built, Warranted Boatswain.⁷²

* * *

Of the Duty of Gunners and Their Assistants

According to the *Marine Rules and Regulations*, the gunner and his assistants, under the supervision of the naval lieutenants, had responsibility for the ordnance, ammunition, small arms and hand grenades, and related stores and accoutrements, such as match, tampions, rammers, and sponges. The gunner insured that the powder room was kept in good order, locked and under guard, securing the gunpowder against damage, loss, and exposure to flames or sparks. He oversaw the preparation of cartridges and fuses. He had the cannon mounted on their proper carriages and at their proper height at the gun ports. He kept the guns protected from moisture and free of rust. He calibrated the sights on the guns. He

⁷¹ *Breeching*: A large rope attached to a gun or its carriage and secured to the ship's side, to limit the recoil distance. *Quoin*: A wedge-shaped wooden instrument used to raise or lower the elevation of a gun.

⁷² *The Naval Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 6 (Nov. 1836), 516–21.

was to see that the cannonballs and grapeshot were kept clean of rust, and that balls of the right caliber were placed in proximity to the guns. He issued powder as occasion required. And he was to keep an accurate accounting of every item under his purview and report daily on their consumption. The gunner's mates and quarter gunners assisted him in his work.⁷³

Thomas Truxtun amplified these instructions for *Constellation's* gunner, James Morgan. In addition to having charge of the artillery and ammunition, and their associated stores and accoutrements, Morgan was to train the seamen in manning and caring for the guns. The object of preserving the cannon, ammunition, and accoutrements in good order was "that in a few minutes warning the ship may be ready at any time to go into an Engagement by night or day."⁷⁴

Truxtun expected the gunner's mate to be equal to the gunner in understanding of gunnery and of ordnance stores. His particular duty was "to have everything ready for action in a moment's warning." He was to know the location of every article relating to the ordnance and to be "expert in preparing Match Stuff, Grenadoes, and every sort of Combustible." To the gunner's mate Truxtun entrusted the duty of training the topmen in the use of small-caliber howitzers to clear the decks of the enemy.⁷⁵

Each quarter gunner had charge of four guns and their gear, which he helped the gunner maintain in good order, scaling the guns to remove rust, and filling their cartridges. At quarters he supplied the gun's crews, and during action stood ready to furnish any reserved or spare article, such as breechings, ladles, and worms, that might be required.

* * *

"Old Combustibles"

The novelist Herman Melville, who served a voyage in the U.S. frigate *United States*, evokes the sulfurous atmosphere and aura of danger that surrounded "Old Combustibles" and his gang:

Among all the persons and things on board that puzzled me, and filled me most with strange emotions of doubt, misgivings, and mystery, was the Gunner—a short, square, grim man, his hair and beard grizzled and singed, as if with gunpowder. His skin was of flecky brown, like the stained barrel of a fowling-piece, and his hollow eyes burned in his head like blue lights.⁷⁶ He it was who had access to many of those mysterious vaults I have spoken of. Often he might be seen groping his way into them, followed by his subalterns, the old quarter-gunners, as if intent upon laying a train of powder to blow up the ship. . . .

At periodic intervals . . . the Gunner, accompanied by his phalanx, entered into the great Magazine under the Gun-room, of which he had sole custody and kept the key, nearly as big

⁷³ *Marine Rules*, "Duties of the Officers charged with the Detail of the Artillery," 25–27, and "Of the Gunner," 34–37.

⁷⁴ Thomas Truxtun to James Morgan, 31 May 1798, in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War*, 1: 99–100.

⁷⁵ Thomas Truxtun's order concerning exercise of topmen, 31 July 1798, in *ibid.*, 1: 263–64.

⁷⁶ *Blue light*: a pyrotechnic torch giving off a blue flame.

as the key of the Bastile,⁷⁷ and provided with lanterns . . . proceeded to turn, end for end, all the kegs of powder and packages of cartridges stored in this innermost explosive vault, lined throughout with sheets of copper. In the vestibule of the Magazine, against the paneling, were several pegs for slippers, and, before penetrating further than the vestibule, every man of the gunner's-gang silently removed his shoes, for fear that the nails in their heels might possibly create a spark, by striking against the coppered floor within. Then, with slippèd feet and with hushed whispers, they stole into the heart of the place.

This turning of the powder was to preserve its inflammability. And surely it was a business full of direful interest, to be buried so deep below the sun, handling whole barrels of powder, any one of which, touched by the smallest spark, was powerful enough to blow up a whole street of warehouses.⁷⁸

* * *

By the *Marine Rules and Regulations*, the armorer assisted the gunner with accounting for the small arms and kept these clean and in good repair. In his additional instructions, Truxtun made it clear to *Constellation's* armorer that he was also subject to the authority of the lieutenant of Marines and of the master-at-arms, to both of whom he was to make himself "as Useful as possible in Making & Repairing all sorts of tools in every department on Board."⁷⁹

Of the Duty of Carpenters and Their Mates

The *Marine Rules and Regulations* entrusted the care and preservation of the hull, masts, spars, and the ship's other wooden gear to the carpenter and his mates. To this end, the carpenter was to inspect all parts of the ship every day. He supervised the work of the caulkers. During an engagement, he was to have ready everything necessary to repair damages and plug up shot holes.⁸⁰

Thomas Truxtun instructed James Yeomans, *Constellation's* carpenter, to "be particularly careful of all the Spars, Boats Oars, Pump Gear, Tools, Pitch, Rosin, Turpentine, Varnish, Paints, Oil," and all other carpentry stores, to have them ready for use at all times, and to keep accurate accounts of their expenditure. Yeomans was to report any defects in the ship related to his responsibilities as soon as he knew of them. To help preserve the wood with salt water, he was to have "the Ship well wet Night and Morning, inside and out," employing, apart from his mates and yeoman, part of the crew as assigned by the officer of the deck.⁸¹ During battle, aside from their damage-control duties, the carpenter and his crew were to man the pumps to extinguish fires.⁸²

⁷⁷ *Bastile*: Correctly "Bastille"; former fortress in Paris, France, used as a prison.

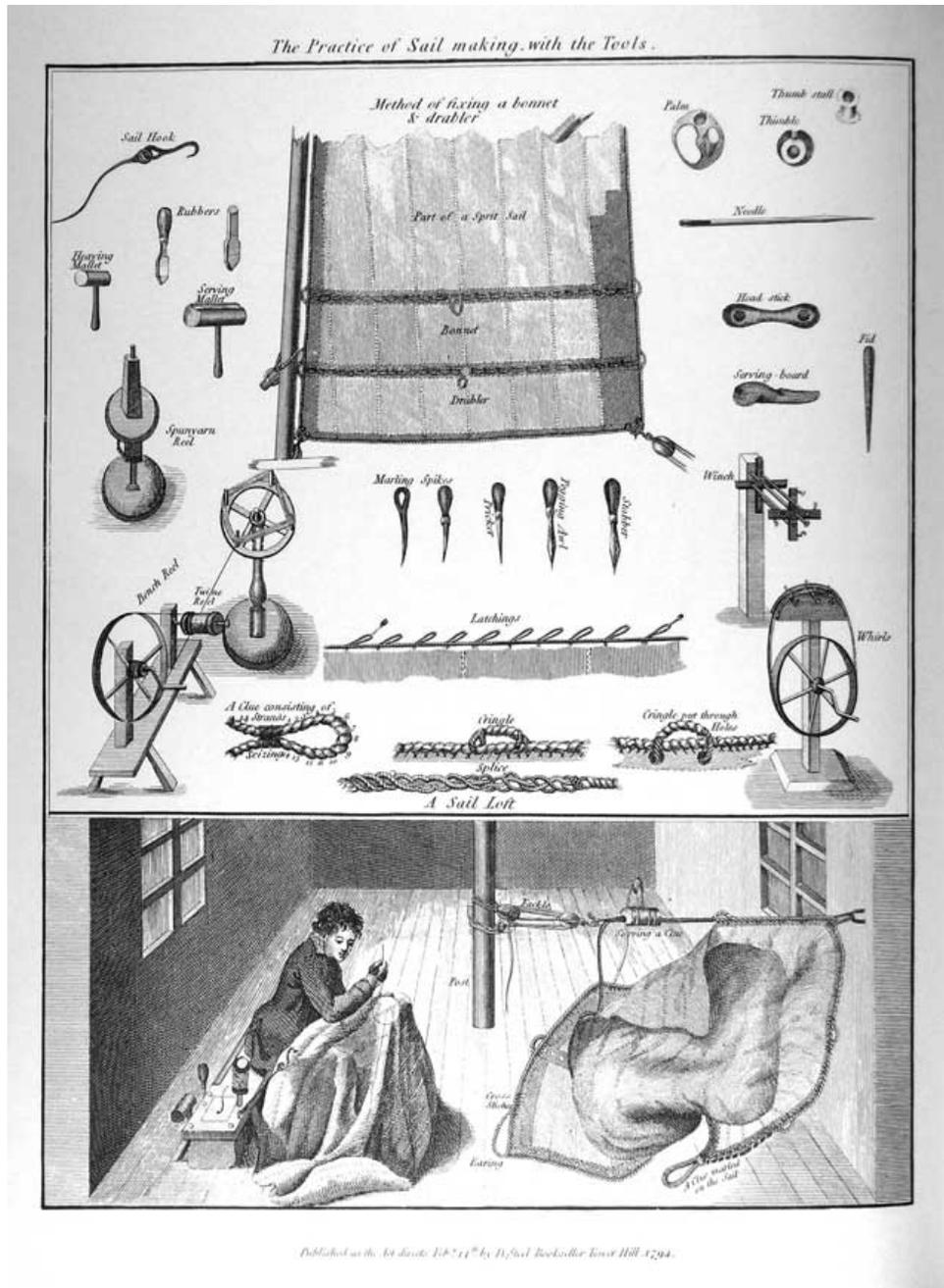
⁷⁸ Herman Melville, *White-Jacket*, 152–53.

⁷⁹ *Marine Rules*, "Of the Armorer," 37; Thomas Truxtun to Mr. Bankston, 7 May 1798, in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War*, 1: 71–72.

⁸⁰ *Marine Rules*, "of the Carpenter," 37.

⁸¹ Thomas Truxtun to James Yeomans, 1 May 1798, in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War*, 1: 61.

⁸² Thomas Truxtun, Order of Boarding, 23 August 1800, in *ibid.*, 6: 278–79.



The practice of sail making, with the tools. David Steel, *The Elements and Practice of Rigging and Seamanship*, (London, 1794), 83.

Of the Duty of Sailmakers and Their Mates

The sailmaker and his mates examined the condition of all sails brought on board, repaired and kept the sails fit for service, and made sure that when stored they were dry and frequently aired, and secured from moisture and vermin.⁸³

⁸³ *Marine Rules*, "Of the Master Sail-Maker," 34.

Of the Duty of Masters-at-Arms and Ship's Corporals

The master-at-arms exercised the petty officers and ship's company in the use of small arms. He placed and relieved sentinels over prisoners and examined the sentinels' weapons. He was responsible for seeing that candles and fires were extinguished at night according to the ship's regulations. It was the master-at-arms' duty to prevent seamen from leaving the ship without permission. He visited all boats coming to the ship. Thomas Truxtun instructed John Marshall, *Constellation's* master-at-arms, to search both boat and rowers to prevent liquor from being smuggled on board.⁸⁴

As the crew's policeman, the master-at-arms was frequently the most hated man in a ship. Since he was responsible for reporting to the officer of the watch all irregularities that came to his attention, his shipmates viewed him as a snitch. Herman Melville describes the master-at-arms as "a sort of high constable and schoolmaster, wearing citizen's clothes, and known by his official rattan."

He it is whom all sailors hate. His is the universal duty of a universal informer and hunter-up of delinquents. On the berth-deck he reigns supreme; spying out all grease-spots made by the various cooks of the seamen's messes, and driving the laggards up the hatches, when all hands are called.

It behooved him to be on guard against retaliation, for,

. . . as it is a heartless, so is it a thankless office. Of dark nights, most masters-at-arms keep themselves in readiness to dodge forty-two pound balls, dropped down the hatchways near them.⁸⁵

The ship's corporal was the master-at-arms' assistant.

Of the Duty of Ships' Cooks

The cook had charge of the tubs used to steep salt-meat in order to remove as much salt as possible before cooking. He boiled the meat and served it out to the messes. The *Marine Rules* particularly emphasized his responsibility for securing the steep tubs during storms so that they would not be washed overboard.⁸⁶

Of the Duty of Other Petty Officers

The Act for the Government of the Navy of the United States of 2 March 1799 provided that "all officers, not having commissions or warrants, (or appointed commission or warrant officers for the

⁸⁴ Ibid., "Of the Master at Arms," 38; Thomas Truxtun to John Marshall, 4 June 1798, in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War*, 1: 103.

⁸⁵ Melville, *White-Jacket*, op. cit., 37–38.

⁸⁶ *Marine Rules*, "Of the Cook," 38.

time being,) are termed petty, or inferior officers.”⁸⁷ The term thus encompassed master’s mates, captain’s clerks, stewards, and yeomen, among others.

The *Marine Rules and Regulations* mentions some petty officers only in passing. For instance, the steward had charge of the purser’s storerooms, issued small stores, served out rations, assisted in issuing clothing, and performed related duties; and the cooper repaired defective casks for the purser and could be called on to certify the purser’s account of the waste of staves and hoops.⁸⁸ Unmentioned in the *Marine Rules and Regulations*, captains of the fore-, main-, and mizzen-tops, and of the fore-castle, after-guard, and hold had charge of the seamen at each of those stations.⁸⁹

“Light and Liberty!” Subordination and Discipline

Besides their specific shipboard duties, forward and petty officers in the fledgling Navy of the United States needed to understand their place in the ship’s hierarchy, but it was against a tide of democratizing social expectations that commanding officers sought to inculcate habits of subordination and respect among their men.

In colonial America, habits of deference on the part of persons of lower rank to those of higher, and of the reciprocal noblesse oblige, or sense of responsibility, on the part of the genteel classes toward the common people characterized social relations. The title of “Mister” was restricted to gentlemen, those whose position in society did not oblige them to work with their hands to make their living. Laboring men and women paid respect to genteel men and women by doffing their hats or curtsying. Quakers earned their reputation as social levelers because of their refusal to apply honorific titles or to remove their hats. Laws restricted voting rights to property holders because of a belief that only those who owned property had a sufficient stake in society to make them reliable citizens and the economic independence to cast uncorrupted ballots.

The 1790s, however, when the United States Navy was established, was an era in which republican ideals, based on the American Revolution’s assertion that “all men are created equal,” were challenging traditional habits of deference of social inferiors to social superiors. In the fervor of their commitment to liberty and equality, Americans set out to eliminate all vestiges of special privilege or aristocratic pretense. State laws lowered property requirements for voting and abolished primogeniture and entail, disallowing restrictions on inheritance of land to first born sons and clauses in wills that forbade heirs to sell inherited land. Laboring men began to demand the right to be called “Mister.” Employers complained that hired hands considered themselves their own masters and would take offence and walk off the job if told how to do their work. Wealthy travelers from Europe noted that servants in

⁸⁷ An Act for the government of the Navy of the United States, 2 March 1799. 5th Cong., 3d sess., ch. 22, sec. 1, art. 11, *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 1 (1845), 622.

⁸⁸ *Marine Rules*, “Of the Purser,” 40, 41, 42.

⁸⁹ Definitions of the various petty officers can be found in: William Falconer, *New Universal Dictionary of the Marine*, modernized and enlarged by William Burney (London, 1815; reprint ed., New York: Library Editions, 1970); L. R. Hamersly, *A Naval Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia: L. R. Hamersly, 1881); W. A. McEwen and A. H. Lewis, *Encyclopedia of Nautical Knowledge* (Cambridge, MD: Cornell Maritime Press, 1953); and *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam, 1971).

America lacked the dutifulness and deferential attitude of servants in the Old World. In fact, American household workers came to resent being called “servants,” preferring the term “help,” with its implication of equality. To have one’s help eat apart from the family came to be viewed as snobbish. An ideology of “producerism” emerged, glorifying the virtues of artisans and manual laborers who produced wealth, in distinction to those who derived their income from the labor of others.⁹⁰

The contrast between the presidential styles of Federalist President George Washington (1789–1797) and Republican President Thomas Jefferson (1801–1809) exemplifies the competition between old and new behavioral expectations. Washington rode in a coach drawn by matched white horses, held formal receptions called levees, and affected a dignified reserve in public. Jefferson rode his horse or walked, answered the door of the White House himself, often in robe and worn slippers, and at the dinner table allowed guests to sit wherever they pleased rather than where diplomatic protocol required. Washington’s Republican critics complained that he ape’d royalty, whereas Federalists considered Jefferson an importer of French revolutionary radicalism and anarchy. Like many Americans, Jefferson believed that social progress depended on the freedom of individuals from oppression and coercion and hailed the post-revolutionary era as a new chapter history because of the untold possibilities for human advancement the American experiment in republicanism opened up.

Egalitarian American mores dating from even before the American Revolution worked against the military subordination thought essential in regular armies and navies. This was especially true in New England, where militia units traditionally elected their officers. When organizing the Continental Army in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 1775, George Washington struggled to enforce a “proper distinction between officer and private.” Historian Christopher Ward describes the situation Washington confronted:

The “leveling spirit,” the opinion that every man was just as good as any other man and a little better, was rife in New England, and was utterly subversive of discipline in the army. The officers could not maintain proper dignity and superiority to their men, could not give an order and exact obedience. Instead, they must truckle to them, conduct themselves with humility, and persuade their men to do their duty. This spirit of equality and lack of dignity was prevalent among the officers themselves.⁹¹

Commanding officers of the newly established United States Navy confronted similar attitudes, now even more common throughout America because of the spread of republican ideology. Thomas Truxtun addressed the problem early in the process of organizing a naval force. On 30 August 1797, he demanded that his commissioned and warrant officers eschew “the detestable and ruinous practice to Subordination in being too familiar with Petty Officers &c.” For, he observed, “no sort of Conduct in

⁹⁰ Jackson Turner Main, *The Sovereign States, 1775–1783* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1973), 347–48; Clark, *Social Change in America*, 79, 107, 110–11.

⁹¹ Christopher Ward, *The War of the Revolution*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 1: 103.

any officer on board, have a tendency to lessen his Authority and the respect due to himself So much as an improper familiarity with the petty Officers &c.”⁹²

To promote subordination, Captain James Sever established the following rules and regulations to be observed in the frigate *Congress*:

4th. No Officer of an Inferior grade shall address himself to his superior Officer, without moving his hat; nor any petty Officer, Seaman, or Marine, shall accost a Commission'd Officer, without, taking off[f] his hat; & remaining uncover'd, during the period of Conversation— The same rule shall apply when accosted by a Commission'd Officer.—

5th. When a Seaman, or Marine; shall be accosted by, or accost himself to a Midshipman, or other Warrant Officer; he shall pay that Officer, the Compliment of taking off[f] his hat; at the commencement, and ending of the Conversation.—

7th. No Petty Officer, Seaman or Marine, shall be permitted to pass the Barricade of the Quarter Deck; when the Commander; or other Commission'd Officer is present; without pulling off[f] his hat; and remaining uncover'd, untill he shall have pass'd the Wheel; the same thing will be requir'd after passing the Wheel in going forward. nor will they be suffer'd to pass on the weather side of that deck; without an especial order—.⁹³

An incident during Sever's command of *Congress* in 1800 that began innocently enough but quickly escalated into what a subsequent court-martial designated as seditious and mutinous behavior illustrates the difficulties that resulted from the disjunction between rising notions of liberty and equality among American seamen and traditional concepts of due subordination held by naval commanders. Captain Sever's shipboard rules required the seamen to eat their meals on the berth deck. Without lights it was too dark for the seamen to see their victuals on the deck on which they slung their hammocks, given that it was below the waterline. The men, therefore, ate their meals by candlelight until one day, acting on Sever's orders, the master at arms went through the deck extinguished the candles while informing the men that burning candles on the berth deck without special permission was against regulations. The next morning, a delegation consisting of two seamen, Ansel Robinson and acting armorer's mate John Carter, requested an audience with the captain. Hats in hand, they asked that the crew be allowed candles during meals, or, failing that, that they be allowed to eat their meals on the gun deck, where natural light was sufficient. They suggested to Sever that his denying them candles “was different from the practice in every other ship in the service.” Informing the men that he would not be dictated to by them, Sever denied both requests, telling them that the burning of candles on the berth deck could not be allowed and that they would mess in the place assigned at the beginning of the cruise. After the delegation of seamen had left the captain's cabin and returned to the spar deck, the officers heard from among the crew on the forecabin cries of “light and liberty!” Apprehending that the crew's mood

⁹² Thomas Truxtun to Lt. Simon Gross, 30 August 1797, in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War*, 1: 13–14.

