



Yamacraw, 1909



The Yamacraw were a Native American tribe which settled parts of Georgia, specifically around the future site of the city of Savannah.

Builder: New York Shipbuilding Company, Camden, New Jersey

Length: 191' 8" oa

Beam: 32' 6"

Draft: 13'

Displacement: 1,080

Cost: \$200,000

Commissioned: 17 May 1910

Decommissioned: 11 December 1937

Disposition:

Machinery: Triple-expansion steam, 18", 29", and 47" diameter x 30" stroke

Top Speed: 14.1 knots

Economical Speed: 8 knots

Cruising range: 3,500 miles (economical speed)

Complement: 8 officers, 65 enlisted

Electronics:

Armament: 2 x 6-pound rapid-fire guns (1909)

2 x 3"/50 caliber dual-purpose guns (1930)

Cutter History:

The *Yamacraw*, a steel-hulled "First Class Cruising Cutter," was built by the New York Shipbuilding Company of Camden, New Jersey. She was launched on 24 October 1908 and was christened by a Miss Tildeman of Savannah, Georgia. The new cutter entered commissioned service on 17 May 1909. Her homeport was Savannah.

During the next few years, she destroyed derelicts and other hazards to navigation, patrolled regattas and other nautical races, enforced customs laws, carried out special duties as required, sailed on winter cruises each year, and participated in search and rescue operations when needed. After the start of World War I, she was ordered to enforce neutrality laws.

Tragedy struck *Yamacraw* on the night of 3 March 1917. An original report published in the 1917 *Annual Report of the United States Coast Guard* (Washington: GPO, 1917, pp. 28-31) described what happened that night:

"In a hazardous service, such as the Coast Guard, where men must risk their lives to save others who are in perilous positions, it is expected that occasions will arise where the rescuers themselves are lost in their brave attempts to save the unfortunate. But few years have elapsed wherein one or more of the members of the Coast Guard have not been sacrificed in the interests of humanity. It remained for the year just past, however, to develop what was, in all probability, the most disastrous incident of this kind ever recorded in the annals of the Coast Guard, or of either of its forbears, the Revenue-Cutter Service and Life-Saving Service. Ten men of the crew of the cutter *Yamacraw* lost their lives on March 4, 1917, in an attempt to rescue the crew of the stranded steamer *Louisiana*. The conditions leading up to this catastrophe, and the circumstances attendant thereto, are best told in the following copy of Special Order No. 16, issued by the Secretary of the Treasury on April 2, 1917:

TREASURY DEPARTMENT
Washington, April 2, 1917.

The American steamship *Louisiana*, bound from Tampico, Mexico, for Claymont, Del., with a crew of 28, including master, and a cargo of crude oil, was stranded during thick weather in approximately 3 fathoms of water, 1 1/2 miles offshore and about 2 miles east-northeast from Coast Guard Station No. 146 [near Ocean City, Maryland], at 6.43 a.m., March 4, 1917. The vessel was discovered by the patrol from that station when the fog lifted at about 8.20 a. m. The keeper of the station immediately notified the district superintendent by telephone and called for the assistance of the crew of the next northerly station, No. 145. The keeper and three surfmen of the latter station immediately responded, and the surfboat of station No. 146 was launched through a high surf at 10 o'clock a.m.; the steamer was visited and assistance offered. The master declined any and all assistance, save that he desired to send a telegram to the owners, which telegram he threw overboard in a bottle, to be picked up by the surfboat's crew. The master considered that only a cutter or wrecking tug could be of assistance to him. About 3 o'clock in the afternoon of the same day the *Louisiana* set the distress signal NC (assistance wanted). The surfboat was again launched in a still higher surf, and the steamer again visited, this time with considerable difficulty. It was found that the master only wanted to have the station again call for a wrecking tug or a cutter, and he positively declined to consider the landing of his crew. In returning to the shore about 6 o'clock, a sea boarded the power surfboat and carried overboard surfman No. 1, station No. 146, causing him some slight injury. There was at this time a moderate swell from the southeast and a strong east-northeast breeze, causing a rough sea and an occasional break on the shoal in the vicinity of the *Louisiana*, but less sea and no break in the deeper water. The swell caused heavy seas to break over the *Louisiana* from aft forward, this condition growing worse later in the day, and there was a strong suction under her bow following each sea. After dark the *Louisiana* began showing flare-up lights and sending out urgent distress signals to the Coast Guard cutter *Yamacraw*.

