



## **Charles S. Root: Hurricane Lifesaver, Distinguished Engineer and Founder of the Coast Guard's Intelligence Office**

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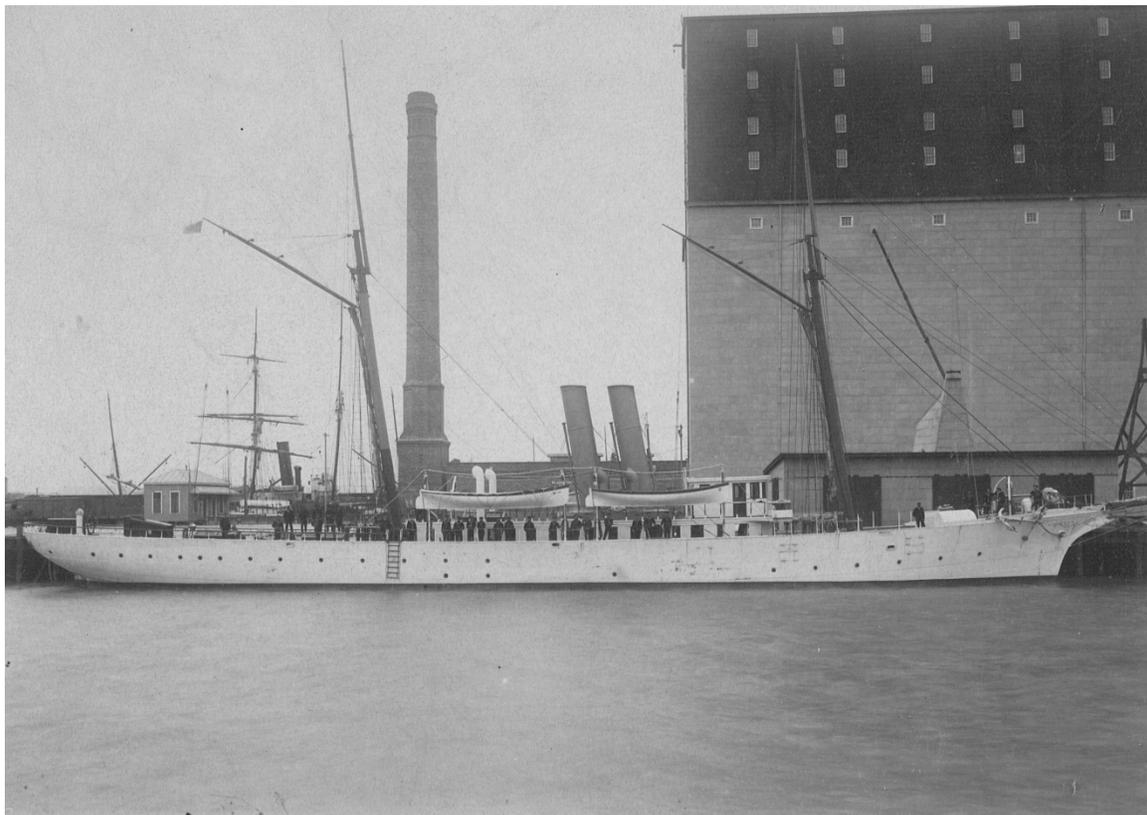
**A rare photograph of Captain Charles S. Root**

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In studying the historical record of by-gone days, scholars often come across men and women whose deeds have gone largely unrecognized. Such is the case of Captain Charles S. Root, one of the most distinguished engineering officers of the early-twentieth century whose career exemplified the Coast Guard's core values.



Early in his career, Root distinguished himself as a brave and self-sacrificing member of the Revenue Cutter Service. In June 1900, he entered the service as a second assistant engineer and by September of that year he had earned the Gold Lifesaving Medal (left), an honor bestowed on only a few Revenue Cutter Service personnel. Root received the medal for service while assigned to the cutter Galveston during the catastrophic Galveston Hurricane, which is believed to have killed more Americans than the combined number lost in the attack on Pearl Harbor, Hurricane Katrina and the terrorist attacks of 9/11. During the height of the hurricane, and at great risk to his own life, Root led rescue parties into the flooded streets of Galveston to save over thirty individuals from drowning.