⁹³ Rules and Regulations to be observed on board U. S. Frigate *Congress*, 22 May 1800 (Capt. James Sever), in *ibid.*, 5: 547.

was growing ugly, Sever ordered the men below decks. Once the men were below deck, some 30 or 40 of them shouted, “huzza for liberty!” Sever, having had the Marines armed and drawn up on the quarterdeck, ordered the seamen back above decks. Some of the men took as much as a half an hour to comply. As Carter was coming up the ladder, admonished by Sever for his tardiness, he replied, “If this is liberty, damn such liberty.” Sever had Carter, Robinson, and five other men he considered the instigators of the trouble placed under arrest.

The transcript of the subsequent court-martial opens a window on the viewpoints of both the seamen and their commanding officer. Whereas the seamen asked for the use of candles by which to eat their meals not as a favor, but as a right, Sever denied the request because the men asked it as a right and not as a favor. Some of the men, from having served previously in *Constitution*, where they had been allowed candles at meals, believed that such was the Navy’s established practice. Asked during the trial, “was the application for candles a demand or a requisition,” Sever answered, “It was clearly a demand. The word was not ‘I demand,’ but that they had a right.” And asked if messing on the gun deck was a demand or a requisition, Sever stated, “The words were ‘if you will not let us have candles you will not object to our messing on the gun deck.’”

In their defense, the accused submitted an apology in which they stated that they had only meant to ask for something that they believed was their right. They had acted in good faith and if they were mistaken in their belief, they were sorry for asserting a right that was not theirs. They pled that their disgruntlement arose only because they had thought the refusal of their request was “a denial of what we imagined the rules of the navy gave us a right. . . . We again solemnly protest that our uneasiness was solely the idea of being deprived of our rights.” The court acquitted one of the accused, sentenced four to 72 lashes with the cat-o-nine-tails, and condemned Carter and Robinson, identified as the ringleaders, to death by hanging from the fore yard arm, while recommending the latter two men to clemency. Commodore Thomas Truxtun confirmed the sentences of 72 lashes, referring to them as “mild,” and mitigated the hangings to 100 lashes and dismissal from the service.⁹⁴

Among the petty officers who proved to be disciplinary cases in the Navy’s first years, mates, of the forward officers and especially of the master, were the most prominent, if the records included in the published naval documents of the Quasi-War are representative. During that conflict, Thomas Truxtun disrated a master’s mate for involvement in embezzlement of rum in the hold; a master’s mate in *Connecticut* was discharged for disobedience of orders; one master’s mate in the frigate *Congress* was discharged for “unsteady conduct,” and another was reduced to seaman; and master’s mates deserted from the frigates *Constellation* and *Congress* and the brig *Richmond*. Truxtun jailed a gunner’s mate and a quarter gunner for “having behaved exceedingly ill to the Master’s second Mate . . . and in a mutinous Manner.” Boatswain’s mates deserted from *Congress*, *Connecticut*, and *Richmond*, and a carpenter’s mate from *Constellation*. Frigates *Constellation* and *Constellation* each

⁹⁴ RG 125, NARA, No. 2.

had a quartermaster desert, and *Ganges* an armorer and his mate. A master-at-arms in *Constitution* was reduced to carpenter's yeoman because of misconduct.⁹⁵

Given the difficulties the Navy had in finding skilled sailors, it is not surprising that some of the men the system succeeded in identifying and engaging to serve as the Navy's first forward officers proved unsuitable for their posts or resistant to naval discipline. Truxtun instructed *Constellation*'s sailing master on his responsibility for monitoring the work of the boatswain:

You will observe that in the present State of Things in America, that it is difficult to find a Person as a Boatswain, in whom all that Confidence can with Propriety be placed, that is attached to such Character; hence it is, that the Master must be vigilant in superintending that Department in every Respect, otherwise the Service might suffer considerably, for Frauds, if not committed, have been attempted.⁹⁶

A bad experience had jaundiced Truxtun's opinion of the Navy's earliest boatswains. A few months earlier he had discharged John Alling for disorderly and mutinous conduct, remarking in his journal, "this man acted as a Boatswain for a While, but was too infamous to be continued in that Station."⁹⁷ *Constellation* was not alone in experiencing fractious boatswains.

Constitution's first boatswain, Benjamin Brackett, engaged by Lieutenant Isaac Hull on 8 July 1798, was arrested on 13 August, and broke and sent on shore 17 August. Three months later, Brackett's replacement, James Connell, found himself confined in irons after cursing the frigate's second lieutenant for inspecting the boatswain's storeroom. *Constitution* had bad luck with its boatswains: On 2 March 1799, while the ship was clearing for action, Boatswain John Hancock "was Accidentally shot thro' the Head with a pistol & expired Immediately." Hancock's replacement, Thomas Johnston, was broke for misconduct and sent on shore 14 July 1799.⁹⁸

Several of the first forward officers remained in the service for only a short time. Secretary of the Navy Stoddert recognized the importance of finding men who were dedicated to national service to fill the posts of lesser officers. Asking the Navy agent at Norwich, Connecticut, to recommend inferior officers, he remonstrated that he sought "such characters as will do credit to the Service—they must not be men who come forward merely because they have no other employment." Resignations among the inferior officers were so frequent that Stoddert felt impelled to apologize to the President for sending him so many new warrants to sign for their replacements.⁹⁹

Like a bad penny that always turns up, it is the problem cases that appear in the records. There were

⁹⁵ *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War*, 1: 273, 300, 304–16, 2: 286, 434, 3: 438–448, 4: 5–10, 12, 5: 13–27, 512–14.

⁹⁶ Thomas Truxtun to John Turner Fisher, 29 April 1799, in *ibid.*, 3: 106.

⁹⁷ Thomas Truxtun, Journal, 5 February 1799, in *ibid.*, 2: 309.

⁹⁸ Muster Roll of U.S. frigate *Constitution*, 22 September 1798–July 1799, in *ibid.*, 3: 438–48; Journal of James Pity, 23 November 1798 and 2 March 1799, in *ibid.*, 2:47, 419. *Constitution* likewise had trouble with one of its carpenters, who was suspended, along with a midshipman, for fighting. Isaac Hull's Journal, 10 February 1800, in *ibid.*, 5: 207.

⁹⁹ Benjamin Stoddert to President John Adams, 25 June 1799, and to Joseph Howland, 15 July 1799, in *ibid.*, 3: 402, 502.

certainly many good men who served as forward and petty officers in the Navy of the Quasi-War. The Navy retained some of the best of those when the force was reduced after the war under the Naval Peace Establishment Act.¹⁰⁰ Gunner James Moore, recruited for the frigate *Constitution* in January 1799, and Boatswain Thomas Whitehead, warranted in May 1800, remained in naval service until at least 1808, when they last appear in the records. Boatswain George Hodge, whose warrant, dated 11 May 1798, is the earliest known boatswain's warrant in the U.S. Navy and served until his death in 1820.¹⁰¹

The Naval Peace Establishment of 1801

In the fall 1800 elections, the Republican Party won control of both the Presidency and the Congress, and in mid-December 1800 news reached Washington, D.C., that a treaty of peace had been agreed to between U.S. negotiators and the government of France. Following this communication, orders went out to U.S. naval vessels to cease hostilities. The outgoing Federalists then drastically reduced the size of the Navy. With the nation at peace, Federalists feared that the Republicans, who sought to limit government expenses and the size of the armed forces, would make even deeper cuts. President John Adams signed the Naval Peace Establishment Act on 3 March 1801, his final day in office.

The act reduced the Navy to 13 frigates, only 6 of which were to be kept on active service, with crews reduced to two thirds of their wartime complements. A sailing master was to have charge of each of the 7 frigates laid up in ordinary and was to be assisted by a boatswain, gunner, carpenter, cook, and sergeant or corporal of Marines, 8 Marines, and 10 or 12 seamen. All but 9 captains, 36 lieutenants, and 150 midshipmen were to be discharged. Commissioned and warrant officers who were discharged were to receive an additional 4 months' pay.¹⁰²

The act did not specify the number of forward officers the Navy was to retain but authorized the President to discharge any commissioned or warrant officers that were in excess of requirements. The department retained five each of the gunners and carpenters who held warrants and four each of the warranted boatswains and sailmakers.

Within months of Thomas Jefferson's inauguration as President, the United States would once more be waging naval warfare and would have to recruit hundreds of seamen and build anew a corps of forward and petty officers.

¹⁰⁰ An Act providing for a naval peace establishment, 3 March 1801, 6th Cong., 3d sess., ch. 20, *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 2 (1845), 110.

¹⁰¹ William Rogers received the earliest U.S. Navy gunner's warrant on the same day Hodge received his boatswain's warrant. The earliest carpenter's and sailmaker's warrants, issued to James Morris and Jacob Miller, were signed 17 days later, on 28 May 1798.

¹⁰² An Act providing for a naval peace establishment, 3 March 1801, 6th Cong., 3d sess., ch. 20, *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 2 (1845), 110.

CHAPTER TWO
BUILDING TRADITION
1801–1815¹⁰³

The Good conduct of the Petty Officers and Seamen will receive every encouragement . . . all promotions will be made, from those who are cleanly, obedient, and seamen like in their deportment.

Master Commandant William M. Crane
19 December 1813

We are men Sir, who tho' not in so high a station in life as you are, have some feelings of pride about us, and cannot bear to be dependent on strangers, when we have money due us which we have hardly and honorably earned.—! Is this the reward Sir we expected to meet from our Country, [or] the Conduct for men to receive who have been at all times willing to shed their blood in defence of that Countries rights [?]

Members of *Essex*'s crew to Captain David Porter
20 July 1814

“Fire!” At ten o’clock on the morning of 14 February 1804 as U.S. frigate *Constitution* lay at anchor off Syracuse, Sicily, the cry called the crew to their firefighting stations. Not two hours later, a second cry, “All hands to witness punishment,” called the crew to assemble at the gangway. Commodore Edward Preble and the frigate’s other commissioned officers gathered on the starboard side of the quarterdeck, and an armed Marine guard drew up on the larboard side. Master-at-Arms John Burchard then escorted James Wallace, ship’s corporal, to the gangway, where Boatswain John Newton Cannon’s crew stripped the shirt from Wallace’s back and secured his hands and feet between the hammock rail and grating on deck. Surgeon James Wells stood by, ready to interrupt the punishment if the offender passed out during the flogging. On signal, one of Cannon’s mates removed the cat-o-nine-tails from its canvas bag. At Preble’s command, “Boatswain’s mate, do your duty,” the punishment began, and it did not end until Cannon had counted out 36 strokes of the cat across Wallace’s bare back.

Wallace’s offense was to have jeopardized the ship by fumigating one of the officers’ cabins with smoldering rope yarns. Naval regulations allowed a commanding officer to order a punishment of a maximum of 12 lashes without a court-martial. Preble rationalized ordering three times that number by finding three crimes in the culprit’s offense: fumigating a part of the ship without orders, neglect of

¹⁰³ Portions of this chapter were published in: Michael J. Crawford, “U.S. Navy Petty Officers in the Era of the War of 1812,” *Journal of Military History* 76 (2012): 1035–51.

duty, and “suffering the rope Yarns to blaze.” Wallace’s rapid and severe punishment no doubt drove home among the ship’s company the vital lesson that carelessness with fire endangered the ship and every life on board.¹⁰⁴

Nine months earlier, in another ship of the U.S. Mediterranean squadron, carelessness with fire caused the deaths of four men and barely missed destroying the ship in a spectacular explosion. Gunner Richard Morrell in U.S. frigate *New York* found that his mate, John Staines, had left a candle burning in the gunner’s storeroom. After coming on deck and reprimanding Staines, Morrell returned to the storeroom to make sure that all was in order. When he lifted some sheepskins, sparks fell out into a bucket of damaged gunpowder. The damaged powder exploded, causing some powder horns hanging above the bucket to explode in turn. The blasts burst down the door to the Marines’ storeroom, where nearly 450 blank cartridges also exploded. In the disaster, nine men were badly burned, four, including Morrell, mortally. Midshipman Henry Wadsworth ruminated on the peril to which the entire ship’s company had been exposed:

We were in the utmost danger of blowing up as the door opening to the Magazine passage was bursted. In the Wardroom there is a scuttle for the purpose of passing up cartridges in time of action, this scuttle was lifted & another passage opened by the explosion, otherwise it is the opinion of all that we should have been lost, for the explosion would have burst the only remaining door into the filling room: here there are always an hundred or two of cartridges ready filled: This explosion would moment[arily] have been followed by the magazine & then adieu.¹⁰⁵

As the cases of Ship’s Corporal James Wallace and Gunner’s Mate John Staines illustrate, petty officers were charged with crucially important duties, and catastrophic results could follow when they failed to fulfill them responsibly. Although exercising responsibility and enjoying certain perquisites as officers, they were subject to the same physical punishment meted out to ordinary sailors. Occupying a precarious position on the lower rungs of the ship’s hierarchy, they faced repeated opportunities of offending the people, above whom they were but a little elevated, and those who stood higher on the ladder of authority.

Republican Naval Policy

The Republican administrations of Presidents Thomas Jefferson (1801–1809) and James Madison (1809–1817) established restrictive parameters within which the United States Navy performed its mission during the early years of the 19th century. Within a year of assuming the presidency, Thomas Jefferson promulgated a new set of *U.S. Navy Regulations*, dated 25 January 1802,¹⁰⁶ to replace *The Marine Rules and Regulations* established by his Federalist predecessors. The portions of the

¹⁰⁴ Extract from log book kept by Sailing Master Nathaniel Haraden, USN, on board U.S. frigate *Constitution*, 14 February 1804, *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers*, edited by Dudley W. Knox, 7 vols. (Washington: GPO, 1935–38) [hereafter cited as *Naval Documents of the Barbary Wars*] 3: 408.

¹⁰⁵ Extract from journal of Midshipman Henry Wadsworth, USN, on board USS *New York*, 12 May 1803, *ibid.*, 3: 403.

¹⁰⁶ *U.S. Navy Regulations* issued by command of President Thomas Jefferson, 25 January 1802, *ibid.*, 2: 29–40.

regulations respecting forward and petty officers represented rewording and reordering but embodied no essential changes from those of 1798. It was not new regulations but a new attitude toward the Navy that affected the experience of naval personnel under the Republican regime.

In Republican thought, public virtue depended on minimal government. Republican writers theorized that great public expenditures and a large national debt endangered civil liberty by providing irresistible temptations for political corruption. Corrupt lawmakers and officials acted not for the general good, but to advance private interests. They enacted and collected taxes that impoverished common citizens in order to enrich the moneyed few. If corruption remained unopposed, eventually the few would lord it over the people, turning the republic into an autocracy. To avoid those evil consequences, Republicans kept government small, reduced the public debt, and minimized taxes. Achieving those ends meant restricting the size of the army and Navy.

Keeping the army and Navy small accorded also with Republican belief in the use of the minimum military force required to attain specific ends. Republicans feared the consequences to liberty of an expanded military. By controlling the limits of the armed power they exercised, they believed that Americans would show that they were a people worthy of freedom.

When Thomas Jefferson took the oath of office on 4 March 1801 and assumed the Presidency, the United States was at peace. Jefferson's commitment to peace, however, competed with his aversion to the United States' participation in a system of international extortion in which the powers of Europe had participated for centuries. Jefferson longed to end the payment of tribute to the Barbary powers—Islamic countries on Africa's Mediterranean coast—to which the Federalists had agreed in treaties negotiated in the 1790s. The discontent of the bashaw of Tripoli with the amount of tribute he received from America gave Jefferson his opportunity. One of Jefferson's first acts as President was to dispatch Commodore Richard Dale with a squadron to the Mediterranean to protect American commerce and maintain the peace with the show of force. If any of the Barbary states had declared war against the United States, Jefferson ordered Dale to blockade their ports and to sink, burn, or otherwise destroy their ships. When the U.S. squadron arrived in the Mediterranean, Dale learned that the bashaw of Tripoli had declared war.

The Tripolitan war continued from 1802 to 1805, in the course of which the United States put five different commodores in command before peace was finally restored. This was not the decisive victory it is often made out to be. Tripoli's army and navy stood up to the forces of the United States for four years, and the treaty was a compromise. Although the bashaw agreed to an end to the payment of tribute by the United States, the United States paid a substantial sum to ransom the 300 U.S. sailors taken prisoner by Tripoli when the frigate *Philadelphia* ran aground on a shoal outside Tripoli harbor.

Jefferson's Federalist critics asserted that if he had sent an adequate force in the beginning, the *Philadelphia* would not have been lost and a more satisfactory treaty would have been secured in less

time. To have employed overwhelming force, however, would have contradicted Jefferson's concept of Republican virtue.

National defense policy under Jefferson and Madison shaped naval personnel practices and the experiences of the Navy's lesser officers. During periods of relative calm, the Navy could maintain only a small corps of experienced sailors. In times of crisis, the service had to recruit energetically. Mobilizing rapidly, the Navy struggled to find qualified sailors to serve as forward and petty officers.

In these conditions, some sailors were able to find permanent employment in the Navy, through periods of expansion and contraction. Reuben James, for instance, enlisted as a seaman in 1797 and retired on a pension 40 years later, having found employ variously as quartermaster, acting gunner, and boatswain's mate, with few breaks in service.¹⁰⁷ But in times of rapid expansion, especially the War of 1812, the Navy drew the vast majority of its inferior officers from the merchant marine. These men were new to the Navy's ways. A few had time and opportunity to cultivate the patronage of commissioned officers, but the majority had to prove themselves to their superiors and could expect no particular protection. It was a relatively small number of men, then, who established the traditions of the United States Navy on which later generations built.

Recruiting for the War with Tripoli

As it recruited men for the ships being ordered to the Mediterranean to fight Tripoli, the Navy had the experience of the Quasi-War on which to base appointments of forward and petty officers. Augustine Serre's service as boatswain under William Bainbridge earned him reappointment to the ship *George Washington*, and John St. John's three years as carpenter's mate in the frigate *United States*, during which he established a reputation for sobriety, won him recommendation as carpenter in the *George Washington*.¹⁰⁸ George Bills as acting boatswain during the Quasi-War had earned Captain Richard Valentine Morris's good opinion. On Morris's recommendation, Captain Edward Preble obtained a warrant for Bills, urging that "a good Boatswain is difficult to be procured, and [Bills] does not incline to go to sea without a warrant."¹⁰⁹ Lieutenant Richard Somers obtained a warrant for Charles Walker, whom he had known as a boatswain's mate in the frigate *Boston* during the hostilities with France. The men whom Lieutenant Stephen Decatur recommended for warrants as boatswain, gunner, and carpenter had all served in those posts in acting capacities and had all been highly recommended.¹¹⁰

The Navy Department understood the advantage of previous knowledge of men. The Secretary of the Navy instructed Midshipman John M. Gardner to recruit quartermasters and quarter gunners, with the standard caveat that "you had better enter them subject to the condition, that they shall be confirmed if found competent to the duties." Even so, the secretary made one exception. "Cases . . . occurring

¹⁰⁷ Reuben James to Secretary of the Navy Levi Woodbury, 10 October 1832, Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Captains, Record Group 45, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.; "James, Reuben," ZB Files, Navy Department Library, Washington, D.C.; *Naval Documents of the Barbary Wars*, 3: 424; 6: 133; 7: 28.

¹⁰⁸ Lt. John Shaw to Acting Secretary of the Navy, 7 July 1801, *Naval Documents of the Barbary Wars* 1: 504–505.

¹⁰⁹ Capt. Edward Preble to Secretary of the Navy, 20 February 1802, *ibid.*, 62–63.