The *Yamacraw* had left Norfolk, Va., about 7 p.m., March 3, to go to the assistance of the British steamer *Strathearn*, reported ashore at Metomkin Inlet, Va., and because of the advantage to be gained by reaching the stranded vessel about an hour before the early morning high water of the following day the commanding officer of the *Yamacraw* decided not to await the return of the men who were ashore on liberty. She therefore left port with about 60 per cent of her enlisted force. While searching for the *Strathearn*, the *Yamacraw* received the SOS call from the *Louisiana*, giving an erroneous report of her position, which caused the cutter to lose valuable time during daylight in locating the *Louisiana*. The calls from the *Louisiana* were urgent and for immediate assistance. The *Yamacraw* reached the scene about 8.10 p.m. on March 4, and anchored near the *Louisiana*. At the time the *Yamacraw* anchored the weather was somewhat thick and drizzling, with moderate northeast wind blowing fresh at times with heavy rain squalls. The sea was moderate, with an occasional long swell, sometimes a little confused. The visibility was poor, but the lights of Ocean City could be seen. The moon was obscured by clouds, mist, and rain, but afforded a slight degree of light. Conditions on and near the *Louisiana* could be discerned

but poorly by means of the *Yamacraw's* searchlight. The sea was not too rough for rescue work by boats. The *Yamacraw* rode nearly head to the wind and sea, so that the two vessels had each other about two points on the port bow. Consultation was had between the commanding officer of the *Yamacraw* and other officers aboard, and the conclusion was reached that the weather and sea conditions were not unfavorable to assistance work, and in view of the urgency of the calls received from the *Louisiana* and the indications that the wind and sea both would increase before morning, making rescue work more dangerous if delayed, it was decided to remove her crew at once. There was no question in the minds of the officers or the crew of the *Yamacraw* as to the feasibility of the work at this time. Therefore, at about 8.20 p.m. a surfboat was sent from the *Yamacraw* to the *Louisiana*, containing the following men:

Gunner Ross Harris, in charge, at the steering oar; Master at Arms R. J. Grady; Quartermaster M. L. Kambarn; Seaman G. V. Jarvis; Ordinary Seaman M. L. Austin; Ordinary Seaman D. Fulcher; Ordinary Seaman R. L. Garrish; Ordinary Seaman R. E. Simmons; and Ordinary Seaman T. L. Midgett.

Gunner Harris was an expert boatman and had the entire confidence of the officers and crew, and the other men named were efficient boatmen. The surfboat was lowered from the *Yamacraw* without difficulty or accident and safely made the passage to the *Louisiana*. The commanding officer of the *Yamacraw* had requested by signal that the *Louisiana* use oil freely to form a slick for the surfboat, and this signal was acknowledged. A Franklin life buoy, with a running line attached, had been placed on the port quarter of the *Yamacraw* to be streamed in case the surfboat should have difficulty in reaching the vessel upon her return from the *Louisiana*. Gunner Harris made his boat fast with the painter under the port bow of the *Louisiana*, and had taken off one of that vessel's crew, when an unusually heavy sea, whose approach could not be seen in the darkness, struck the starboard quarter of the vessel, swept over her decks, and engulfed the *Yamacraw's* boat, which was caught in the backlash and hurled against the *Louisiana's* bow, throwing all the men into the water. Lighted life buoys were immediately dropped from the *Louisiana*, and the *Yamacraw* was promptly notified of the accident by occulting light signals. On account of the lack of trained oarsmen remaining on board the *Yamacraw*, it was not deemed safe at that time to lower another boat for the purpose of rescuing the men in the water. The vessel, however, was gotten under way with the least practicable delay and navigated in toward the men. She was stopped near a lighted buoy, to which Master-at-Arms Grady could be seen clinging. Grady left the buoy and attempted to swim to the *Yamacraw*. When it was evident that the attempt was beyond his strength, Steerage Cook J. J. Kennedy went overboard in a bowline, swam to Grady, and with much difficulty brought him alongside the vessel. Kennedy was obliged to loose his hold on Grady, who was then carried under the cutter as she rolled to starboard. When the ship rolled back to port, he floated out alongside just forward of the gangway. Second Lieut. W. J. Keester, who had gone down on the sea steps in the bight of a rope, grabbed Grady under the arms and raised him high enough to pass his hand to someone up the gangway. He then slipped his hand down Grady's side and seized him about the waist, when a sudden