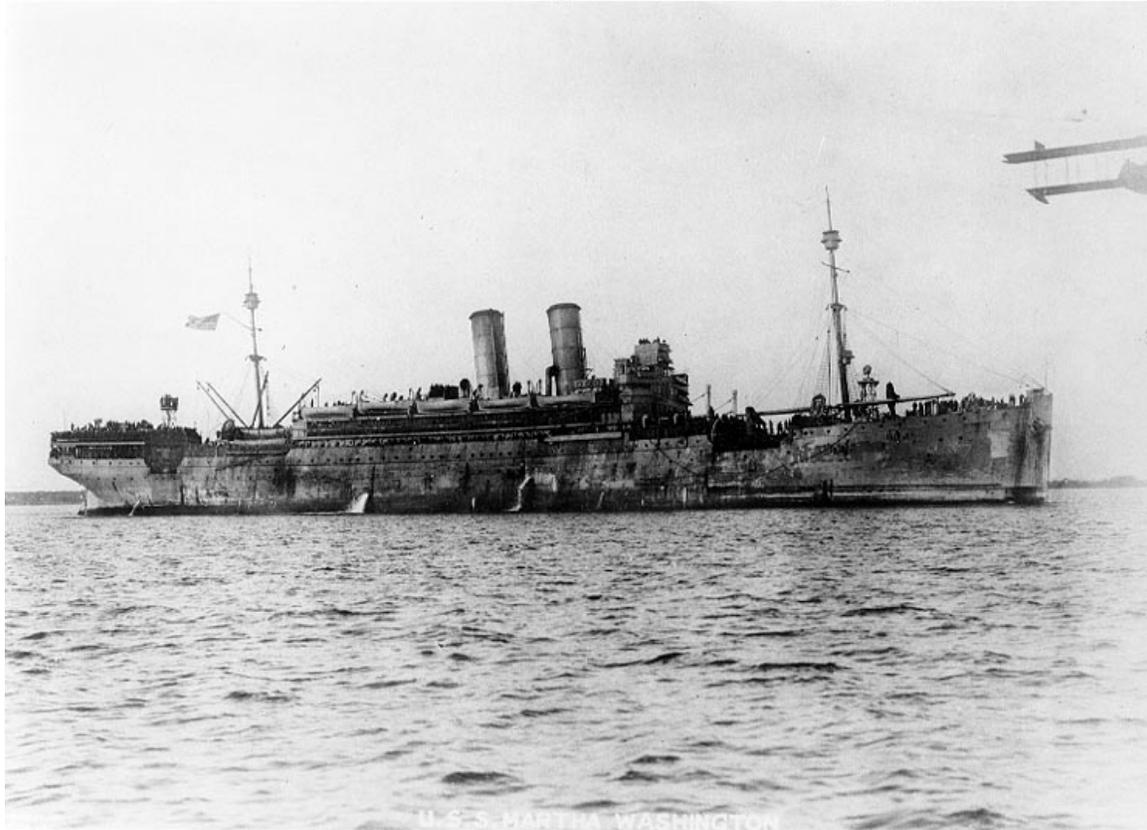


**Revenue Cutter *Galveston* prior to the 1900 hurricane.**

Root also distinguished himself as an accomplished professional in the field of engineering. He had already established his career as a marine engineer in Connecticut before joining the service at the age of twenty-six. As an engineering officer, he specialized in reconditioning steam vessels for sea service, including the USS Bancroft after it was turned over to the Revenue Cutter Service to become the cutter Itasca and the USS Eagle 22 after it became the cutter Earp. Root published papers on marine engineering in professional journals and a prize was later established in his name for the highest grades in mechanical drawing at the Coast Guard Academy. In 1917, the U.S. Navy ordered Root to convert the large yacht Xafira for war patrol duties and later that

year it requested Root's services again when it took possession of the interned Austrian passenger liner SS Martha Washington. The Austrian crew had sabotaged Washington's steam engines, but Root got the vessel in operation in short order and served as first engineering officer throughout the rest of World War I as the transport ferried American troops between the United States and France.

Photo # NH 96668 USS Martha Washington crowded with returning troops, 1919



**U.S.S. *Martha Washington*, 1919.**  
**Courtesy of the Naval History and Heritage Command**

Root received medals, commendations and special recognition from the Coast Guard and the U.S. Navy throughout his career, but he is best known for his work in Coast Guard intelligence during Prohibition. In 1924, then Lieutenant Commander Root created the Coast Guard's Office of Intelligence as the service became the primary law enforcement agency in interdicting illegal liquor smuggled along the nation's coasts and inland waterways. Root built up one of the most respected intelligence sections in the federal government by recruiting the best talent, adopting the finest technology at his disposal and working closely with offices and personnel in the Treasury Department and Customs. As head of Coast Guard Intelligence, he is credited with breaking up much of the Rum Running activities along the East Coast. Between 1924 and 1929, he rose in rank from lieutenant commander to captain and, from 1925 on, held an additional appointment as customs agent.

In 1930, Captain Root died in an automobile accident in Washington, D.C. In August of that year, he was buried with full military honors at Arlington National Cemetery, joining many other distinguished members of the U.S. Coast Guard buried in that hallowed ground. In addition to his role as founding father of Coast Guard intelligence, Root had had a distinguished career as an engineering officer on board cutters in Atlantic, Gulf and Pacific waters, including service on board the cutter Seneca during that vessel's historic first cruise in the International Ice Patrol. Terms used by contemporaries to describe him include "skillful," "proficient," "reliable," "efficient," "unselfish" and "untiring," and the Coast Guard's current Charles S. Root Intelligence Award for excellence is named in his honor. In a 1927 commendation, Assistant Treasury Secretary L.C. Andrews, concluded with the following remarks: "I am truly grateful that I had a man of your caliber and genius here at hand to help me plan and carry on this [Prohibition] work. I hope, Commander, that you have a most successful future, as you will always have a very warm spot in my affections."