¹¹⁰ Lt. Stephen Decatur to Secretary of the Navy, 21 August 1803, *ibid.*, 2: 516.

where the Individuals are personally known to you, to be qualified for the Stations, you may engage them without being subject to this condition.”¹¹¹

The available pool of warranted forward officers from the Quasi-War and of petty officers who had established credentials that recommended them for advancement to warrant offices fell well short of the needs of the Navy during the Tripolitan war. Commodore Edward Preble complained that “wages are so high in the merchant service that the best men will not ship with us,”¹¹² and Captain Alexander Murray wrote, “We find great difficulties in finding proper Persons to fill those stations, & hope those [whom I am recommending] will Answer.”¹¹³ The shortage became especially pressing in the spring of 1804, when the department put *President*, *Congress*, *Constellation*, *Essex*, and *John Adams* into commission. Carrying out the assignment to recruit for those ships in New York City, Lieutenant Isaac Chauncey reported “but little prospect at present of procuring any suitable characters for Masters, Boatswains, or Gunners.”¹¹⁴ More than a year later, Chauncey was still having difficulty discovering “any suitable Characters for a Boatswain, Gunner, or Carpenter.”¹¹⁵

A good boatswain was a rarity. Lieutenant Stephen Decatur appointed a new boatswain of the brig *Argus* in place of the man who was tending upon it in the capacity of boatswain, since the latter had been turned out of the *Constitution* for incapability and Decatur had had “a great deal of trouble with him without being able to procure the smallest service from him.”¹¹⁶ Commodore Edward Preble discharged yet another of *Constitution*’s acting boatswains for intemperance, “to do duty before the mast.”¹¹⁷ Boatswains appointed to the gunboats proved to be largely a bad lot. The boatswain of gunboat *No. 7* deserted, along with the gunner, the steward, and several seamen,¹¹⁸ and the boatswain of gunboat *No. 2* was suspected of occasioning the death of a seaman through “violent usage.”¹¹⁹

“Unsuitable characters” could be found in other ratings besides that of boatswain, of course. Commodore Richard Dale bemoaned the fact that frigate *President*’s carpenter was “good for nothing.”¹²⁰ In the 1803–1804 period alone, *Constitution* had one gunner discharged as unfit for duty, a second reduced to quarter gunner, and a third confined to quarters charged with disobedience of orders.¹²¹ At least two of *Constitution*’s quarter gunners deserted during the Tripolitan War.¹²² A court-martial convicted *Constellation*’s sailmaker of charges now lost.¹²³ A quartermaster was one of three men out of the

¹¹¹ Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith to Midn. John M. Gardner, 31 March 1804, *ibid.*, 3: 548.

¹¹² Capt. Edward Preble to Secretary of the Navy, 21 June 1803, *ibid.*, 2: 494.

¹¹³ Capt. Alexander Murray to Secretary of the Navy, 10 January 1802, *ibid.*, 2: 17.

¹¹⁴ Lt. Isaac Chauncey to Secretary of the Navy, 9 April 1804, *ibid.*, 4: 16.

¹¹⁵ Lt. Isaac Chauncey to Secretary of the Navy, 27 August 1805, *ibid.*, 5: 252.

¹¹⁶ Lt. Stephen Decatur to Secretary of the Navy, 1 August 1803, *ibid.*, 2: 502.

¹¹⁷ Diary of Capt. Edward Preble, 18 October 1803, *ibid.*, 3: 154.

¹¹⁸ Lt. Peter S. Ogilvie to Secretary of the Navy, 12 June 1805, *ibid.*, 6: 115.

¹¹⁹ Capt. John Rodgers to Secretary of the Navy, 25 December 1805, *ibid.*, 6: 327.

¹²⁰ Capt. Richard Dale to Secretary of the Navy, 13 December 1801, *ibid.*, 1: 635.

¹²¹ Payroll of U.S. Frigate *Constitution*, 1803–1804, *ibid.*, 5: 61–71; Log book kept by Sailing Master Nathaniel Haraden, USS *Constitution*, 17 October 1804, *ibid.*, 5: 92.

¹²² Payroll of U.S. Frigate *Constitution*, 1803–1804, *ibid.*, 5: 61–71; Logbook of USS *Constitution*, 13 June 1805, *ibid.* 6: 118.

¹²³ Capt. John Rodgers to Master Commandant Charles Stewart, 22 August 1805, *ibid.*, 6: 245.

captured 309 seamen and officers of *Philadelphia* who “turned Turk” to escape the hardships of imprisonment in Tripoli.¹²⁴

Still, the Navy recruited many worthy men to serve as petty and forward officers, including some excellent boatswains. Boatswain’s Mate John McFate, appointed acting boatswain in *Constitution* on 25 April 1805 to replace another one found incompetent, received his warrant on 2 January 1806. Master Commandant John Dent believed McFate to be one of the Navy’s best and requested him for his command. “I should feel gratified,” he wrote the secretary, “by your exchangeing [sic] him for Mr. Berry the one now on board—Mr. Berry I believe to possess every qualification but that of Commanding which is absolutely necessary on board a Vessel of War—and the service on which we are going makes it proper if not necessary to have the best Officers of the kind our Navy possesses.”¹²⁵ The Navy managed to engage admirable boatswains even for some of the generally despised gunboats. For instance, Boatswain Evan Jenkyns, of *No. 6* proved his mettle while in the Mediterranean by proposing stout resistance to a British boarding party in search of British sailors to press. Jenkyns implored the midshipman in temporary command, “he hoped he would not suffer the Men to go and said if he was in his place he would not. There were plenty of Boarding Pikes and Cutlasses at hand and could have Kept the boat off with ease.”¹²⁶ Because of gallant conduct in the attack on Tripoli harbor of 27 August 1804, Gunner’s Mate Edmund P. Kennedy earned a midshipman’s warrant.¹²⁷ “It is with regret I have to inform you of the loss of No. 8 [i.e., 9], which was blown up by a hot shot from the enemy,” Captain Stephen Decatur, wrote in his report of the action.

After the smoke cleared off, I found all abaft the mast was under water; the gun and bow being the only part out. Mr. [Robert] Spence, midshipman, was the officer superintending the gun, who, at the time of the explosion, was in the act of loading her: after which accident, he, and the brave fellows left, completed the loading of the gun before she sunk, and then swam to the nearest boat, where they assisted during the engagement.

Conspicuous among those firing the final shot as the gunboat sank below the waves was the gun’s captain, Edmund P. Kennedy. Kennedy eventually rose to captain, the highest naval rank attainable in his lifetime.

Having returned to the United States at the end of the war with Tripoli, Captain William Bainbridge evaluated the frigate *Philadelphia*’s forward officers for the Secretary of the Navy. These were men who, like Bainbridge, had endured 19 months of imprisonment in Tripoli.

G. Hodge Boatswain—has been in the service from the commencement of it, and is a good Officer in his station—should there be a vacant birth in the Navy Yard for him—it would be some recompense for his long services

¹²⁴ Capt. William Bainbridge to Secretary of the Navy, 4 February 1805, *ibid.*, 5: 328.

¹²⁵ Master Commandant John Dent to Secretary of the Navy, 18 March 1806, *ibid.*, 6: 394–95.

¹²⁶ Depositions regarding British impressments of men from Gunboat *No. 6*, *ibid.*, 6: 113–14.

¹²⁷ Note, *ibid.*, 4: 299.

R. Stephenson Gunner—knows the duties of his office but is too inactive

Wm. Godby Carpenter—the best I ever had

Joseph Douglass Sail Maker—a very decent good Officer¹²⁸

The Navy's commanding officers recognized the importance of having on record the strengths and weaknesses they had witnessed in the naval service's lesser officers.

The Difficult Status of Petty Officer

Whatever their competence, petty officers occupied awkward positions in a warship's hierarchy, for they were totally identified with neither the officers nor the people.

The rules William Bainbridge established for the frigate *Philadelphia*, which were no doubt typical of those in use throughout the Navy, set petty officers apart from the common enlisted men and boys. Petty officers messed with other petty officers. Unlike common seamen, they enjoyed the privilege of keeping sea chests on board. They were responsible for seeing that men belonging to their divisions did not carry excess clothing ashore (to preclude the selling of clothing for money to buy drink), and they were supposed to see that the men kept their mess utensils clean. Like commissioned and warrant officers, petty officers were expected "to exact on all occasions of duty . . . the most ready, unequivocal and respectable compliance with their orders." Captains of the forecastle, tops, afterguard, and waist had "command over the men of those Stations."¹²⁹

Seamen could resent authority exercised by petty officers and shun those whom they suspected of being informers—the latter situation being especially applicable to a ship's corporal, who assisted the master-at-arms in monitoring the men's conduct.¹³⁰

During the war with Tripoli at least, one other benefit set the forward and petty officers apart from the common seamen, as it did from all the commissioned officers but one. This was the privilege they shared with the commodore alone of bringing their wives with them. Richard V. Morris's flagship, the frigate *Chesapeake*, had the wives of at least five lesser officers on board, those of the boatswain, gunner, carpenter, ship's corporal, and captain of the forecastle (see "Ladies of the Bay" below). Commodore Morris also brought his wife along. She was pregnant and gave birth while in the Mediterranean. It may have been that, knowing Mrs. Morris would find comfort having other women on board ship, Commodore Morris encouraged his petty officers to bring their wives. When USS *Philadelphia* ran aground on an uncharted shoal and its 309 officers and men fell prisoner to the bashaw of Tripoli, no women were taken prisoner with them. Yet, *Chesapeake* was not the sole U.S. warship to carry petty

¹²⁸ Capt. William Bainbridge to Secretary of the Navy, 23 September 1805, *ibid.*, 6: 285–86.

¹²⁹ Internal rules and regulations for U.S. frigate *Philadelphia*, by Capt. William Bainbridge, *Naval Documents of the Barbary Wars* 3: 32–41, rules nos. 22, 31, 52, and 53, where this document is misidentified as for U.S. frigate *Constitution*, by Capt. Edward Preble. For the correct identification, see Christopher McKee, *Edward Preble: A Naval Biography 1761–1807* (Annapolis, MD: NIP, 1972), 369.

¹³⁰ For the parallel situation in the British Navy, see Brian Lavery, *Nelson's Navy: The Ships, Men, and Organisation 1793–1815* (Annapolis, MD: NIP, 1989), 137.

and warrant officers' wives during the war with Tripoli. The wife of Boatswain John Newton Cannon, for instance, followed him from New York into *Constitution* in 1803, and Nancy, the 19-year-old wife of John Staines, the gunner's mate whose carelessness led to the deadly explosion in *New York*, died in the ship of a uterine infection.¹³¹

* * *

“Ladies of the Bay”

Extract from the journal of Midshipman Henry Wadsworth in USS *Chesapeake*, 1803:

On the 22d. Febry. it being the day after we left Algiers: Mrs. Low (wife to James Low Captain of the Forecastle) bore a Son, in the Boatswain's Store Room: on the 31st. inst. [March].—the babe was baptiz'd in the Midshipmen's apartment: The Contriver of this business was Melancthon Taylor Woolsey a Mid: who stood Godfather on the occasion & provided a handsome collation of Wine & Fruit: Mrs. Low being unwell Mrs. Hays the Gunner's Lady officiated: Divine Service by Rev. Alex McFarlan. The Child's name Melancthon Woolsey Low:— All was conducted with due decorum & decency no doubt to the great satisfaction of the parents, as Mr. Woolsey's attention to them must in some measure have ameliorated the unhappy situation of the Lady who was so unfortunate as to conceive & bare, on the Salt Sea. NB. The other Ladies of the Bay—The Forward Most part of the Birth Deck—viz. Mrs. Watson: the Boatswain's Wife, Mrs. Myres the Carpenter's Lady—with Mrs. Crosby the corporal's Lady: got drunk in their own Quarters out of pure spite—not being invited to celebrate the Christening of Melancthon Woolsey Low.¹³²

* * *

A petty officer held no other warrant than his appointment by the commanding officer, and superior officers viewed him not so much as a fellow officer but as part of the people, especially when it came to administering discipline. In some cases, youth contributed to this perception. After all, the sailors exercising command over the constrained domain of a fighting top could be remarkably young. John Suggs, “a lad of 16 years,” and “a very smart active youth,” was captain of the mizzentop in the frigate *Essex* in October 1801, when he died from a fall from the crossjack yard.¹³³

Nor did commissioned officers have high opinions of the good sense of petty officers as a class. After the crew of *Philadelphia* had been captured and held as prisoners in Tripoli, Commodore Edward Preble addressed a letter to the frigate's warrant and petty officers, seamen, and Marines, reminding them that they were prisoners, not slaves, and warning them that if they voluntarily worked for the enemy, they

¹³¹ J. Worth Estes, *Naval Surgeon: Life and Death at Sea in the Age of Sail* (Canton, MA: Science History Publications/USA, 1998), 118, 145–46.

¹³² Journal of Midshipman Henry Wadsworth, on board USS *Chesapeake*, entry for 2 April 1803, *Naval Documents of the Barbary Wars*, 2: 387.

¹³³ Extracts from journal of U.S. frigate *Essex*, Capt. William Bainbridge, 5 October 1801, *ibid.*, 1: 595.

would be guilty of treason.¹³⁴ In explaining to Captain William Bainbridge the list of addressees of this letter, Preble wrote, “I did not think it necessary to say anything to the Commissioned Officers, nor do I suppose that it is to any of the Warrant excepting some of the Mechanics.”¹³⁵ In other words, Preble believed that gentlemen officers would understand their rights and responsibilities as prisoners of war, but carpenters, sailmakers, and lesser officers—men who worked with their hands—had to be told their duty.

That they wore no uniform made petty officers seem more a part of the people than of the officers. In appearance, petty officers were undifferentiated from the common seamen. Not even the forward officers had prescribed uniforms, a situation Lieutenant Charles Stewart found unwise. A uniform, he asserted, “would add much to the respectability of thier [sic] stations, they now assume fancy dresse’s & some interfere with the uniform established for other Officer’s, while others pay no respect to thier [sic] dress & often make an appearance unworthy of men holding a Warrant in the Navy of the United States.”¹³⁶

Their lower level of literacy further separated petty officers from the warrant and commissioned officers. All commissioned and warrant officers were literate; many petty officers could not even sign their names. During the War of 1812, of 52 petty officers in *Constitution* for whom such data is available, only 29 (56 percent) could sign their name.¹³⁷ During the same war, petty officers on the Great Lakes were as likely to be illiterate as were the seamen. All 87 crew members of U.S. brig *Oneida*—officers, petty officers, seamen, and Marines—signed a document relinquishing claims to trunks of clothing belonging to a lady in a schooner captured on Lake Ontario. Thirty-seven, better than a third, could not sign their names, but indicated their agreement by marking an “X.” Out of 11 petty officers, 4—boatswain’s mate, coxswain, quartermaster, and cook—again better than a third, were among those who signed with an “X.”¹³⁸

Petty officers struggled to please many masters. James Wallace, for instance, may have sought to win favor by fumigating an officer’s cabin without having been first ordered to do so. Instead, he won 324 welts on his back.¹³⁹

A confrontation between the purser’s steward and the assistant surgeon in U.S. brig *Vixen* illustrates some of the difficulties petty officers faced in their relations with officers of superior grade. On the evening of 4 November 1804, as *Vixen* lay anchored in the harbor of Messina, Sicily, Steward Hezekiah Loomis went into the wardroom to get candles for the captain. By recent alterations, the

¹³⁴ Capt. Edward Preble to the Warrant and Petty officers, Seamen and Marines of the late U.S. frigate *Philadelphia*, 7 January 1804, *ibid.*, 3: 312.

¹³⁵ Capt. Edward Preble to Capt. William Bainbridge, 16 January 1804, *ibid.*, 3: 334.

¹³⁶ Lt. Charles Stewart to Secretary of the Navy, 8 July 1803, *ibid.*, 2: 470.

¹³⁷ Matthew Brenckle and Lauren McCormack, “‘A Yankee Ship and a Yankee Crew’: The Lives and Experience of USS *Constitution*’s War of 1812 Crew,” paper delivered at the 2007 Naval History Symposium, Annapolis, Md., 22 September 2007.

¹³⁸ Officers Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy Below the Rank of Commander, Vol. 20. Record Group 45, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

¹³⁹ Thirty-six strokes with nine knotted rope ends amounts to 324 stripes.

scuttle granting access to the spirit room, where the candles were stored, was in the apartment shared by the assistant surgeon and two of the lieutenants. When Loomis went to open the spirit room scuttle, the assistant surgeon, Dr. Michael Graham, objected and the following words were exchanged:

Graham: What business have you to take that scuttle up?

Loomis: I wish to go into the spirit room, sir.

Graham: Well, that scuttle is not to come up. I have particular orders against it.

Loomis: I have orders, sir, to go into the spirit room, sir.

Graham: Very well, take up the other hatch.

Loomis: It will not come up.

Graham: What is the reason, has not the carpenter fitted it?

Loomis: I cannot tell, I did not see him do it.

Graham: Well, this scuttle is not to come up.

At this point, Purser Clement S. Hunt, Loomis's immediate superior, intervened. Asked what the trouble was, Graham stated that the captain had given orders that the apartment was not to be disturbed by the scuttle. Hunt replied that the spirit room was his responsibility and access to it was not to be stopped by Graham's orders. Throughout, Loomis treated the assistant surgeon with due respect, employing the required "Sir," repeatedly. He reserved his opinion of the man for his private journal, where he concluded his account of the episode with this observation, "then having done my errand I went on deck leaving the Doctor like a monkey handling that which was not his business."¹⁴⁰

In order to do his job, a steward had to have the cooperation not just of superior officers, but of fellow petty officers as well. Obtaining that cooperation was not always easy, as another encounter of Steward Loomis, also in November 1804, illustrates. Required to open two new barrels of flour and one each of beef and pork, Loomis requested one of the boatswain's mates to rig up a tackle and then asked the cooper to strike the barrels from the fore hold. Both men readily complied. However, with the barrel marked "pork" turning out actually to be of beef, the cooper balked at getting up yet another barrel. According to Loomis, the cooper "said he could not get at any and that it was my damned carelessness not marking them right. I told him that I must have the business done at once as it was late." The cooper finally got up the additional barrel "after great disputing."¹⁴¹ The contrast between the punctilious courtesy in the encounter between steward and assistant surgeon and the cursing and arguing in the encounter between petty officers measures the distance between the status of the disputants.

¹⁴⁰ Extract from journal of Hezekiah Loomis, Steward, U.S. Navy, in U.S. brig *Vixen*, 4 November 1804, *Naval Documents of the Barbary Wars* 5: 121–22.

¹⁴¹ Extract from journal of Hezekiah Loomis, Steward, U.S. Navy, in U.S. brig *Vixen*, 18 November 1804, *ibid.*, 5: 150.

Steward Loomis needed his superior to resolve his dispute with the assistant surgeon. In the absence of Purser Hunt's intervention, Loomis, in obeying orders to get candles for the captain, could easily have exposed himself to charges of contempt of Dr. Graham. Inferior naval officers, such as Steward Loomis, relied largely for their well-being on good relations with their superiors. They therefore had reason to cultivate positive associations with specific officers who could act as their patrons.

A letter from a purser's steward from later in the century suggests some of the dimensions of patronage between officers and men. Dating his letter "U.S. Ship Decatur, Porto Praya, Cape Verde Islands, November 22, 1848," Purser's Steward John S. Meginnes wrote to Lieutenant Commandant William McBlair to explain his reasons for leaving his position in the *Allegheny*, an iron-hulled steam gunboat. Meginnes had joined the ship when McBlair was executive officer, and McBlair had made certain promises regarding Meginnes's duties. "On Mr. Reynolds taking charge of the Executive Dept of the ship," however, Meginnes wrote, "Every thing went the opposite of right." For instance, "The desk you gave me to do my writing on he ordered broken up, and said I should write in the Masters Room. You know the locality, but you were never in it when the ship was under a full head of steam. Sperm candles would melt in the horn lanterns." Unable to bear his new working conditions, Meginnes asked leave to go ashore at New Orleans. He remained ashore for two weeks, and then, unable to pay his room and board bill, arranged that his landlord turn him in as a deserter and pocket the reward. Returning to *Allegheny*, Meginnes found, much to his surprise, that Lieutenant William Reynolds was no longer *Allegheny's* executive officer, but had become the commanding officer. Reynolds ordered that Meginnes be given 12 lashes and then be discharged. At the time he wrote to McBlair, Meginnes was serving in sloop-of-war *Decatur*. On arriving in Porto Praya, he found in the harbor there the U.S. store ship *Erie*, with McBlair in command. Meginnes sent his narrative to McBlair, for, as he explained, "You haveing [sic] always acted towards me as a gentleman, and placed confidence in me while you were on board of the Alleghany, I do not wish to loose [sic] your good opinion."¹⁴² An unsympathetic officer could make existence as hot as hell, as Reynolds literally did for Meginnes. Hoping to continue his naval career, Meginnes nurtured his association with McBlair.

* * *

A Tale of Two Quartermasters

On 2 April 1803, during the war with Tripoli, two men shipped as seamen in U.S. schooner *Enterprise* and in time both would be promoted quartermasters. One would save Stephen Decatur's life. The other would loyally serve Decatur until the commodore's death nearly two decades later. The deed of the former would be remembered, but be attributed to the latter, and the latter the Navy would memorialize in a ship whose name would go down in history.