lurch of the vessel to port wrenched Grady from his grasp, and the latter fell back into the water. The dinghy, with Boys First Class William R. Hogarth and J. A. Dugger, was lowered to the water and hanging in the falls.

The boys attempted to save Grady as he was torn from the grasp of Lieut. Keester, but were unsuccessful. Hogarth and Dugger then unhooked the dinghy and let it ride to the painter. The painter parted, and they took to the oars and pulled to a lighted buoy, to which Ordinary Seaman R. E. Simmons was clinging. Being unable to get Simmons into the dinghy, they lashed him alongside and endeavored to row back to the *Yamacraw*, but the strong current which was now running carried the dinghy against the stakes of a fish pound, capsizing it and throwing the occupants into the water. In the meantime Boatswain Hermann Fiedler, Electrician Third Class Belton Miller, Boy First Class George L. Wynn, and Boy Second Class J. McWilliams had jumped into the whaleboat, which was lowered, and started in search of the men in the water. They found no one. The alongshore current was so strong that they could not pull back to the ship or to the Franklin buoy, which had been streamed. They were ordered by signal to anchor until the *Yamacraw* could be dropped down to them. They obeyed the order, but were in the edge of the breakers and, fearing the boat would be swamped, cast off the anchor line and pulled through the surf for the shore. Their boat was upset, but all safely reached land. In response to messages sent by occulting light signals from the *Yamacraw* to Coast Guard Station No. 146, a patrol of the beach, both north and south, and a vigilant lookout, were immediately instituted by the members of that and adjacent stations. It is established by competent testimony that it was not possible on account of the high and dangerous surf for the Coast Guard crews ashore to launch a boat to go to the assistance of the men in the water. The *Yamacraw*, having anchored after the dinghy and whaleboat left, again got under way and was maneuvered to a position near where the whaleboat was last seen, but by that time the boat had pulled through the breakers on the beach, although this fact was not known on board. After remaining in the vicinity of the breakers until hope had been abandoned of saving any of the endangered men, the *Yamacraw* moved offshore and anchored until daylight. No further attempt was made to render assistance to the *Louisiana*, as there remained on board the *Yamacraw* too few men to be able to accomplish anything in that direction. During the night the weather unexpectedly improved, and at daylight the *Yamacraw* proceeded to the southward in search of boats and bodies. None was found and the vessel returned to her headquarters at Norfolk.

As a result of this series of accidents one man, name unknown, from the *Louisiana* and the following-named men from the *Yamacraw* were lost:

Gunner Ross Harris, Master-at-Arms R. J. Grady, Quartermaster M. L. Kambarn, Seaman G. V. Jarvis, Ordinary Seaman M. L. Austin, Ordinary Seaman D. Fulcher, Ordinary Seaman R. L. Garrish, Ordinary Seaman R. E. Simmons, Ordinary Seaman T. L. Midgett, and Boy First Class J. A. Dugger.

The foregoing facts, circumstances, and conditions are established by the testimony elicited by a board of inquiry convened for the purpose of inquiring into the matter, and by a board of investigation convened in pursuance of section 9 of

the act of June 18, 1878. The boards find that the loss of life was entirely unavoidable, and that no blame attaches to any person in the Coast Guard on account thereof. On the contrary, it is shown that the personnel of both cutter and stations did everything in their power to render assistance and to save life throughout the entire incident. The board of inquiry convened in connection with the disaster submits the following recommendations:

That a life-saving medal, second class, be awarded to Steerage Cook J. J. Kennedy for his heroic attempt to save Master-at-Arms Grady.