On 3 August 1804, the U.S. Navy's Mediterranean squadron under Commodore Edward

¹⁴² John S. Meginnes to Lieutenant Commandant William McBlair, 22 November 1848, Papers of Commander William McBlair, Personal Records Collection, Operational Archives Branch, NHHC, Washington, DC.

Preble entered Tripoli harbor to bombard the city and to attack the city's shipping. Lieutenant Stephen Decatur, in gunboat *No. 4* and in command of a division of the attacking squadron's gunboats, led his men in boarding an enemy gunboat. When Decatur fell to the deck while grappling with a gigantic opponent, another Tripolitan raised his scimitar to kill him. One of Decatur's men, wounded in both arms, interposed his head and received a nasty scalp wound.¹⁴³

Because of his known connection with Decatur, many assumed that Reuben James was the sailor who endangered himself to save Decatur. In his 1846 biography of Decatur, U.S. Navy Captain Alexander Slidell MacKenzie named Reuben James as the hero, and in 1865, Commodore Charles Stewart, who was with Decatur in the Tripolitan war, confirmed the identity, embellishing the account with the assertion that James, thrusting out his arm to save Decatur, had had it severed by the scimitar.¹⁴⁴

This identification of Decatur's rescuer did not go undisputed. In a footnote to his biography of Decatur, MacKenzie acknowledged that his identification of Reuben James as the man was uncertain and that some said that Decatur's savior was Daniel Frazier.¹⁴⁵ In fact, *The Naval Chronicle* of 1824, published by Chief Clerk of the Navy Charles Goldsborough, stated that it was Daniel Frazier who intercepted with his own head a blow directed at Decatur.¹⁴⁶

In the sailing Navy, seamen often developed an attachment to a particular officer and followed their favorite commander from ship to ship. This was the case with Reuben James, who served with Decatur in the Tripolitan war, in the War of 1812, and in the Algerian war in 1815. Born about 1776 in Delaware, James entered the Navy during the Quasi-War with France and served under Thomas Truxtun in the frigate *Constellation*, participating in the famous engagements with *L'Insurgente* and *La Vengeance*. He went to the Mediterranean in U.S. frigate *President* on the eve of the war with Tripoli, transferred to *Chesapeake*, and from thence to *Enterprise*. In November 1803, Stephen Decatur took command of that schooner. In February 1804, James was a member of the band of volunteers who, led by Decatur, burned the captured *Philadelphia* in Tripoli Harbor. The following June, Decatur promoted James to quartermaster. Back in the United States after the Tripolitan war, James served in gunboats and, on Christmas Day 1810, he returned to service under Decatur when he appeared on board the frigate *United States* in the capacity of quarter gunner. He remained under Decatur's command throughout the War of 1812, participating in the capture of HM frigate *Macedonian* and transferring with Decatur into the frigate *President*, was wounded in the fight with

¹⁴³ No contemporary records document this story, but this is the generally accepted account of what happened.

¹⁴⁴ Alexander Slidell MacKenzie, *Life of Stephen Decatur, A Commodore in the Navy of the United States* (Boston: Little Brown, 1846), 92; Edward S. Ellis, "Old Ironsides," *The Chatauquan* 27 (April–September 1898), 415.

¹⁴⁵ MacKenzie, *Life of Stephen Decatur*, 92–93.

¹⁴⁶ Charles W. Goldsborough, *The United States' Naval Chronicle* 1 (Washington, DC: James Wilson, 1824), 223.

HMS *Endymion*, and was taken prisoner along with his commander. With the end of the war with the United Kingdom, James followed Decatur into U.S. frigate *Guerrière* and returned with him to the Mediterranean, this time to dictate peace to the dey of Algiers. James continued his naval service after Decatur's death in 1820, rising in the 1820s to the rate of boatswain's mate while fighting West Indian pirates. In 1832, no longer hearty enough for sea duty, he applied, without success, for a post as boatswain in ordinary, on the basis of 35 years of faithful service, "during which time," he calculated, "I have been but 9 months off pay." In 1836, after surgeons at the naval hospital in Washington, D.C., had amputated an infected leg, he received a pension as boatswain's mate in recognition of "long, faithful, and gallant service." He died in the naval hospital on 3 December 1838.¹⁴⁷

James North, of Baltimore, Maryland, joined the Navy soon after the outbreak of war with Tripoli. For a reason now unknown, upon joining the service he changed his name to Daniel Frazier. It frequently happened that a naval recruit would enlist under an assumed name, perhaps to avoid creditors, flee the wrath of a wronged lover, or escape obligations as a crewman of a merchant ship whose master he found uncongenial. In any event, James North enlisted in the Navy as Daniel Frazier. Frazier transferred from the frigate *Chesapeake* to the schooner *Enterprise* on the very day in April 1803 that Reuben James did the same. In August 1804, by which time Frazier, like James, was a quartermaster, he was wounded in hand-to-hand fighting in Tripoli harbor. On 20 September, he transferred to *John Adams* and from that frigate to *Congress* a few weeks later. Frazier detached on 5 December 1805 after *Congress* returned to the United States and was moored at the Washington Navy Yard. On the basis of his battle-caused disabilities he was rewarded a pension to commence 7 December. Although his disabilities continued until his death, he left his pension to accrue, intending to use it to support himself in his old age. He lived another 27 years, dying on 23 April 1833, never having collected his pension.¹⁴⁸

Historians now agree that it was Daniel Frazier, not Reuben James, who took the blow of the Tripolitan scimitar, saving Stephen Decatur's life.¹⁴⁹ The decisive proof that Frazier deserves the credit is contained in two surgeon's reports. The first, describing injuries sustained by the crew on the day of the bloody encounter in Tripoli harbor, is found in the papers of Edward Preble and held in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress. Surgeon Lewis Heerman's report written immediately after the battle lists three men slightly wounded on board gunboat *No. 4*, including Decatur, and one more seriously. The latter casualty was Daniel Fraser, who had sustained "two incised wounds

¹⁴⁷ Reuben James to Secretary of the Navy Levi Woodbury, 10 October 1832, Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Captains, Record Group 45, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC; "James, Reuben," ZB Files, Navy Department Library, Washington, DC; *Naval Documents of the Barbary Wars* 3: 424; 6: 133; 7: 28.

¹⁴⁸ "Frazier, Daniel," ZB Files, Navy Department Library, Washington, DC.

¹⁴⁹ Gardner W. Allen, *Our Navy and the Barbary Corsairs* (1905; reprint ed., Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965), 191–92; Charles Lee Lewis, "Reuben James or Daniel Frazier?" *Maryland Historical Magazine* 19 (March 1924), 1: 30–37.

on the head, one of them severe; one bad wound across the wrist & seven slightly about his hands.” Before Frazier left the Mediterranean for the United States and discharge from the Navy, Heerman signed a certificate stating,

that Daniel Frazier, Seaman on board the USS Schooner Enterprise, Stephen Decatur, junr, esq., was wounded on gunboat No. 4 in the action against Tripoli on the third of August eighteen hundred and four and that in consequence of wounds the middle finger of his left hand was rendered entirely useless and the wrist of the right hand disabled in such a manner as to preclude him from doing the duty of a sailor with facility.

With Heerman’s certificate, now in Frazier’s pension file at the National Archives in Washington, DC, are two supporting documents, both by Decatur. The one certifies that Daniel Frazier was on board *Enterprise* under Decatur’s command in the capacity of quartermaster, participated in the capture of two gunboats, and was entitled to share in any prize money that might accrue from their capture. The other states, “I do hereby certify that the wound of Daniel Frazier, Seaman, as Specified by Lewis Heerman Surgeon was received on board Gunboat #4 under my command on the 3rd August 1804 off Tripoli.” From all accounts it appears that Reuben James, on the other hand, emerged from the battle that historic day unscathed.¹⁵⁰

Reuben James is the name the Navy chose to christen DD-245, a *Clemson*-class destroyer it launched at Camden, New Jersey, on 24 September 1920. In March 1941, before formal entry of the United States into World War II, *Reuben James* joined the escort force established to convoy vessels transporting war materials to Great Britain. On 31 October, while escorting a convoy out of Argentia, Newfoundland, it was torpedoed by a German submarine. Its magazines exploded and it sank quickly, taking with it 115 of its crew of 159. Because Seaman Reuben James established a long-term attachment to his commander, it was his name that became linked to the memory of the heroic rescue in Tripoli harbor, and it is *Reuben James*, not *Daniel Frazier*, that is remembered as the first U.S. Navy ship sunk by hostile action in World War II.¹⁵¹

The contrast between the fates of the two seamen illustrates the importance of the patron and follower relationship between commissioned and petty officers.

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¹⁵⁰ “Frazier, Daniel,” ZB Files, Navy Department Library, Washington, DC.

¹⁵¹ *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, Vol. VI, (Naval History Division, Department of the Navy: Washington, DC, 1976), 85, s.v. *Reuben James*.

The Gunboat Navy, 1807–1812

In his annual messages to Congress following the close of the war with Tripoli, President Jefferson recommended increasing the number of gunboats in the fleet, as part of a balanced naval force of ocean-going warships and smaller vessels for the defense of ports. Two years after the end of the war, however, the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair reinforced Jefferson's belief in the dangers of possessing a large, seagoing navy. The frigate *Chesapeake*'s violent peacetime encounter with a foreign warship nearly drew the United States into an unwanted war. On 22 June 1807, HMS *Leopard* intercepted *Chesapeake* as the American frigate departed Chesapeake Bay and boarded her to search for Royal Navy deserters. When Commodore James Barron refused to muster his men for inspection by British naval officers, *Leopard* fired into *Chesapeake*, killing or maiming 20 sailors. After Barron struck his colors, the British seized four sailors identified as deserters. The national affront outraged the American populace, and only Jefferson's measured response averted an immediate war with the United Kingdom.

In the aftermath of the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair, Congress passed and the President signed the Embargo Act, which remained in place from December 1807 through February 1809 and forbade the export of American produce to Britain and France. Jefferson and his party hoped to accomplish two goals with this extreme measure. First, keeping American ships off the high seas avoided any clashes on those seas that could provoke war; and second, deprived of American foodstuffs, Britain and France might be starved into conceding American rights as neutral traders. Thus, instead of deploying the Navy in the defense of American commerce on the world's oceans, Jefferson turned traditional political wisdom on its head by employing the Navy to keep American commerce off those oceans. In a parallel move, Jefferson eschewed enlarging the nation's seagoing force and instead embraced small gunboats, each mounting only one or two deck guns, even more warmly than earlier as a frugal means of strengthening the defenses of America's bays and harbors.

One potential effect of the administration's decision to rely primarily on gunboats for naval defense was an explosive growth in the demand for forward and petty officers. Whereas in December 1807 the Navy employed 30 forward officers and 188 petty officers in actual service, the department's estimates for 1808 called for 220 forward officers and 838 petty officers. Each of 69 new gunboats required a boatswain, gunner, master's mate, quartermaster, quarter gunner, steward, and cook.¹⁵² The department was considering the construction of an additional 188 gunboats, which, if manned, would require 376 forward and 940 petty officers more.¹⁵³ In the event, this notional high personnel demand was not acted upon before the War of 1812. By June 1809, of 176 gunboats that had been built since 1804, 151 were in ordinary or on the stocks in 15 different ports, and 1 had been lost at sea. Only the 24 gunboats at New Orleans were in active service, and orders had been issued to reduce their crews

¹⁵² "Statement of the number of officers and men, respectively, belonging to the Navy of the United States," and "Estimate of the number of officers and men (exclusive of marines) which would be necessary to complete the manning of the whole and entire Navy of the United States, including the gunboats," enclosed in Robert Smith to the House of Representatives, 10 December 1807, in U.S. Congress, *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, 1: 171–72.

¹⁵³ "Statement exhibiting the number and condition of the Frigates and other vessels of war of the United States," enclosed in Robert Smith to Thomas Blount, Chairman of a Committee of Congress, 16 November 1807, *ibid.*, 1: 169.

to the minimum required to navigate safely.¹⁵⁴ The manning of the gunboats remained little changed until the beginning of the War of 1812.

As a result of Republican frugality, when President Madison asked Congress to declare war against the United Kingdom in June of 1812, the United States had in commission only 15 warships suitable for keeping the seas. The largest American warships were 44-gun frigates. At the same time, the enemy boasted the most powerful fleet afloat, consisting of some 600 warships, including first-rate ships of the line, each mounting 100 or more guns. Following the declaration of war, the U.S. Navy grew swiftly, in ships and guns, and in sailors to man and fight them.

* * *

A Petty Officer's Heroism in the Gunboat Navy

Thomas B. Parsons, of Portland, Maine, was mate of *Charles* in the autumn of 1807, when, on account of the Embargo Act, the merchantman was laid up at New Orleans and the officers and crew were dismissed. Needing employment, Parsons signed on gunboat *No. 11*, "with a promise and understanding that he should have the office of quartermaster." The erstwhile mate found himself being transferred from boat to boat until he was made coxswain to Acting Lieutenant Thomas ap Catesby Jones in *No. 22*. In July 1808, while entering the Sabine River in pursuit of smugglers defying the Embargo, the gunboat grounded on a bar, filled with water, and capsized. With the crew clinging to the bottom of the boat, the only means of escape appeared to be swimming the nearly two miles to shore. This Sailing Master Brown and Parsons attempted, Brown reaching safely only with Parson's help.

After resting a few minutes, Parsons returned again to the boat and took Lieutenant Jones (who could not swim) upon his back, and bore him safely to the shore. Parsons then returned a second time to the boat and by his exertions got the boat and men, who were still holding upon it, to the shore. Thus Parsons . . . almost miraculously saved the lives of Brown, Jones and five seamen.

By these exertions, Parsons sustained a rupture, and, no longer able to perform the duties of coxswain, became quartermaster once more. But, as his injury worsened, disabling him from doing duty, he was discharged in November. The rules then in force restricted pension awards to sailors disabled in combat, and so Parsons received none. He recovered well enough by the War of 1812 to serve in privateers, but later his ailments again forced him to leave the sea. A quarter century after his heroics, Parsons renewed his request for a pension, and Thomas ap Catesby Jones, now Commodore

¹⁵⁴ "Exhibit showing 'the situation in which the Gunboats are now placed,' 'the number laid up,' 'the number in actual service,' and 'where stationed,'" enclosed in Paul Hamilton to Joseph Anderson, Chairman of a Committee of the Senate, 6 June 1809, *ibid.*, 1: 195.

Jones, confirmed Parsons' account of the "extraordinary and miraculously successful exertions in rescuing Sailingmaster Brown, (in the act of drowning,) and myself and others, from the perilous situation in which we were."¹⁵⁵

In a strange twist of history, Parsons and Thomas ap Catesby Jones would make parallel contributions to American victory at the battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812. Parsons was sailing master in the privateer *General Armstrong* commanded by Samuel Chester Reid. The privateer's crew stoutly fought off attacks by boats of a British fleet in the port of Fayal in the Azores during the night of 26–27 September 1814. In the morning, Reid scuttled *General Armstrong* to prevent its capture. The heavy casualties the British suffered in this encounter delayed their passage to the Gulf of Mexico to take part in the planned attack on New Orleans. On 13 December 1814, Thomas ap Catesby Jones commanded a flotilla of gunboats ordered to oppose the British fleet's passage through Lake Borgne on their way to New Orleans. Like Reid, Jones sacrificed his command, but gained time for the defenders of New Orleans to make the preparations that led to victory.

* * *

The War of 1812

During the War of 1812, the Navy's rolls expanded tenfold, from about 1,000 officers and men when the United States declared war in June 1812, to 10,600 in October 1814, two months before the end of the war.¹⁵⁶ In February 1815, shortly before the Senate ratified the treaty of peace ending the war, the Department of the Navy submitted estimates for expenses for 1815. According to the department, the naval service would require 15,200 men, assuming the war was to continue. Of these, there were to be some 1,600 petty and 530 forward officers.¹⁵⁷

Finding a sufficient number of sailors qualified to serve as petty and forward officers proved even more difficult during the War of 1812 than it did during the Quasi-War and Tripolitan conflict, given that the number required in the War of 1812 was so much larger than the number needed in the earlier conflicts. The increasingly effective British blockade of the American coast aided the U.S. Navy's recruiting efforts, since, by driving American merchant shipping from the ocean, the blockade put America's sailors out of work. Still, in 1814 Secretary of the Navy William Jones calculated that, given that enlistment was voluntary, the Navy could not recruit beyond 12,000 men, including officers,

¹⁵⁵ "On Claim of Thomas B. Parsons, a Seaman in the Navy, for Arrears and Increase of Pension on Account of Personal Injuries Sustained by Extraordinary Exertions in Saving the Lives of Two Officers and Five Seamen," communicated to the House of Representatives 27 April 1836, *ibid.*, 4: 951–53.

¹⁵⁶ William Jones to James Madison, 26 October 1814, in Michael J. Crawford, et al., eds., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, Vol. 3, 1814–1815, *Chesapeake Bay, Northern Lakes, and Pacific Ocean*, 631–36.

¹⁵⁷ Explanations of the Estimates for the Support of the Navy and Marine Corps, for the Year 1815, 13th cong., 3d sess., *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, 1: 363–64.

commissioned and warrant, seamen, able and ordinary, and boys. He enumerated several factors that diminished “our stock of seamen” available to the Navy:

- casualties of war
- diseases incident to the sea service
- capture and imprisonment by the enemy
- enlistments in the army
- opportunities seamen had for employment in manufacturing
- preference of many seamen to wait out the war in farming their small fields
- preference of many seamen for privateering and its temptations of prize money¹⁵⁸

In making his estimates for 1815, Jones’s successor in the secretary’s office, Benjamin Crowninshield, noted that it had proved “impractical to procure boatswain’s, gunners, carpenters, sailmakers, and master’s mates, possessing the requisite qualifications, particularly for the service on the ocean and the lakes, for the compensation of twenty dollars per month, heretofore allowed.” Crowninshield proposed enhancing the incentive to such men to enlist by increasing the pay to \$25 a month.¹⁵⁹

Navy registers contain the names of 115 men who served as forward officers during the War of 1812.¹⁶⁰ Of these, 77 (two thirds) held warrants and 38 (one third) served under acting appointments. In actuality, more than 38 served in an acting capacity, but some of their names did not make it into the registers. Of the 77 who held warrants, 40, slightly more than half, received them before the war. Thus, despite the tenfold increase of the Navy’s personnel, the number of forward officers holding warrants did not even double during the war. Commanding officers understood the implications that the paucity of warranted forward officers had for manning. Preparing 20-gun sloop-of-war *Peacock* for a cruise in September 1813, Master Commandant Lewis Warrington wrote to the Secretary of the Navy:

As we shall soon want a Carpenter, and as I cannot expect a warranted one, (there being so few) I should like much to have your approbation to engage one who is strongly recommended and whose brother is Carpenter of the United States and is in high estimation there for his qualifications.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁸ William Jones to James Madison, 26 Oct. 1814, in Michael J. Crawford, et al., eds., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, Vol. 3, 1814–1815, 632.

¹⁵⁹ Explanations of the Estimates for the Support of the Navy and Marine Corps, for the Year 1815, 13th cong., 3d sess., *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, 1: 363.

¹⁶⁰ Names, Rank, Pay, and Rations, of the Officers of the Navy and Marine Corps, 4 Feb. 1812, *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, 1: 258–59; A register of the commissioned and warrant officers of the United States’ navy, 7 December 1815, *ibid.*, 1: 372.

¹⁶¹ Master Commandant Lewis Warrington to Secretary of the Navy William Jones, 6 September 1813, in William S. Dudley, et al., eds., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, Vol. 2, 1813 (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1992), 226.

Conservatism in the issuance of warrants during the war was probably wise policy, for it meant that the Navy was able to return to a peacetime basis without an excess of warrant officers on its rolls.

Four of the forward officers of the War of 1812 had held their warrants since the time of the Quasi-War, and another ten had held theirs long enough to have seen service in the war with Tripoli. These men constituted a small core of veterans who brought their past experiences into the new conflict. Some of the forward officers of the War of 1812 would remain in naval service well into the future, carrying their experience of that war with them. Six of them would still be on the Navy's rolls into the 1820s, four into the 1830s, and one, John Adams, warranted boatswain in 1803, would serve until his death in 1840. In addition, several sailors who saw service in the War of 1812 as seamen and petty officers would procure warrants later on and serve among the Navy's warrant officers during the antebellum era. The cohort of forward officers serving in 1836 illustrates this phenomenon. Robert H. O'Neal entered the Navy as a seaman in 1812 and secured his warrant as boatswain in 1831. Asa Curtis, who served as a seaman in *Constitution* throughout the war, was warranted gunner in 1825. Richard Thomas started as a master's mate in 1812, became acting carpenter in *Chesapeake* in 1813, and was warranted carpenter the following year. Samuel Phillips was acting carpenter first in U.S. brig *Viper* and then in U.S. sloop-of-war *Hornet*. In the latter vessel's engagement with H.M. brig *Penguin* he was wounded. He was warranted carpenter in 1821. Thomas Ryley and Henry Keeling, warranted gunners in 1827 and 1829, both started out as seamen in gunboats during the War of 1812.¹⁶²

Historian Nicholas A. M. Rodger argues that, because in the 18th-century Royal Navy skilled armorers, boatswains, carpenters, coopers, gunners, masters at arms, sail makers, and their various mates and assistants tended to make naval service a career, the British navy enjoyed advantages enabling it to remain strong and effective over the duration of a long conflict.¹⁶³ U.S. Navy Commodore Charles Morris, reflecting back on the War of 1812 from the perspective of several decades, isolated a different factor contributing to the U.S. Navy's notable victories during that war: "The greater resources of our seamen than is usual with those of other nations." He observed that "many of our seamen have acquired trades before they begin their maritime pursuits, and, in the case of necessity, carpenters, smiths, and others, who are to be found in numbers among our crews, who can render most valuable aid in repairing damages; which could only be done in other services by the few who are usually specially provided for such purposes." Morris recognized American egalitarianism, resulting in the spread of specialized skills through the crew of an American warship, as a factor that improved the speed with which such a ship could manage emergencies.¹⁶⁴ Morris's observation suggests that petty officers of the U.S. Navy were as integral to the Navy's success as was its corps of line officers.

Just as it did for commissioned officers, service on the high seas during the War of 1812 provided opportunities for petty officers to distinguish themselves and thereby earn promotion, as the experiences of sailors in the frigate *Essex* and the sloop-of-war *Peacock* illustrate.

¹⁶² For more on the forward officers listed in the Navy Register of 1836, see Chapter 3.

¹⁶³ N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World*.

¹⁶⁴ Charles Morris, *The Autobiography of Commodore Charles Morris, U.S. Navy* (1880; reprint ed., Annapolis, MD: NIP, 2002), 65.

Violent weather in rounding Cape Horn in late February and early March 1813 tested *Essex*'s crew. By 1 March, "the sea had increased to such a height, as to threaten to swallow us at every instant." Captain David Porter recalled that "the whole ocean was one continued foam of breakers, and the heaviest squall that I ever before experienced, had not equalled [sic] in violence the most moderate intervals of this tremendous hurricane." The storm's climax came in the wee hours of the morning of the gale's third day.

About 3 o'clock of the morning of the 3d, the watch only being on deck, an enormous sea broke over the ship, and for an instant destroyed every hope. Our gun-deck ports were burst in; both boats on the quarters stove; our spare spars washed from the chains; our head-rails washed away, and hammock stanchions burst in; and the ship perfectly deluged and water logged, immediately after this tremendous shock.

When the sea broke over the ship, one of the prisoners, taken in a British packet captured by *Essex*, cried out in a panic that the ship's side had been stove in and the frigate was sinking. The torrent of water cascading down the hatchways lent credence to this statement and increased the crew's alarm, especially of those men who had been "washed from the spar to the gun-deck, and from their hammocks." "This was the only instance," in which future admiral David Glasgow Farragut, then a midshipman, "ever saw a regular good seaman paralyzed by fear at the dangers of the sea."¹⁶⁵

Fortunately for all, several men, including those at the wheel, held fast and maintained their stations, and most of the men below responded promptly to the call for all hands on deck. Boatswain's Mate William Kingsbury, whom Farragut remembered as a "trusty old son of Neptune," and who actually played the role of Neptune when *Essex* crossed the line earlier in the cruise, led the men and heartened them, roaring with the voice of a lion, "Damn your eyes, there is one side of her left yet!"¹⁶⁶

The petty officers who "distinguished themselves by their coolness and activity after the shock" Porter advanced one grade by filling up posts vacated by men sent away in prize ships. Since the boatswain's post was occupied, Boatswain's Mate Kingsbury's recognition had to wait. In May, when Porter converted a captured British whaler into a cruiser rechristened *Essex Junior*, he appointed Kingsbury her acting boatswain.¹⁶⁷

On 28 April 1814, off Cape Canaveral, Florida, *Peacock* defeated HMS *Epervier*, an 18-gun brig-sloop, in a 42-minute engagement. *Epervier* surrendered in a sinking condition, with 23 casualties, while *Peacock* suffered only two wounded. On the merits of this lopsided victory, Congress posted Lewis Warrington captain and voted him a gold medal. In reporting the engagement to the Navy Department, Warrington noted the contributions by his subordinates to victory. As was customary, the victorious

¹⁶⁵ David Porter, *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean, by Captain David Porter, in the United States Frigate Essex, in the Years 1812, 1813, and 1814* (New York, 1815, 2 vols.; reprint ed., in 1 vol., Robert D. Madison and Karen Hamon, eds., Annapolis, MD: NIP, 1986), 98–100; Loyall Farragut, *The Life and Letters of David Glasgow Farragut, First Admiral of the United States Navy, Embodying His Journals and Letters* (New York: Appleton, 1879), 20.

¹⁶⁶ Porter, *Journal of a Cruise Made to the Pacific Ocean*, 98–100.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

commander mentioned his principal commissioned officers by name. Not stopping there, Warrington reached down into the ratings, recommending a master's mate for elevation to master, and his clerk for a midshipman's warrant. The victory also provided Warrington the occasion to recommend for a permanent warrant, as well, the man whom, when fitting out the previous September, he had requested permission to appoint acting carpenter:

Mr. David Cole, acting carpenter, I have also found such an able and valuable man in his occupation, that I must request, in the most earnest manner, that he may receive a warrant: for I feel confident that, to his uncommon exertion, we, in a great measure, owe the getting of our prize into port. From 11 A.M. until 6 P.M. he was over her side, stopping shot holes, on a grating; and when the ordinary resources failed of success, his skill soon supplied him with efficient ones.¹⁶⁸

The President signed Cole's warrant on 18 November 1814.

During most of the War of 1812, only several hundred sailors at any one time were aboard ships cruising the oceans, with the number on the high seas diminishing over the course of the war as the British blockade grew more effective. By autumn 1814, more than half the Navy's sailors were stationed along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, employed in harbor defense and in flotillas for the protection of the Chesapeake Bay, New York, and the Delaware, and about a third served on the northern lakes. Thus, the typical experience of the War of 1812 sailor was not in the famous ocean cruises like those of *Constitution*, *Essex*, and *Peacock*. Rather, it was in flotillas of gunboats, barges, and other small craft stationed in the nation's principal harbors from Maine to Louisiana, or on service on inland lakes, especially Ontario, Erie, and Champlain.¹⁶⁹

Service in the gunboats and on the lakes also offered opportunities for displays of valor. Reporting on an amphibious boat attack of 27 November 1812 on a British position across the Niagara River, Lieutenant Samuel Angus lavished praise on his "Gallant Petty Officers & Sailors." Among others, he singled out Quartermaster Thomas Hodings, "who bore my flag and behaved most gallantly was mortally wounded but preserved the flag and died in a few hours."¹⁷⁰

When the War of 1812 ended in 1815, the Navy demobilized, disposed of unwanted ships, laid up others in ordinary, and discharged thousands of men, just as it had after previous wars. The naval peace establishment instituted at the end of this war, however, differed from those put in place at the end of the Quasi-War and the war with Tripoli. During the War of 1812, the Navy had earned the respect of the American people, who came to see it as a valuable arm of national policy. Immediately following peace with the British, a squadron sent to the Mediterranean demonstrated that value by quickly forcing the restive Algerians to agree to terms. With the coming of peace, instead of seeking

¹⁶⁸ Lewis Warrington to William Jones, 5 May 1814, in U.S. Congress, *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, 1: 314.

¹⁶⁹ William Jones to James Madison, 26 October 1814, in Michael J. Crawford, et al., eds., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, Vol. 3, 1814–1815, 631–36.

¹⁷⁰ Lt. Samuel Angus to Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton, 1 December 1812, in William S. Dudley, et al., eds., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, Vol. 1, 355–59.

to keep the Navy small, the federal government implemented a policy designed to increase the Navy gradually. In the succeeding decades, sailors found the service a source of secure berths and long-term employment; and the Navy sought to put in place personnel policies that fostered seafaring skills and institutional loyalty.

Chapter Three

A Career Service

Considering that the situations of boatswain and gunner require officers of peculiar skill, experience and tact, and that they have no hope of promotion in the service, your committee deem it just and proper that an ample compensation should be allowed these grades, to induce competent and confidential native-born American citizens to continue in them for life. So likewise with the carpenters and sailmakers.

Select Committee of the U.S. House of
Representatives
28 February 1834

Asa Curtis, of Massachusetts, signed on as a seaman in U.S. frigate *Constitution* in May 1812, the month before the War of 1812 began, and was in the frigate during the so-called Great Chase, when *Constitution*, under the command of Captain Isaac Hull, escaped capture by nearly the entire British North American squadron. He was still in the ship later, participating in Hull's victory over H.M. frigate *Guerriere*, when the American frigate earned its nickname "Old Ironsides."

Although many seamen chose to leave *Constitution* on Hull's transfer of command to Captain William Bainbridge—a commander with a reputation for harsh discipline and for bringing a ship bad luck—Curtis remained in the ship. Thus, he participated a second time in *Constitution*'s capture of a British frigate. In the hottest moments of the fight with H.M.S. *Java*, according to Sailing Master Michael Clear, Curtis "descended the Foretop Gallant stay to rebend the Flying Gib [sic] Halyards which had been shot away." Curtis's quick action restored the ability of the frigate to steer by the head, contributing greatly to the capture of the enemy ship.

Bainbridge recognized Curtis by rating him master gunner. When Bainbridge subsequently assumed command of the Charlestown, Massachusetts, Navy Yard, where he superintended the building of ship of the line *Independence*, Curtis followed him as gunner of gunboat *No. 85*. In 1815, when Bainbridge sailed *Independence* to the Mediterranean to face down Algiers, Curtis sailed with him as gunner's mate. Upon Bainbridge's transfer to *Columbus* in 1819, Curtis transferred with him, retaining his rating as gunner's mate. Eventually, in 1825, he received his gunner's warrant, which freed him from dependence on his commander's whim for his rating. He continued to serve under Bainbridge at the Philadelphia Navy Yard and later at the Charlestown Navy Yard. Curtis subsequently served with the Mediterranean, Pacific, and Brazil squadrons, alternating with shore duty and time spent at the Naval

Asylum (a service hospital and veterans' home) in Philadelphia. He died in 1858, in a Rio de Janeiro hospital, the senior gunner in the Navy.¹⁷¹

Sample Careers of Antebellum Naval Warrant Officers

Asa Curtis brought himself to the attention of his commanding officer by his heroism in battle and strengthened his career chances by maintaining his relationship with that officer through the course of more than a decade. Curtis's career exemplifies one model of the path of advancement warrant officers in the antebellum Navy followed. A sketch of the careers of two other sailors provides a general idea of the career progression of warrant officers in the Navy in the years between the War of 1812 and the Civil War.

Climbing the ladder of promotion. Henry Keeling's naval career followed the logical steps from seaman to petty officer to warrant officer. Keeling entered this life in the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1783, the year in which Great Britain recognized the independence of the United States of America, and departed from it 81 years later in the midst of the Civil War as a resident of the Naval Asylum in Philadelphia.

Keeling probably spent his youth as a merchant sailor, for he only began his naval career at the age of 29, signing on as a seaman for service in gunboats on the Rhode Island station at the start the War of 1812. He completed his war service as a seaman in *Adams*, at Washington, D.C., serving in that ship from January 1813 until his discharge in October 1814. After the war, Keeling probably returned to merchant service, but in May 1823, when he accepted appointment as quarter gunner in *Enterprise*, he began a permanent career in the U.S. Navy. That August he transferred to U.S. schooner *Shark*, in which he took part in a cruise against West Indian pirates. In August a year later he was advanced to gunner's mate in *Shark*. With his two-year enlistment expired, he was discharged at New York in July 1825. He signed on again in November, and in December was rated quarter gunner once more, this time in *Cyane*, in which he cruised in the Mediterranean. In July 1827, a year and a half later, he transferred to *Erie* for a cruise in the West Indies, and in September became *Erie*'s acting gunner. In the late summer of 1828, Keeling spent seven weeks in the hospital in New York, presumably to recover from a tropical illness contracted in the West Indies. The following August, he entered *Constellation* as acting gunner, and on August 25, after six years of nearly continuous naval service and three cruises, Keeling received his warrant as a gunner in the United States Navy.

Keeling made two Mediterranean cruises as gunner in *Constellation*, 1829 to 1831, and 1833 to 1834. This was the last of his sea duty. He left *Constellation* in December 1834 to enter the hospital. Twice in 1836 ordered to join a ship, he had his orders revoked on account of illness. He entered the Naval Asylum in 1837, but left it in 1839 at his own request. From 1840, when he was 58, until 1845, when

171 Papers of Gunner Asa Curtis, Historical Manuscripts Collection, Navy Department Library, Washington, DC. Curtis, Asa," ZB Files, Navy Department Library, Washington, DC.

he was 63, he was attached to the Navy yard at Norfolk. In the latter year he returned to the Naval Asylum, where, presumably, he spent the final two decades of his long life.¹⁷²

A wounded combat veteran. Like Keeling, New Jersey-born Samuel Phillips entered the Navy during the War of 1812, accepting an acting appointment as carpenter in U.S. brig *Viper*, on the New Orleans Station. He was taken prisoner on 13 January 1813, when the 12-gun brig was overhauled and captured after a five-hour chase by the 40-gun frigate HMS *Narcissus*. After his exchange, he served in the Delaware Flotilla for 20 months, and then joined U.S. brig *Hornet* at New York as acting carpenter. In *Hornet's* successful action with HMS *Penguin* on 23 March 1815, Phillips was wounded by a grape shot that passed through his right breast and lodged in the elbow of his right arm.

After the war, Phillips served in the sloop *Ontario* during 1817–1819 in its cruise into the Pacific Ocean, along the Pacific coasts of America, from Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America to the Columbia River in the future state of Washington, and back to the Chesapeake Bay; and in frigate *Cyane*, during its 1821 anti-piracy patrol in the West Indies. In May of 1821, Phillips received his permanent warrant. He remained in the Navy until his death in 1839.¹⁷³

The stories of these three sailors are varied, but contain common elements, are unique, and yet bear similarities. Can we conclude, however, that their career paths were typical of their era, or do their stories simply indicate the range of possibilities? Who were the men who served as warrant officers in the antebellum Navy, and how should we characterize them? Only a general analysis of the warrant officers as a group can answer these questions.

The Cohort of 1836

The discussion and conclusions that follow are based on a consideration of the forward warrant officers in the Navy at the commencement of the year 1836, in the middle of the antebellum era. On 1 January 1836 the Navy employed 21 boatswains, 20 gunners, 20 carpenters, and 19 sailmakers, for a total of 80 of these four ratings. Eight of the warrant officers listed in the 1836 register had acting appointments, and some of them would eventually obtain warrants. The earliest warrant of the 80 officers dated to 1809, and the most recent to 1835. Some of these officers had begun their naval careers during the War of 1812 and even before, and some of them would see service in the Civil War. The 1836 cohort of warrant officers is a cross section of the antebellum warrant officers, and analysis of their careers reveals what was typical and what was unusual or even unique about their individual stories.¹⁷⁴

¹⁷² “Keeling, Henry,” ZB Files, Navy Department Library, Washington, DC.

¹⁷³ “Phillips, Samuel,” ZB Files, Navy Department Library, Washington, DC.

¹⁷⁴ The two major sources for the remainder of this monograph are the Navy Register and the ZB Files, Navy Department Library, Washington, DC. The Navy Register was published irregularly before 1818 and annually from that year through the rest of the century. The ZB Files are research files on naval personnel compiled, beginning in the late 19th century, by staff of the Office of Navy Records and Library and its successor offices. The ZB files contain a miscellany of compiled service records, incoming requests from researchers and replies thereto, and both originals and copies of contemporary documents, relating to thousands of U.S. naval personnel, mainly of the 19th century. Whether a folder for any particular sailor exists in the ZB Files is dependent on whether a researcher requested information on that individual over the years during which the files were compiled. There are ZB Files on 51 of the 80 forward warrant officers in the 1836 Navy

Geographic Origins of Antebellum Warrant Officers

Of the 80 boatswains, carpenters, gunners, and sailmakers in the Navy in 1836, there are records of their places of origin for 71. Sixty-three of the 71, or 89 percent, were native-born Americans. The waters of the Atlantic lapped the shores of the birth states of every one of these. A full third, 35 percent, of the 1836 cohort of forward officers were New Englanders, hailing from Massachusetts (12), Maine (6), Connecticut (4), New Hampshire (2), and Rhode Island (1). The Middle Atlantic States provided 28 percent: New York (12), Pennsylvania (5), and New Jersey (3). A quarter, 25 percent, called the Southeast home: Maryland (8), Virginia (7), North Carolina (2), and South Carolina (1). Eight of the forward officers, 12 percent, were born abroad: two each in Ireland and Greece, and one each in England, Scotland, Germany, and Italy.

Birth regions of U.S. Navy Warrant Officers, 1836

New England:	35 percent
Middle Atlantic:	28 percent
Southeast:	25 percent
Abroad:	12 percent

Analyzing these figures by rating raises intriguing questions.

Table A: Percent of 1836 Forward Warrant Ratings from Region of Birth

Region where born	4 ratings combined (N=71)	Boatswains (N=18)	Carpenters (N=18)	Gunners (N=19)	Sailmakers (N=16)
New England (N=25)	35	28	50	42	19
Mid. Atlantic (N=20)	28	28	28	16	44
Southeast (N=18)	25	39	17	10	37

Register: boatswains William Brown, Edward Crocker, David Eaton, Lawrence Gallagher, William Hart, John Knight, Charles Matthews, John McNelly, John Morris, Robert H. O’Neal, John Patterson, Thomas Ring, Robert Whitaker, and Charles Woodland; gunners Thomas Barry, William B. Brown, Asa Curtis, Henry Keeling, George Marshall, Thomas Robinson, Thomas Ryley, Alexander Stephenson, Benjamin Towner, Charles Wade, and Joseph Ward; carpenters Thomas Armstrong, Richard D. Berry, Charles Bordman, Joseph Cox, Patrick Dee, John A. Dickason, William Hatch, Alonzo Jones, Samuel Phillips, William E. Sheffield, John Southwick, and Richard Thomas; sailmakers Henry Bacon, Samuel B. Banister, John Beggs, William Bennett, James R. Childs, James Davis, James Ferguson, James G. Gallagher, Samuel V. Hawkins, John Heckle, Nathaniel B. Peed, William Ryan, George Thomas, and William Ward.

Abroad (N=8)	12	5	5	32	0
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Note: The boldface numeral indicates that New England contributed 28 percent of the Navy's boatswains.

Table A indicates that few boatswains came from abroad, and more came from the southeast than from either of the two more northern regions. The Navy found 78 percent of its carpenters in New England and the Middle Atlantic, and few in the south or from abroad. Gunners came mainly from New England and from abroad. From the southeast, the Navy drew boatswains and sailmakers, but few carpenters and fewer gunners. Consider the regional distribution from another angle:

Table B: Percent Distribution of Region of Birth by 1836 Forward Warrant Rating

Rating	New England (N=25)	Mid. Atlantic (N=20)	Southeast (N=18)	Abroad (N=8)
Boatswains (N=18)	18	25	41	12.5
Carpenters (N=18)	32	25	18	12.5
Gunners (N=19)	36	15	6	75
Sailmakers (N=16)	14	35	35	0

Note: The boldface numeral indicates that of the officers in the ratings listed who were born in New England, 18 percent were boatswains.

A comparison of Tables A and B shows that, although the Navy drew 50 percent of its carpenters from New England, only 32 percent of the New England–born who held warrants were carpenters. More New Englanders preferred gunnery and fewer sail making. Warrant officers from the Middle Atlantic were more evenly distributed among the four ratings than were the New Englanders, but more of them were sailmakers and fewer were gunners. Southeastern warrant officers tended to be boatswains and sailmakers, fewer were carpenters, and very few gunners. The most striking statistic relates to immigrants: Three quarters of the foreign-born holding warrants in 1836 were gunners; none was a sailmaker.