That the department publish a special order in commendation of the conduct of certain members of the crew of the *Yamacraw*, as follows:

Gunner Ross Harris, Master-at-Arms R. J. Grady, Quartermaster M. L. Kambarn, Seaman G. V. Jarvis, Ordinary Seaman M. L. Austin, Ordinary Seaman D. Fulcher, Ordinary Seaman R. L. Garrish, Ordinary Seaman R. E. Simmons, and Ordinary Seaman T. L. Midgett, for conspicuous gallantry in promptly and eagerly responding to the urgent calls from the *Louisiana* for assistance and making an attempt to rescue the crew of that vessel by means of the *Yamacraw's* surfboat.

Boy First Class J. A. Dugger, for zeal and devotion to duty in responding eagerly and fearlessly to a call for assistance and giving up his own life in an attempt to save the lives of his shipmates.

Boy First Class William H. Hogarth, Boatswain Hermann Fiedler, Electrician Third Class Belton Miller, Boy First Class George L. Wynn, and Boy Second Class J. McWilliams, for zeal and courage in their efforts to rescue their shipmates who were struggling in the water.

Second Lieut. W. J. Keester, for his effort to save the life of Master-at-Arms R. J. Grady.

In reviewing the report of the board of inquiry, the testimony submitted therewith, and the conclusions and recommendations of the board, the department is deeply impressed by the fine example of bravery, fidelity to duty, and self-abnegation shown to have been exhibited by those to whose lot it fell to take part in this unfortunate and tragic event. The department commends these officers and men in the highest terms.

True to the noblest traditions of the sea, faithful to their highest trusts, even to the sacrifice of their lives without thought of self, those who perished went voluntarily on their errand of mercy, that they might save the lives of their fellow men. The survivors, no less true to these noble traditions, and undismayed by the disaster which had overtaken their comrades, met the situation with a spirit of bravery and determination which calls forth the highest encomiums. To them the department extends its felicitations, and believes that the experiences of the occasion will serve as an inspiration to even greater endeavor and accomplishment.

Events like these, sad as they are, lend enduring luster to the service and strengthen still further its century-old traditions, of which our Government has the right to be proud.

It is directed that this order shall be read at a general muster to be held as soon as practicable after the receipt hereof, at every unit of the service.

Wm. G. McAdoo, Secretary."

After the U.S. declared war on Germany on 6 April 1917, *Yamacraw* was "temporarily" assigned to the Navy for duty. She retained her Coast Guard crew. The Navy assigned her to the Sixth Patrol Force that operated from the capes of the Chesapeake to Nantucket Shoals lightship. She continued on this duty until 19 July 1917 when she was transferred to the Fifth Naval District with headquarters at Norfolk and served in this district until she was selected to go overseas.

She was assigned to convoy duty, escorting merchant ships. On her fourth convoy escort voyage one of the ships in the convoy was torpedoed. It was not considered a good policy for a ship to leave a convoy during the war to attempt any rescue of survivors of sunken ships but *Yamacraw's* commanding officer requested permission to return to the sinking ship to attempt to rescue any survivors. Permission was granted and she returned to the sinking ship's aid. Only four survivors were located and rescued. During the war the cutter escorted many merchant vessels and cruised for over 36,000 miles.

After the war, she returned to her peacetime routine and was again homeported at Savannah, Georgia. She served on the International Ice Patrol from 1 April to 7 July 1921. After the passage of Prohibition she took an active part in the Coast Guard's enforcement efforts along the southeastern coast.

The *Yamacraw* was decommissioned on 11 December 1937 at Curtis Bay, Maryland.

Photographs:



"Yamacraw"; no date/photo number; photographer unknown.

The *Yamacraw* at anchor, circa 1914.



"The cutter YAMACRAW with three seized motorboats alongside, which were picked up enroute from West End, Bahamas to the Florida Coast with cargoes of contraband."; 3 January 1925; no photo number; photographer unknown.



"USS Yamacraw with captured rum runner 'Pronto' alongside, 21 January 1936 at anchor, Charleston Harbor, S.C."; post-card photo; photographer unknown.