The statistics generated in Tables A and B call for explanation, however speculative.

Why did the Navy's gunners come from New England and from abroad? It may be that gunnery required a degree of mathematics and chemistry more readily available through the opportunities afforded by New England's and Europe's educational institutions than in the Middle Atlantic and, in particular, in the South.

In contrast, New Englanders and immigrants shied away from sail making, most likely because it enjoyed less prestige as a profession than the other three ratings and was less highly regarded as a skill. Unlike the boatswain, gunner, and carpenter, a ship's sailmaker did not stand in the line of succession to command. (The line of succession after the captain, or commander, was as follows: lieutenants,

agreeably to date or number in their commissions; master; master's mate; boatswain; gunner; carpenter; midshipmen.)¹⁷⁵ From the mixed economy of the Middle Atlantic states came people of a wide variety of skilled backgrounds to fill the warrant ratings relatively equally. Carpenters rose out of the crafts traditions of New England and the Middle Atlantic states. The southern states lacked a wide base of skilled white craftsmen. Hence, one sees few southern carpenters in the Navy, and the dearth of educational opportunities in the South for those other than the wealthy probably explains why few Navy gunners were southerners.

The Navy as a Career

Warrant officers in the antebellum Navy were career servicemen. They valued their warrants and did not lightly give them up. If they did resign, they often soon regretted the decision and sought reinstatement. Warrants were difficult to obtain because there was a small absolute number of warrant billets in the Navy, and in any given year only a few of the small number of billets became available—to some extent because most warrant officers held onto their posts. Officers who did not resign within eight years of receiving their warrants remained in the Navy until they were dismissed, retired, or died.

Obtaining a Warrant. A sailor who desired a permanent appointment as a boatswain, gunner, carpenter, or sailmaker applied for a warrant by writing to the Secretary of the Navy, including with the application one or more letters of recommendation, preferably from commissioned naval officers, one of whom was usually a commanding officer under whose orders the applicant had served.

Judging from those letters of recommendation, the chief characteristics that the Navy Department sought in its warrant officers can be grouped into the categories of skill, sobriety, and good character. Richard D. Berry was recommended as “a sober and respectable mechanic,” and “a very capable energetic man.” William Hart was “a good Boatswain, was bred in the Service, is a young man, a very expert seaman, and . . . extremely sober and steady.” Thomas Ryley, applying for a warrant as a gunner, emphasized his respectable position in society by pointing out that he held the offices of constable and grand juror, and his letter of recommendation commended his “good character as a man, . . . sobriety and correct deportment.” John Smith, applying for a boatswain's warrant, was called “a temperate, decent and capable man.” Charles Woodland enclosed with his application for a boatswain's warrant a Navy lieutenant's letter naming Woodland “one of the most competent meritorious subordinate and useful officers I have ever served with” and “one of the very best.”

Being “American-born” was sometimes mentioned as a point in the candidate's favor. Having a family suggested stability. Establishing a reputation for zeal for the service helped the candidate's image: “I cannot omit to mention to you the commendable zeal of Mr. William Hart, Acting Boatswain, in leaving a sick bed and the Comforts of a Hospital to embark in the Ship on her intended Cruise.”

¹⁷⁵ 15th Cong., 1st sess., “Rules, Regulations, and Instructions, for the Naval Service Communicated to the House of Representatives April 20, 1818,” in *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, 1: 510–34.

The *Navy Regulations* of 1818 made one year of acting service a formal requirement for obtaining a warrant.¹⁷⁶ In practice, several years of acting service usually preceded the securing of a warrant. Those additional years of naval service provided the training and experience necessary for the proper execution of the responsibilities of those positions. Just as important, naval service established the applicant's reputation and provided the basis of the personal knowledge of the applicant's skills, sobriety, and character on which the recommending officer based his letter supporting the petitioner's application for a warrant. Commissioned officers appear to have taken the writing of those letters seriously, sharing the sentiments that Captain George W. Rodgers expressed when he wrote one aspirant, "I must inform you, that such an office is one of great importance, and I feel very cautious in recommending any one, for that station, in our service."

Unless the candidate or his sponsor was explicit in the application for the warrant, information on warrant officers' experiences before they received their warrants is hard to find. It is not clear, for instance, how Richard D. Barry developed his carpentry skills, for before joining the Navy he is reported to have been an army officer. In the case of Gunner Thomas Ryley, his appointment to the post of quarter gunner "and other Subordinate offices" after enlisting during the War of 1812 may indicate that he had already had at least a few years of experience at sea. Samuel Phillips began his naval service with an acting appointment as a carpenter in 1812, indicating that he had learned his trade outside the Navy; but he did not secure a warrant until 1821.

Carpenter John Southwick started as an apprentice in the Charlestown, Massachusetts, Navy Yard in 1820, and six years later secured a warrant. William Brown probably learned his trade in the Navy. He enlisted in 1813, persevered until about 1828 before earning an acting appointment as boatswain, and waited another three years before obtaining his warrant. Like Brown, Boatswain William Hart was "bred in the Service." Charles Woodland and Robert Whitaker also seem to have perfected their skills as enlisted men. When Charles Woodland got his warrant, he had ten years of naval service and had acted as boatswain in several ships. Robert Whitaker took 14 years to rise from ordinary seaman to boatswain. It seems to have been common for a sailor to serve from three to six years in an acting capacity before gaining a permanent warrant. This was the case for Sailmaker Henry Bacon (three years acting), Boatswain Robert H. O'Neal (three years acting), Gunner Alexander Stephenson (three years acting), and Boatswain John Heckle (six years acting).

Seeking Promotion. Once a sailor received a warrant as a boatswain, gunner, carpenter, or sailmaker, he was likely to remain in that rating, for his opportunities for promotion were rare. On occasion a proficient forward warrant officer would be made a sailing master, but obtaining the transfer to sailing master was difficult. Promotion to sailing master was desirable because during the antebellum period a sailing master's basic rate of pay was about twice that of boatswains, gunners, carpenters, and sailmakers.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 516.

Of the 80 warrant officers in the 1836 register, George Marshall was the only one who would ever hold an appointment as master, and he only for a period of five years before being returned to his former rating. Warranted gunner in 1809, Marshall, after serving 32 years in that rate, made master in 1841. He had last served at sea in 1819 and would do shore duty as master at the Gosport, Virginia, Navy Yard. He reverted to gunner in 1846.

Two other warrant officers in the 1836 register, Carpenter John Southwick and Gunner Thomas Ryley, failed in their bids for promotion to master, despite strong claims.

Warranted carpenter in 1826, Thomas Southwick, of Massachusetts, by the early 1840s had so perfected his craftsmanship as to earn the highest encomiums of his superiors. In 1841, after a two-year Mediterranean cruise in the ship of the line *Ohio*, Garret Pendergast, *Ohio*'s first lieutenant, attested to Southwick's "extraordinary qualifications, as a Carpenter of a large vessel. In temperance, industry, energy, & skill, I am persuaded you have not your superior in the Navy." Commodore Isaac Hull affirmed that *Ohio*'s carpenter's "vigilance, promptness, and skill . . . could not have been surpassed," and, remarkably, that against him there was "not a single complaint." Two years later, Captain Joseph Smith recorded similar praise for Southwick's abilities:

The greatest confidence, may be placed in his ability, from skill and experience, to plan and execute the equipment and appointments of a Ship of War, in his department, and that much credit is due to him for some suggestions of his, in the improvement of some of the fixtures &c to facilitate the duties and render Ships more efficient and safe from fire.

In 1849, on the basis of meritorious service in the California campaign during the Mexican War, Southwick mounted a campaign to secure a promotion.

In July 1846, Commodore Robert Stockton took over command of the Pacific squadron and continued the conquest of California begun by Commodore John D. Sloat. In August, Stockton captured Los Angeles, but the following month Mexican Californians expelled the small party of Americans left to garrison the town. In January 1847, Stockton led a force of some 600 men, with six field pieces, overland to retake Los Angeles. On 8 January he encountered resistance from an organized force about two hundred armed men. After his men had struggled mightily to push the heavy artillery through the soft bottom and quicksand of a ford of the San Gabriel River, Stockton relied on the field pieces, whose fire he directed personally, to drive off the enemy. The next day, the enemy blocked the way to Los Angeles once more, and once more Stockton used his artillery to disperse the opposition. After these engagements, known as the battles of San Gabriel and the Mesa, the way to Los Angeles lay open. The Americans reoccupied the town the next day.¹⁷⁷

Southwick, carpenter of U.S. frigate *Congress*, Captain Elie A. F. Lavallette commanding, went ashore with Commodore Robert F. Stockton's force of sailors and Marines, attached to an artillery company

¹⁷⁷ K. Jack Bauer, *The Mexican War, 1846–1848* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 183–92.

commanded by Navy Lieutenant Richard L. Tilghman. A few weeks after the recapture of Los Angeles, Stockton wrote Southwick a letter approving his conduct in the campaign, writing, “your services in the recent campaign in California, and especially in the battles of the 8th and 9th of January, deserve my commendation and I hope will receive that of the Government of the United States.” In later letters of commendation, Southwick’s immediate superior, Lieutenant Tilghman, and his commanding officer, Captain Lavallette, clarified Southwick’s role in the battles of San Gabriel and the Mesa: Southwick had had two of the field guns under his charge. Furthermore, the zealous carpenter was instrumental in the general equipping of the artillery.

Southwick’s meritorious services in the Mexican War did not end with the taking of Los Angeles. He had charge of a piece of artillery at the capture of Guaymas, a Mexican port in the Gulf of California, and in the attack on Mazatlán, a Mexican coastal city near the mouth of the Gulf of California, landed with the attacking party, again in charge of an artillery piece. During the seven-month occupation of Mazatlán, Southwick served ashore, where he not only aided in the engineering and construction of fortifications and the fabrication of gun carriages, but, as Lieutenant Thomas P. Green, responsible for the forces occupying the city, attested, also had charge of one of the forts.

In their letters, written in January 1849, shortly after Congress had returned to the east coast, Lavallette and Tilghman suggested that Southwick had merited recognition for his services. Tilghman wrote, “I hope this has been reported by others higher in rank, than myself; and you will receive the reward your services so justly merit,” and Lavallette noted, “This with your long services at Sea entitle you to the most favourable consideration of the Hon[orable] Secretary of the Navy.” Tilghman ended his letter indicating that Southwick’s “constant exposure in that unhealthy climate has evidently impaired” his health.

Armed with letters from Commodore Stockton, Captain Lavallette, and Lieutenants Tilghman and Green commending his Mexican War service, and letters of earlier date from Commodore Hull, Captain Smith, and Lieutenant Pendergast, Southwick addressed a letter to Captain Samuel F. Dupont, laying out the case for his promotion. Southwick probably came to know Dupont in Mexico, for they had seen action in many of the same engagements, including San Gabriel, the Mesa, and Las Guayas.

Southwick allowed the letters of commendation to speak for his services during the war. His letter to Dupont focuses instead on two major points. First, there was the matter of pay equity. He points out that his nearly 13 years of sea service was more than that of any other serving boatswain, gunner, carpenter, or sailmaker. The 1849 Navy Register bears out this claim. Because of those years at sea, he has lost out, Southwick complains, on the higher pay given to carpenters assigned to receiving ships and Navy yards. He was the Navy’s senior carpenter, but carpenters with much less seniority had benefited from more lucrative assignments. Secondly, he underscores the significant and lasting contributions he had made to the Navy’s efficiency by the service’s adopting his innovations in fitting out ships. Southwick asserts,

Many of the improvements that have been made in fitting out ships, for the last twenty-two years, I have been engaged in. . . . In making room on deck and preventing beams and decks from rotting.

He had helped incorporate these changes into the Navy's standard operating procedures by working for four months with the officers who produced a new book of allowances.

Southwick asked Dupont to sponsor his promotion to master, with an appointment to the Navy Yard at Charlestown, Massachusetts, where he would be responsible for fitting out ships of war. He pointed out that such a promotion had precedents, for "two or three boatswains and one or two gunners have been promoted in the service." Barring that promotion, the carpenter asked for an acting promotion, or at least permanent orders to the yard.

Southwick suggested that Dupont enlist the support of Commodore Joseph Smith, who "has always acted very friendly towards me, and I think, would forward this movement." Smith, as seen above, had earlier praised Southwick's abilities and innovations in fitting out ships. Unfortunately for Southwick, he misjudged Smith's support. Smith gave Southwick's application the following unenthusiastic endorsement in a note for the Secretary of the Navy:

The idea of his receiving an appointment as Master in the U.S. Navy is not to be entertained in my opinion. To be ordered to the Boston Navy Yard . . . is quite as much as Mr. Southwick can reasonably expect.

Apparently, a boatswain or a gunner might possibly qualify to become a master, but a carpenter's advancement to master would have been so great a leap in degree as to boggle Commodore Smith's imagination. Southwick secured appointment as carpenter of the Charlestown Navy Yard, where he remained posted until assigned to the steam frigate *Minnesota* in 1857. He retired, still a carpenter, in 1866 and died in 1874.

Gunner Thomas Ryley's claim to a promotion rested on premises different from those on which John Southwick rested his. Ryley asserted that he had been assured of a promotion when he accepted his gunner's warrant. He also implied that, having lost an eye in the service, he merited consideration. Understanding the importance of a highly placed sponsor, Ryley carefully cultivated the favor of the commanding officer in whose service he had lost his eye.

In 1827, when Thomas Ryley, of New London, Connecticut, exchanged his grocer's cloth apron for the leather apron of a Navy gunner, he not only had seen wartime naval service in the War of 1812 and in the 1815 conflict with Algiers, but also had for some time commanded a merchant vessel. According to Ryley, he was induced to accept his gunner's warrant "under the assurance of after Making one or two Cruises there would not be the least doubt of my being appointed a master." After two lengthy cruises in the Mediterranean, from 1827 to 1829 and from 1830 to 1833, he had a short period of shore duty at the Charlestown, Massachusetts, Navy Yard, where Jesse D. Elliott was commandant. When Elliott sailed in U.S. frigate *Constitution*, for a three-year tour as commodore of the Mediterranean

Squadron (1835–1838), he took Ryley with him as the ship’s gunner. It was in the latter part of this cruise that the accident occurred in which Ryley lost an eye.

Elliott’s Mediterranean command became notorious for another reason, however. Taking General Lewis Cass, the United States’ ambassador to France, on board in April 1838, *Constitution* made a tour of the eastern Mediterranean so that Cass could report to the president on the political situation there. The commodore took advantage of the assignment to collect an immense trove of antiquities for himself and friends, including many marble carvings, some of large size, and even a mummy. He used *Constitution* to carry these back to the United States at the end of his tour, as well as a menagerie of exotic horses, jackasses, and hogs. The commodore’s contentious relations with *Constitution*’s lieutenants and chaplain and a bad state of discipline among the ratings further marred the cruise. When Elliott returned to the United States he faced a number of charges. In 1840, a court-martial acquitted Elliott on the most serious of these—that of failing to suppress a mutiny—but found him guilty of several lesser counts. The court suspended Elliott from the service for four years.¹⁷⁸

Ryley, on his return to the United States, was assigned shore duty to allow him to recover from his injuries. After a year at the New York Navy Yard, he was put in charge of the ordnance magazine at Ellis Island. In July 1842, he was placed on leave. In February 1843, with his “physical powers much improved,” Ryley wrote to Elliott, asking him to sponsor his bid for a promotion to master. “I think a request from you in a letter to General Cass would without difficulty procure me the appointment particularly as he was on board when I was wounded.” Ryley said that he was spending from six to eight hours a day studying ordnance, that since his return to the United States in *Constitution* two gunners had been appointed as masters and detailed to the ordnance department (one of whom had since died), and that “from my long service & the severe wounds received in it, I am induced to apply for a masters appointment.”

Elliott sent Ryley’s application on to the Secretary of the Navy with a positive endorsement, stating that Ryley was “an extremely intelligent man of his grade, has a fondness for ordnance duty, and is quite competent to the performance of a Master.”

In the spring of 1843, Ryley reported for duty as gunner at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, and in September applied to the Navy Department, by way of the commandant of the yard, Captain George C. Read, for appointment as a master. Ryley first gave a chronology of his various assignments since first joining the Navy in 1813, in the course of which he pointed out that he had served under Read when Read was a lieutenant commanding a brig in the 1815 war with Algiers. Ryley proceeded to ask for appointment as a master, having “frequently been advised by many officers under whom I have served to apply” for such an appointment. If the appointment were to be approved, Ryley stated that he would prefer being attached to the ordnance department, “having made it my Constant Study to acquire a thorough Knowledge of the Theory & Practice of Gunnery.”

¹⁷⁸ Tyrone G. Martin, *A Most Fortunate Ship: A Narrative History of Old Ironsides*, revised ed. (Annapolis, MD: NIP, 1997), 253–56.

On 19 October, President John Tyler remitted the remaining portion of Commodore Elliott's four-year suspension. Eleven days later, Ryley wrote Elliott a congratulatory letter. The full text of the letter will allow the reader to judge on which side of the line between expressing sincere friendship and obsequiously flattering a superior it falls.

Philadelphia October 30th 1843

Sir

I should scarcely feel at Liberty to address most of the Commanders that I have had the honor to serve under, (on such an occasion) But I flatter myself that I have too thorough a Knowledge of your Character to suppose that you do not fully appreciate the kindly feeling of your humblest Friends.

Permit me therefore to Congratulate you, On the restoration of your Just rights and privileges from which you have been so long unjustly Detained.

I trust you will believe me when I say; that had the Department gratified me with the appointment I expected it would not have afforded me one half the satisfaction that your restoration has Done.

That you may live to overcome your enemies by Kindness & Long be the solace of your friends is the earnest wish of your

Humble Friend &

Faithful Servant

Thomas Ryley

Ryley thus made use of the occasion of Elliott's restoration to duty to give a subtle reminder to his potential patron of his desire for promotion.

Two weeks later, on 14 November, Ryley's letter bore fruit, motivating Elliott to write the Secretary of the Navy once more on the gunner's behalf. Ryley's superior knowledge and skills as a gunner and mechanic, the commodore wrote, entitled him consideration, and he was certainly capable of discharging the duties of a more responsible position. Besides, having "lost an eye in the service of his country," Ryley deserved some recompense. "But even if there were no other reasons for the attention of Government to this good man," Elliott continued, preparing for the rhetorical climax of his plea,

the moral of the following sentiment addressed to me should suffice: "That you may live to overcome your enemies by kindness and long be the solace of your friends is the earnest wish of your," &c. It is not alone from the high in station that good precepts emanate, and I fully appreciate what this good friend has said. God forgive me for swearing, but _____

Ryley's expression of high moral sentiments and good precepts may have suitably impressed his former commanding officer, moving him even to use swear words omitted by the clerk who transcribed his letter, but it did not sufficiently impress the Secretary of the Navy. Twenty months after Elliot's letter to the secretary, Ryley died without having secured his coveted promotion.

Resigning a Warrant. Twelve of the 80 forward warrant officers in the 1836 sample would resign their warrants. Sailmaker William Bennett's career was unusual in that it included two resignations, separated by nearly a quarter of a century. Bennett received his original warrant in 1833 and resigned in 1836. Three years later he received a new warrant and served another 22 years, only to resign a second time, on 15 May 1861. Bennett, a Virginian, resigned at the outbreak of the Civil War evidently out of loyalty to his native state, which had declared its secession from the United States. Four months later he "went South," accepting a sailmaker's warrant in the Confederate States Navy. It is reasonable to assume that had Virginia not seceded, Bennett would have stayed in the Navy indefinitely. Bennett's second resignation after 22 years stands as a statistical outlier, for every one of the other 12 resignations involving the 1836 cohort, including Bennett's first resignation, occurred within between two and eight years of the date of the warrant. The 12 warrant officers served an average of five years before resigning. Hence, the likelihood that a newly warranted officer would resign his warrant at some time was 12 out of 80, or 15 percent. If he had not resigned after five years that likelihood diminished to four out of 72, or 5.5 percent; and if he had not resigned after eight years the likelihood of his resigning—barring extreme circumstances such as civil war—fell to zero.

The reasons for the resignations can be found in, or deduced from, the records in six instances. Two men's stated reasons for resigning were that the pay was inadequate to support their families. One boatswain went on merchant voyages to Europe and Canton for two years following his resignation. Another boatswain left the U.S. Navy in 1836 to join the Texas Navy. William L. Shuttleworth gave up his carpenter's warrant in exchange for a commission as a second lieutenant in the United States Marine Corps. This proved to be a wise career move, for Shuttleworth rose to the rank of full colonel during the Civil War. Had he remained in the Navy, it is likely that he would have retired still a carpenter. Finally, as noted above, William Bennett resigned his sailmaker's warrant to serve the Confederacy.

At least four of the 12 officers who resigned their warrants sought and obtained reappointments—we know about those who were successful, but not about those who were not. The two who resigned because they found the pay inadequate to support their families sought and obtained reappointments within three years of tendering their resignations. Boatswain Robert Whitaker sought reappointment practically the moment he stepped on American soil after his two years in merchantmen. Boatswain Charles Woodland, who left for the Texas Navy in 1836, was back seeking a new warrant by 1842 and persisted in his quest until finally obtaining one in 1848.

Leaving the Navy Involuntarily. The Navy dismissed, discharged, or revoked the appointments of 11 of the 1836 cohort of forward warrant officers. These 11 served an average of eight years before being let go, but as is to be expected when the causes of dismissal varied randomly, their time in service before dismissal ranged widely, from one year to 16 years. The causes of the removal of the warrants

and acting appointments are recorded in four cases: One for intoxication and absence without leave; one for “irregularity”; one for embezzlement of government property; and one acting appointment seems to have been revoked because of chronic ill health. At least five of the 11 sought reinstatement. This five included the ones expelled for intoxication and irregularity, and even the one ejected for embezzlement. Only two of the dismissed officers received new appointments: Boatswain William Black after four years, after which he served another 32 years until his death in 1874; and Carpenter Charles Bordman, after a hiatus of five years, after which he served another 16 years before retiring.

Dying in the Service. Forty-seven of the 1836 cohort of forward warrant officers died in active service before retiring. Both the average and the median number of years of naval service at death for these officers were 18 years, with a range of from two to 46. We know the cause of death in six cases: one each died of inflamed lungs, jaundice, and a “long-standing disease,” and three drowned. Two of those who drowned were boatswains, 9.5 percent of our sample of 21. That nearly one in ten died by drowning underscores the dangers boatswains encountered in exercising their profession at sea.

Retirement. Those of the 1836 cohort who lived beyond 1861 had an opportunity for retirement. Late in 1861, Congress provided that naval officers with 40 years of service could retire by their own application and that naval officers 62 years of age or with 45 years of service would be retired involuntarily. Retired officers could be assigned shore duty.¹⁷⁹ Fourteen of the 1836 warrant officers stayed in the Navy long enough to retire with pay. They averaged 30 years of active service, ranging from a low of 21 to a maximum of 40 years. The longest serving on active duty were Sailmaker James R. Childs and Carpenter John Southwick. Childs received his warrant as a sailmaker in 1822, retired in 1862, and received retirement pay until his death nine years later in 1881. Southwick was warranted in 1826, retired in 1866, and lived another eight years. The 14 retirees averaged 16 years in retirement, so that, combined, their years on active duty and retirement pay averaged 46 years. Carpenter Jonas Cox was warranted in 1834, retired after 27 years in 1861, and lived another 33 on his retirement pay, having had a government income for a total of 60 years.

Staying Navy. In sum, of the 1836 cohort of boatswains, carpenters, gunners, and sailmakers:

- 15 percent resigned their warrants
- 13.75 percent were dismissed, discharged, or had appointment revoked
- 58.75 percent died in active service
- 17.5 percent retired

(Note: The total is greater than 100 percent because of officers who are counted in more than one category.)

Thus, 85 percent of the 1836 cohort never voluntarily gave up their warrants. Eliminating from

¹⁷⁹ 37th Cong., 1st sess., ch. 42, secs. 21 and 22, and 2d sess., ch. 1, sec. 1; *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 12 (1863), 290, 329.

the calculation the 11 who were dismissed, discharged, or had their appointments revoked leaves 69 warrant officers who had a choice of leaving or remaining in the Navy. Eight-six percent of those who had a choice stayed Navy.

Navy Benefits

In committing to a career in the antebellum Navy, warrant officers weighed the bad and the good in the balance: strictness of naval discipline, dependence on the approval of commissioned officers, uncertainty of assignments, hardships of seafaring, terrors of the deep and horrors of war, and long separations from loved ones, on the one side; meaningful occupation, secure and steady employment, a sense of belonging to a permanent organization with an honorable heritage, an adequate, if modest, income, and security during sickness and feeble old age on the other side. As we have seen, the great majority found that the benefits outweighed the disadvantages and chose a lifetime career.

Making a Living. One reason that a warrant as a naval officer was so highly desired in the antebellum period was that it assured steady work and a fairly steady income. This is evident from the many men of respectable backgrounds who left civilian life for a permanent naval career. Take Thomas Ryley, for instance. Enlisted in 1813, Ryley left the Navy in 1816 for the merchant service, becoming a skillful enough mariner to command merchantmen. By 1827, he was operating a small grocery store in the Connecticut port town of New London, and, finding business “dull and precarious,” he sought a gunner’s warrant in order to return to the Navy “as a permanent Occupation.”

Yet, some evidence indicates that the warrant officers’ pay was little more than enough to support a family. As discussed above, two of the 12 warrant officers in the 1836 Register who resigned, Sailmaker William Bennett and Carpenter William Sheffield, stated as their reasons the inadequacy of the pay to support their families. Sometimes this inadequacy resulted from the absence of any locality adjustment in the pay schedule. The prohibitively high cost at his new post in Pensacola, Florida, in 1836, for instance, induced Bennett to request a transfer. When Bennett was denied a transfer, he resigned. Still, that both Bennett and Sheffield later applied for new warrants suggests that they found they could make a better living in the Navy than in the civilian economy.

Consider James Watson, boatswain at the Charleston Navy Yard in 1808. According to a complaint filed on 14 October 1808 by John Broughton, a seaman who had been employed in rigging gunboats in the yard, Watson broke into a storehouse on Gadsden’s wharf, removed rigging and blocks from U.S. sloop-of-war *Hornet*’s stores, and sold them. The yard’s commanding officer ordered Watson arrested, suspended from duty, and held for trial under the charge of embezzlement of government property. The court-martial, held on 27 February 1809, exonerated Watson. His accuser Broughton, who also went by an alias, Griffin, had made the accusation apparently in revenge for a flogging he had received. Having rendered its verdict, the court wrote to recommend the boatswain

as an object entitled to the commiseration of every feeling breast—inasmuch as he has been deprived of liberty for a great length of time, being thereby rendered incapable of contributing to the support of two infant Children, and a Wife far advanced in

pregnancy, who depended solely on his exertions for subsistence—Inasmuch as his family, from a comfortable state of independency, have been rendered to a situation truly deplorable—the Court recommend him as highly worthy of some remuneration for his long confinement and undeserved sufferings.¹⁸⁰

That Watson fell “from a comfortable state of independency” to “a situation truly deplorable” in a period of four months suggests that the men who found positions as forward officers in the antebellum Navy lived on the boundaries between the working poor and the precarious middle class.

A recent survey of the history of working people in the early United States observes,

for the urban workers of the early republic, the primary challenge was getting and keeping a job as the precondition to procuring food and fuel, paying rent, and meeting the exigencies of illness, injury, and childbearing. . . . Their labor did not provide them with anything beyond a hand-to-mouth existence, and instead left them consistently imperiled in their efforts to stay warm or avoid hunger.¹⁸¹

Forward officers valued their warrants because those warrants nurtured their hopes of securing middle class security and eased their fears of slipping into urban poverty. By working as naval officers, they escaped the exploitive labor relations of the emerging capitalistic market in which some citizens, those with sufficient capital, “translated [workers’] labor into wealth while making it unlikely that they would be able to do likewise.”¹⁸² But by the same means, the forward officers were unable to escape the influence of the market, which set the prevailing wage rates against which the government had to compete for skilled workers, and which determined the cost of living.

Was the compensation given boatswains, gunners, carpenters, and sailmakers adequate, providing an income with which they could support their families? Was it fair? How did it compare with the pay of other workers in similar occupations?

An act of 1814 governed the pay of naval officers during the antebellum period until 1835. In the latter year, Congress enacted a major revision of the Navy’s pay scale. Acts adopted in 1842 and 1854 made modifications to the scale that affected the pay of the forward warrant officers.

The “Act concerning the pay of officers, seamen, and marines, in the navy of the United States” of 18 April 1814 established the pay of the forward warrant officers at \$20 a month, plus two rations.¹⁸³ With rations being reckoned at 25 cents a day, the resulting annual rate of pay was \$422.50. The next higher paying position in the naval service was that of schoolmaster. With a salary of \$25 a month and two rations, a schoolmaster realized \$482.50 a year. A sailing master received \$40 a month and two rations, for an annual income of \$662.50. Below the forward warrant officers on the pay scale

¹⁸⁰ RG 125, NARA, Case No. 62.

¹⁸¹ Seth Rockman, “Class and the History of Working People in the Early Republic,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 25 (2005): 527–35, 529.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 533.

¹⁸³ 13th Cong., 2d sess., ch. 84; *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 3 (1846), 136.

were captain’s clerks. Although a captain’s clerk’s salary was higher, at \$25 a month, allotted only one ration he realized less, \$391.50 a year. Petty officers were paid \$18 or \$19 dollars a month, depending on their rate, plus one ration, or an equivalent of \$307.25 and \$319.25 a year. Congress set no pay rate for seamen, able and ordinary, but left that to be set by the President. In 1828, an able seaman in the Navy earned \$12 a month, with no ration allowance, or \$144 a year. At the same time, an able seaman in the merchant service could make between \$12 and \$18 a month, or between \$144 and \$216 a year, if he had full employment.¹⁸⁴ The following table lays out this comparison.

<i>Rate</i>	<i>Sea Service Pay and Rations Per Year</i>
sailing master	\$662.50
schoolmaster	482.50
forward warrant officer	422.50
captain’s clerk	391.25
petty officer	307.25 to 319.25
able seaman, USN	144.00
able seaman, merchant service	144.00 to 216.00

This table places the pay for sea service of the forward warrant officers along the scale at an appropriate level relative to other naval personnel to compensate them for the degree of responsibility they exercised.

Warrant officers, as well as other Navy sailors, could add to their government income by working for private citizens in off-duty hours. During *Franklin’s* 1821–1824 cruise along the Pacific coast of South America, for instance, Sailmaker Samuel B. Banister received outside pay for making sails for the American merchantman *Canton*. According to U.S. Navy captain Charles G. Ridgely, it was common for commanders of ships of war in the U.S. Navy as well as foreign navies to permit their mechanics and crew to work for private vessels and receive compensation for their work. The Navy viewed this practice as beneficial to American commerce, since it provided skilled labor for Americans in need in areas of the world where such skills were difficult to find.¹⁸⁵

Naval officers serving at Navy yards and stations received allowances in addition to their pay and rations to recompense them for the extra expenses of living on shore rather than aboard ship. The Secretary of the Navy included the allowances in the department’s annual estimates presented to Congress, subject to Congress’s approval. In 1832, for example, boatswains and gunners assigned to yards and stations

¹⁸⁴ “Difficulties in Obtaining Seamen for the Navy—Their Cause, and Measures for Their Removal,” Navy Department, 23 May 1828, in *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, Vol. 3 (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1860), 205–209.
¹⁸⁵ Testimony of Samuel B. Banister and Charles G. Ridgely in the court-martial of Captain Charles Stewart, *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, Vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1860), 501–502, 505; also see 495.

were allowed \$54 for fuel, \$12 for candles, \$163.25 for a servant (at \$6 a month and one ration). In addition, on those yards and stations where housing was not provided them, boatswains and gunners were allowed \$90 each for rent. Including the rent, these allowances increased a warrant officer's income by \$319.25. Carpenters assigned to Boston, New York, and Norfolk were given these same allowances for fuel, candles, and servants, but carpenters assigned to Portsmouth (New Hampshire), Philadelphia, and Pensacola were not. In that year, the department's estimates made no provision for sailmakers on any of the yards or stations. As a result of the estimates, whereas the boatswain and gunner stationed at Pensacola received \$741.75 for pay, rations, and allowances, the carpenter and sailmaker each received only \$422.50 to support themselves and their families for a year.¹⁸⁶

The inequality of the pay situation for the various ratings of warrant officers at Pensacola took Sailmaker William Ryan unawares. He reported for duty on 31 December 1830 with the expectation of receiving the same pay as the other forward warrant officers stationed there, approximately \$62 a month, but was taken aback when the disbursing officer told him he was only authorized his regular sea pay, without any allowances, approximately \$35 a month. Ryan petitioned Congress for relief. The House Committee on Claims asked the Secretary of the Navy "for information as to the practice of making extra allowances in such cases, and to know, if such practice existed, why the petitioner might not receive the additional compensation without applying to Congress." In reply, the secretary explained, "extra allowances of this character are regulated by the Department, and they are granted when the services and the responsibilities render them necessary or expedient, and then they are included in the estimates, and of course receive the sanction of Congress." As "there was no estimate made for any extra allowance to a sailmaker at Pensacola prior to 1833," Ryan was not entitled to any. Congress deemed it proper not to interfere with the department's regulation and gave Ryan no relief.¹⁸⁷

When assigned to shore duty, if they received allowances, forward warrant officers did as well as, or somewhat better than, most of their civilian equivalents working ashore. A forward warrant officer without any allowances made \$1.16 a day, pay and rations. The same officer with full allowance, including rent, made \$2.03 a day. As borne out by the tables in Appendix 1, the former amount is not much more than most common and semi-skilled laborers in the mid-1820s made in America's Atlantic port cities; the latter sum compares favorably with the pay received by the most highly skilled day laborers in the same cities. Depending on location, common laborers made a dollar or less a day, skilled workers from a dollar to a dollar and a half, and craftsmen with the most highly valued skills—ship carpenters, ship joiners, and masons—from about a dollar and a half up to two dollars a day. A major advantage of holding a warrant was that the income was more certain, since unlike day laborers, warrant officers did not have to worry from day to day, or from month to month, whether they would find employment.

¹⁸⁶ Amos Kendall, "A tabular statement of the whole pay and emoluments of the officers of the navy, of each grade, as now fixed by law or usage," 7 January 1833, in *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, Vol. 4 (Washington, DC: Gales and Seaton, 1861), 229.

¹⁸⁷ "On the Claim of a Warranted Sailmaker in the Navy for Additional Pay as Sailmaker at the Navy Yard at Pensacola," 10 June 1834, *ibid.*, Vol. 563.

Eight years of proposals, investigations, and negotiations involving the Department of the Navy and Congress preceded the passage of the 3 March 1835 “Act to regulate the pay of the navy of the United States,” the first major change to the Navy’s pay scale since the War of 1812.

The process began with a resolution of the Senate of February 28, 1827, directing the Secretary of the Navy “to report a plan for a naval peace establishment.” In the plan presented the following January, the department proposed that officers in each of the four ratings, boatswain, gunner, carpenter, and sailmaker, would progress through three grades. In addition to their pay, rations, and quarters, when attached to Navy yards warrant officers would receive 50 cents a day instead of allowances for fuel, candles, and servants.

The department based these proposed changes on the following principles:

- To increase pay after years of faithful service in the same rank;
- “To add to the pay while at sea, both as an inducement to active service, and to meet the expenses which a separation from their families always creates with officers of the navy; an evil to which those of the army are less subjected. This increase is only in the number of rations”;
- “To take away all emoluments and allowances, as far as practicable, and to give in all cases, both on land and at sea, definite and ascertained compensation for the performance of duty.”¹⁸⁸

Congress failed to act on the department’s recommendation. Nearly five years later, in December 1832, the Secretary of the Navy responded to a request from the House Committee on Naval Affairs by forwarding a new pay plan proposed by the Board of Navy Commissioners. For forward warrant officers in small vessels, the proposed pay represented only a slight increase over the pay authorized by the 1814 act; but for those assigned to larger classes of vessels, especially ships of the line, the increase was significant.¹⁸⁹

Congress did not act on this proposal, but soon afterward the Senate requested the President to submit a plan that would equalize the pay of the officers of the army and Navy, according to their equivalent rank, and substitute a fixed compensation in place of allowances. In presenting the requested plan in December 1833, the secretaries of the War and Navy Departments noted that below the ranks of army cadet and Navy midshipman there was little analogy in rank between the two services. The army had no officers equivalent to boatswains, for instance.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Samuel L. Southard, “A Plan for a Naval Peace Establishment of the United States. Communicated to the Senate January 15, 1828,” in *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, 3:128–30.

¹⁸⁹ Board of Navy Commissioners to the Secretary of the Navy, December 1832, attachment A, 1, to “On a Reorganization of the Navy, With the Additional Rank of Admirals, With Statements of the Appropriate Pay of the Officers, as Compared with That of Corresponding Rank in the Army,” in *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, Vol. 4: 225–26.

¹⁹⁰ Secretary of the Navy to Chairman of Select Committee for equalizing army and navy pay, House of Representatives, 15 January 1834; “A Plan Proposed for Equalizing the Pay of the Officers of the Army and Navy According to Their

The select committee of the House appointed to consider the equalizing of the pay of officers of the army and the Navy criticized the joint proposal of the service secretaries for doing too little for naval officers, whose pay had long been neglected. An attachment to the committee's report showed in tabular form that the pay of the Navy's commissioned officers had not risen since 1799. A master commandant, for instance, received a salary of \$60 a month and five rations in both 1799 and 1831. The committee's chairman noted,

The disclosure of the fact that no increase of compensation to the officers of the navy has taken place since the formation of the government, must operate powerfully upon the minds of the representatives of the people to obtain from them that justice to the gallant seaman which has been so long delayed.

The chairman stated in reference to the forward warrant officers,

Considering that the situations of boatswain and gunner require officers of peculiar skill, experience and tact, and that they have no hope of promotion in the service, your committee deem it just and proper that an ample compensation should be allowed these grades, to induce competent and confidential [i.e., trustworthy] native-born American citizens to continue in them for life. So likewise with the carpenters and sailmakers.

The committee presented a bill that included the following pay scale for forward warrant officers in the Navy:

When at sea	\$700
When on other duty	500

Officers in sea service were allotted one ration per day. Allowances for expenses were to be discontinued, except for housing where quarters were not provided, which was not to exceed \$200 a year. Forward warrant officers on furlough at their own request were to be paid at the rate of \$250 a year.¹⁹¹

The House of Representatives recommitted the bill to the committee for changes, judging that in attempting to equalize the pay of the two services, the bill did injustice to the army officers. The committee, therefore, decided to give up the attempt at equalization and to submit an amended bill that simply attempted to redress the pay of naval officers. The amended bill adopted the principle of varying the pay of forward warrant officers according to the nature of their assignments, as follows.

In ships of the line	\$750
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Relative Rank," *ibid.*, Vol.504, 386–91. A few weeks after the secretaries of army and navy submitted the plan, the Board of Navy Commissioners recommended a revision that would have slightly increased the pay of forward warrant officers attached to ships of the line and substantially decreased the pay when attached to smaller vessels and shore stations. Board of Navy Commissioners to the Secretary of the Navy, 27 December 1833, *ibid.*, Vol.505–507.

¹⁹¹ "On the Expediency of Equalizing the Pay of the Officers of the Army and Navy According to Their Relative Rank," communicated to the House of Representatives 28 February 1834, *ibid.*, 496–504.

In frigates	600
In sloops, brigs, schooners, or while acting ashore	500
On leave of absence or waiting orders	360
On furlough at own request	240

All officers were allotted one ration when attached to a ship, and an allowance for housing when attached to a shore establishment that lacked quarters or public accommodations.¹⁹²

On 3 March 1835, the President signed the “Act to regulate the pay of the navy of the United States,” that made the proposed pay scale law, with two changes: Furloughed officers would receive half, not two-thirds, of their leave of absence pay, which in the case of forward warrant officers reduced furlough pay to \$180; and there would be no housing allowance.¹⁹³

The denial of the housing allowance worked a serious hardship on the forward warrant officers attached to Navy yards. Previously, such officers received compensation amounting to \$651.75 where quarters were provided, and \$741.75 where they were not available. The new law reduced the compensation to \$500, a decrease of more than \$150 in the former case and of more than \$240 in the latter. The boatswains, gunners, carpenters, and sailmakers in the Navy petitioned for an increase, and on 26 March 1836 the House Committee on Naval Affairs, to whom the petition was referred, reported a bill increasing the shore pay to \$650. The bill never became law.

The forward warrant officers would probably have been unsympathetic to the complaint of the first clerks of commandants at Navy yards of the inadequacy of their pay, set by the 1835 law at \$900. But the clerks’ plea, communicated to the House of Representatives on 18 January 1836, does shed light on the obstacles that the warrant officers on Navy yards, making \$400 a year less than the first clerks, faced in trying to support their families in any degree of gentility. The clerks asserted that, with their present salary, they were unable “to educate and rear our children in a respectable and proper manner,” required, as they were, “to reside in cities where a great proportion of the most essential necessities of life are very expensive.”¹⁹⁴ Despite the naval clerks’ complaints, clerks in general in mid-19th century United States enjoyed a measure of prosperity and economic stability. Among those who worked for wages in Boston, for instance, clerks were the group most likely to accumulate property. It took more time and greater effort for skilled manual workers, like the Navy’s forward officers, to accumulate property, if they were even able to do so.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹² “A Plan for Equalizing the Pay and Emoluments of the Officers of the Army and Navy, and Providing for an Increase of the Pay of the Latter,” communicated to the House of Representatives, 17 May 1834, *ibid.*, 541–44.

¹⁹³ For the legislative history of this act, particularly as relates to commissioned officers, see Donald Chisholm, *Waiting for Dead Men’s Shoes: Origins and Development of the U.S. Navy’s Officer Personnel System, 1794–1941* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 148–57.

¹⁹⁴ “Memorial of Certain First Clerks of Commandants at Navy Yards for an Increase of Their Salaries,” in *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, 4: 813.

¹⁹⁵ Christopher Clark, *Social Change in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 201.

The forward officers continued to agitate for better pay. Three manuscript letters in the papers of Asa Curtis provide a snapshot of their efforts to improve their lot. In late November 1838, a committee of forward officers, represented by Samuel B. Banister, sailmaker, and John Blight, gunner, asked Asa Curtis, gunner, to accompany William Shuttleworth, sailmaker, to Washington, D.C., to lobby Congress for a bill in favor of warrant officers. The committee had collected a mere \$38 dollars to cover expenses, but hoped to collect more. In mid-December, Shuttleworth reported that the chairman of the House Naval Committee was hopeful that the bill would be passed, in the form of an amendment to a bill in favor of the Navy’s masters. Shuttleworth said that he had “talked with all our friends and they have unanimously promised me their support, and I hope in my next letter to send you some good news.” In the meantime, Shuttleworth, having had to put himself on leave, complained, “my 98 cts per day just pays my board,” and “I think it a hard case that I must take all the trouble and abuse and pay my own expenses in the bargain.” The money the committee had given him had long been expended and he had spent an additional \$100 of his own. Although by May 1839 he had resigned his warrant and accepted a commission in the Marine Corps, Shuttleworth told Curtis he would not “forget his old friends,” but as soon as Congress reconvened the following winter would again bring forward the warrant officers’ bill. Shuttleworth was happy that the former chairman of the House Naval Committee had lost his seat, “for he was a man of no energy.” The prospective new chair had been a midshipman and was sympathetic to the warrant officers’ cause. In the meantime, the warrant officers in Boston had written Shuttleworth that they meant to push for the bill “to the last.” Shuttleworth had no fear of the bill’s failing to pass.¹⁹⁶

Nonetheless, not until 26 August 1842 did Congress adjust the pay of forward warrant officers. The new system provided that the forward officers would be compensated per year as follows:

In ships of the line, and in the Navy yards	
at Boston, New York, and Norfolk	\$800
On other duty	700
On leave of absence and waiting orders,	
for the first ten years	500
thereafter	600

The adjustment thus provided for a modest increase in pay, took into account the expenses associated with duty in the Navy yards, and gave a small reward for longevity.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Samuel B. Banister and John Blight to Asa Curtis, 28 November 1838, William Shuttleworth to Asa Curtis, 18 December 1838, and Shuttleworth to Curtis, 5 May 1839, in Papers of Gunner Asa Curtis, Historical Manuscripts Collection, Navy Department Library, Washington, DC.

¹⁹⁷ “An Act to regulate the pay of pursers and other officers of the navy,” 22nd Cong., 2d sess., Chap. 206, *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 5 (1846), 535. On 3 August 1848, Pensacola was added to the list of navy yards where the compensation was \$800. 13th Cong., 1st sess., Chap. 221, *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 9 (1851), 266.

Congress made one more adjustment in the pay of forward warrant officers before the Civil War. On 5 August 1854, the President signed an act that set their pay as follows:

Sea service	\$900
Shore duty	700
On leave of absence and waiting orders, for the first ten years	600

The new system rewarded sea duty and the greater responsibility of duty in larger classes of vessels by paying forward warrant officers “an addition of two per centum upon the foregoing rates for every year’s sea service, and an addition upon sea pay of ten per centum when serving in ships with four hundred men, and twenty per centum, when serving in ships with nine hundred men.”¹⁹⁸

Former warrant officers often found their best avenue of employment was as civilians in the Navy’s yards. After 14 years as sailmaker, Henry Bacon was dismissed in 1847 for intoxication and absence from duty. He returned to his home in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and followed his trade as a civilian sail maker in the Navy yard there. Carpenter Richard D. Berry, dismissed in 1836 for “irregularity,” worked for many years as a carpenter in the New York Navy Yard. Charles Woodland, who resigned his boatswain’s warrant in 1836 to join the Texas Navy, returned to U.S. naval service in the early 1840s, serving as master’s mate in U.S. frigate *Constitution* during its world cruise, but did not secure a new boatswain’s warrant until 1848. During the two years between the end of *Constitution*’s world cruise and the date of his new warrant, he found civilian employment as superintendent of the laborers in the Charlestown, Massachusetts, Navy Yard. In each of these cases, the former warrant officer believed the position of warrant officer more attractive than civilian employment. Bacon reformed himself, totally abstaining “from the use of ardent liquor,” and, having reestablished his reputation as a steady and reliable man, obtained the signatures of 57 respectable citizens of Portsmouth on a petition to the Secretary of the Navy to restore him to the service. Berry, also having reformed and established a reputation as “a sober and respectable mechanic,” applied for reinstatement of his warrant, seeking to return to the service because of his “reduced circumstances & large family.” Woodland persisted for six years seeking a new warrant before succeeding in his quest.

Wives and Children. The records of the 80 warrant officers under consideration here offer only occasional glimpses of their family life. There is no way to determine, for instance, how many of them were married or had children, although one can guess that most of them were family men.

Boatswain David Eaton started a family late in life. Warranted in 1811, by 1827 he was the Navy’s senior boatswain. By 1835 he was “old and infirm,” and he died in 1839. Yet, seven years after his death he still had three young children, the eldest of whom, Edward, was still too young “to obtain work as a laborer.” Nor had Edward “had the chance to learn a trade.” Basing a moral claim to some assistance on his father’s nearly 40 years of naval service, young Edward asked for a job in the Washington Navy

¹⁹⁸ 33d Cong., 1st sess., Chap. 268, *Stats at Large of USA*, Vol. 10 (1855), 583.

Yard by which he could contribute to the support his widowed mother and his two little siblings. The naval administration advised Edward to apply to the commandant of the yard.

Boatswain Robert O'Neal pointed to his 30 years of faithful naval service when seeking appointment of his son George as a master's mate. Despite Captain Francis H. Gregory's support of the application, George did not get the appointment.

As cautious as the Navy Department appears to have been in allowing warrant officers' family ties to influence hiring for civilian jobs as well as the making of naval appointments, it appears to have been in making concessions for family matters. The department granted requests related to family exigencies only when those requests appeared urgent and did not interfere with the requirements of the service. The several experiences of Sailmaker William Bennett, of Norfolk, Virginia, may be representative. As has been noted, he was unable to support his family in Pensacola, but the department denied his 1836 petition for a transfer. In July 1853, the department granted Bennett's request to be detached from his ship, sloop-of-war *Decatur*, because of "the serious illness of one of his family," but Bennett's commanding officer declined to detach him because the unavailability of the sailmaker's mate meant that the sailmaker could not be spared from the ship, which was about to depart on a cruise. In September, when *Decatur* returned from its cruise, Bennett asked for transfer to U.S. steam sloop *Saranac*, stationed at Norfolk, stating that "his family needed him." But the department denied the transfer, since there was no longer sickness in his family. Instead, Bennett was sent off to the African station for a year and a half. Finally, in November 1855 he was given an assignment in his hometown, the receiving ship *Pennsylvania*. After two years at Norfolk, as an applicant for sea service Bennett requested a month's leave "to arrange his private affairs before leaving the country." The department informed him that to detach him at that time would not be convenient. In August 1859, after a year and a half of sea duty, Bennett wrote from Nicaragua asking for permission to return home because of unspecified "circumstances in his domestic affairs beyond his control." Even though his request had been forwarded with approval by his commanding officer, the department declined to grant it.

"Now too old and infirm for sea service." In 1835, David Eaton had held his boatswain's warrant for 24 years, since before the War of 1812. Eaton had been the Navy's senior boatswain since 1827 and had been the Washington Navy Yard's boatswain since the mid-1820s. Now, he applied for appointment as keeper of the magazine at the Washington Navy Yard, a job apparently less laborious than that of the yard's boatswain. In support of Eaton's application, Commodore Isaac Hull characterized him as "a faithful officer, now too old and infirm for sea service." Unfortunately for Eaton, the Navy Commissioners thought that the post of keeper should be used to reward the faithful service of an officer of higher grade, a lieutenant or a master.

In 1848, the commandant of the Charlestown, Massachusetts, Navy Yard informed the Secretary of the Navy that Joseph Lewis, the yard's boatswain, "is an excellent man, and is very useful in the Rigging loft, but his health is so feeble as to unfit him for outdoor work," and therefore there was work for a second boatswain in the yard. Lewis, who had held his warrant only nine years, had last been to sea in 1846. Apparently his health eventually improved, for he returned to sea duty in 1852.

Before retirement became available as an option for superannuated warrant officers in 1861, the Navy usually tried to provide for its warrant officers who had become too enfeebled by age or ill health to serve at sea in one of two ways: by assigning them shore duty or, after 1833, by admitting them into the Naval Asylum in Philadelphia. The Navy did not lightly discharge and leave to fend for themselves warrant officers grown old in the service. Rather, valuing their skills and honoring the permanent status of their warrants, the department tried to keep them on as long as there was some useful employment that could be found for them, on a Navy yard or in a receiving ship for instance. Such shore-side appointments depended on availability and the absence of others with better claims to consideration.

Irish-born Carpenter Patrick Dee's case illustrates some of the factors influencing the later years of the careers of antebellum warrant officers. Dee's service record gives the bald facts about the last seven years of his life. Having held his warrant for nearly 22 years, Dee wrote to the Navy Department in January 1854 from *Cumberland* in Genoa, Italy, asking for orders to the Charlestown Navy Yard. His wish went unfulfilled. He did not obtain even a leave of absence until *Cumberland* completed its cruise in July of 1855. In the autumn, he was placed in the status of awaiting orders. The following June (1856), he requested orders to the receiving ship *Ohio* at the Charlestown Navy Yard, which he obtained early the next year (1857). In May, two months after reporting for duty in the receiving ship, he was detached and assigned duty with the lighthouse department at Boston. In August of that same year, at his own request, he was given the duties of carpenter at the Charlestown Navy Yard in addition to those connected with the lighthouse department. He continued to be attached to the Navy yard until his death on 27 December 1860, a year before the option of retirement would have become available to him and older warrant officers like him.

Extrapolating beyond the bald narrative, we can imagine what was going on in the life of Patrick Dee. In 1854, Dee stood second in seniority among the Navy's carpenters. He was most likely in his fifties and feeling the physical effects of a total of 11 and a half years of sea service. He was tired and wanted to go home. As he was a citizen of Massachusetts, he probably sought assignment to the Charlestown Navy Yard in order to be near family. The Navy's senior carpenter, John Southwick, however, held the post of carpenter at Charlestown. For nearly two years, beginning in July 1855, Dee was on half-pay, apparently unable or unwilling to accept another seagoing post. Finally, by March 1857, Southwick had been ordered to the steam frigate *Minnesota*, which made available for Dee an assignment as a carpenter in the neighborhood of Boston. For most of the last three years of his life, Dee once again enjoyed the benefits of full pay.

Patrick Dee died credited with some 28 years of service as a Navy carpenter, divided between 13 years of sea service, 11 years of shore duty and four and a half years unemployed. It had been six years since his last seagoing assignment. A comparison of the records of other warrant officers whose names appear in the 1836 register along with his indicates that Dee's experience was close to the norm.¹⁹⁹

William E. Sheffield's final years as a Navy carpenter were unremarkable. Born in Connecticut in

¹⁹⁹ See Appendix B for an analysis of the length of service records of the 1836 warrant officer cohort.

1788, Sheffield secured a warrant as a carpenter in 1820, resigned in 1826, and obtained a new warrant in 1829. His last cruise ended in 1841, when at the age of 53 he was detached from USS *Chesapeake* and sent home from Rio de Janeiro “condemned by medical survey,” that is, because of ill health. He spent the remaining ten years of his life ashore: attached to the receiving ship at New York (1841–1844); at the navy yard in Pensacola, Florida (1844–1846); on furlough (April 1846–April 1847); once again attached to the receiving ship at New York (April 1847–December 1849); and awaiting orders thereafter, until his death at New York on 18 February 1851. Sheffield died 22 years after receiving his second warrant. When he died, he was credited with a total of 4 years and 4 months at sea, 12 years and 11 months of shore duty, and 2 years and 11 months unemployed.

Portraits of Antebellum Warrant Officers

The Navy Registers and personnel files on which this discussion is based allow but an incomplete character portrait of the Navy’s antebellum warrant officers. We do, at least, possess actual portraits of two of the sample of 80 forward warrant officers, Sailmaker Samuel B. Banister—as well as his wife—and Gunner Asa Curtis, whose story opened this chapter. These images, like this essay, are portraits in miniature.

The formal black suits and white shirts in which these warrant officers chose to be painted document the respectable middle-class self-image these men cultivated, as do Mrs. Banister’s fashionable high-waisted pink dress with its lace collar and her dainty jewelry. The very existence of these miniature portraits is evidence that these workingmen, despite their lack of gentlemanly status, aspired to a measure of gentility. However, since these are portraits of young—rather than middle-aged—adults, it remains uncertain whether the Navy’s forward officers were able to succeed in establishing themselves among young America’s prosperous bourgeoisie.



Above: Samuel Banister and wife, ca. 1817. Navy Department Library, Washington, DC, ZB Files, Samuel Banister, courtesy Christopher Bryant, Boston, MA.

Below: Miniature portrait of Asa Curtis, watercolor on ivory, artist Doyle, early 1800s. Navy Department Library, Washington, DC, ZB Files, Asa Curtis.



Appendix A

Rates of Pay of Laborers in the Principal U.S. Atlantic Ports in the 1820s

Daily Pay Rates of White Day Laborers in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1824²⁰⁰

ship carpenters and ship joiners	\$2.00
riggers	1.50
blacksmiths, block and pump makers	1.25
painters, turners, coopers	1.00

Daily Wages of Workmen at Four Dockyards in 1826, in Dollars²⁰¹

Laborers	Portsmouth, NH	Charlestown, MA	Brooklyn, NY	Gosport, VA
Carpenters	1.50	1.58 1/2	1.75	1.50
Blacksmith's foreman	1.50	1.34	1.75	1.50
Strikers	1.00	1.17	1.00	1.00
Masons	1.75	2.00	1.75	1.75
Splitters, Hammerers, and Laborers	1.00	1.25	0.90	0.87 1/2
Common Laborers	0.80	0.96	0.82	0.75

²⁰⁰ "Examination of the Harbors of Charleston, South Carolina, and St. Mary's Georgia, With a View of Establishing a Navy Yard," 23 January 1826, enclosure F, number 2, Joseph Johnson, 21 April 1824, in *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, 2: 479.

²⁰¹ "A table of the wages of workmen and price of materials, at the dock yards in Portsmouth, Charlestown, Brooklyn, and Gosport," in *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, 2: 819.

*Average Per Diem Pay for Laborers on Navy Yards, 1819–1826*²⁰²

Yard	Carpenters	Joiners	Sawyers	Caulkers	Blacksmiths
Portsmouth	1.39 3/8	1.29 6/7	1.45 5/7	1.46 3/8	1.26 1/4
Boston	1.47 7/8	1.43	1.39 7/8	1.75 2/7	1.31 1/4
New York	1.66	1.45 7/8	1.50	1.65 1/2	1.36
Philadelphia	1.56 3/4	1.24 1/2	1.20 1/2	1.50	1.19 7/8
Washington	1.60 1/4	1.44 3/4	1.26 7/8	1.42 3/8	1.24 3/4
Gosport	1.59	1.42 1/4	1.25 1/2	1.32 3/4	1.24 1/4

²⁰² “Exhibit of the average per diem pay at the several navy yards of the five principal denominations of mechanics, from the year 1819 to 1826, inclusive, and the general average for the eight years of each class at each yard,” in *American State Papers . . . : Naval Affairs*, 3: 42–43.

Appendix B

Analysis of Length of Service of Long-Serving Warrant Officers in the Navy Register of 1 January 1836

The following table displays the average lengths of the various categories of service of eleven members of the 1836 warrant officer cohort who (1) died in or after 1847 (when the Navy Register began publishing length-of-service information), (2) had at least 20 years of service, and (3) did not retire, alongside the average lengths of service of the 14 members of the cohort who did retire. The two sets of averages fall within the same order of magnitude.

Average Length of Service of Forward Warrant Officers in the 1836 Register Who Died Without Retiring (After 1846 with at Least 20 Years of Service) Compared With Average Length of Service of Warrant Officers in the 1836 Register Who Retire

	Non-retirees (N=11) Average years/mos.	Retirees (N=14) Average years/mos
How long in service	29 / 2	30 / 10
Total sea service	8 / 9	11 / 4
Shore or other duty	13 / 3	11 / 0
How long unemployed	7 / 3	9 / 3
How long between last at sea and death (non-retirees) or retirement (retirees)	12 / 3	6 / 10

The largest degree of difference between the two groups of men occurs in the last row and is explained by the fact that the comparison is as between apples and oranges: how long between last serving at sea and dying, and how long between last serving at sea and retiring. Since the first group was ineligible for retirement, its members worked longer after they were unfit for sea service than those for whom retirement became an option. Fourteen of the boatswains, gunners, carpenters, and sailmakers listed in the Navy Register of 1 January 1836 retired under the provisions of the 1861 acts, retiring between 1861 and 1873. The following table displays the relevant statistics.

Records of Length of Service of 14 Warrant Officers in the 1836 Register as of Date of Retirement

	Average years/mos.	Minimum years/mos.	Maximum years/mos.
How long in service	30 / 10	17 / 6	50 / 0
Total sea service	11 / 4	4 / 11	18 / 6
Shore or other duty	11 / 0	2 / 9	21 / 9
How long unemployed	9 / 3	0 / 7	20 / 8
How long between sea duty and retirement	6 / 10	0 / 10	22 / 10

The total length of time between receiving the warrant and retiring averaged just shy of 31 years, with a range of a low of 17.5 and a high of 50. On the average, their years of shore duty nearly equaled the years the retirees served at sea. The wide range between the minimum and the maximum amount of time unemployed provides the chief explanation of the wide range between the minimums and the maximums of time in both sea and shore duties alike. That is to say, men unemployed for decades served little time either at sea or ashore.

The average lengths of the various categories of service of 12 members of the 1836 warrant officer cohort who died in or after 1847 (when the Navy Register began publishing the relevant information for officers), with at least 20 years of service, and who did not retire, fall within the same order of magnitude as the average lengths of service of the 14 retirees from the cohort.

Length of Service Records of 12 of the 1836 Warrant Officer Cohort Who Died After 1846 With at Least 20 Years of Service

	Average years/mos.	Minimum years/mos.	Maximum years/mos.
How long in service	29 / 5	21 / 0	45 / 5
Total sea service	8 / 5	0 / 0	14 / 0
Shore or other duty	13 / 8	3 / 0	25 / 8
How long unemployed	7 / 10	1 / 2	18 / 2
How long between last at sea and death	13 / 11	1/0	32

The averages for total sea service and for length of time between last service at sea and death are distorted by the record of Boatswain Lawrence Gallagher, who had 32 years of service, but no sea time. Removing him from the calculation results in the following table, which is more consistent with the table for retirees, displayed above.

Length of Service Records of Eleven of the 1836 Warrant Officer Cohort Who Died After 1846 with at Least 20 Years of Service

	Average years/mos.	Minimum years/mos.	Maximum years/mos.
How long in service	29 / 2	21 / 0	45 / 5
Total sea service	8 / 9	3 / 2	14 / 0
Shore or other duty	13 / 3	3 / 0	25 / 8
How long unemployed	7 / 3	1 / 2	18 / 2
How long between last at sea and death	12 / 3	1/0	30

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