

**The Heroic Exploits of Benjamin Hiller in America's Quasi War with France**

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The storm must have been horrific; something like the one depicted in the best selling novel, *The Perfect Storm*. It swept in from the equator, along the Bahamas, and up the Florida coast in September of 1800. Devastating winds and towering waves threatened the American frigate *Insurgent*, recently captured from the French. On board the cutter *Scammel*, the crew jettisoned cannon and anchors in an effort to ride out the hurricane, and on board the cutter *Pickering*, a similar scene of bravery likely played out as Master Commandant Benjamin Hiller and his crew fought to save their ship in those deadly seas.

The storm was broad enough to capture *Pickering* and the other warships even though each was carrying out a separate mission to help prosecute a war. Between 1797 and 1801, the United States and Revolutionary France were embroiled in an undeclared naval war known as the "Quasi War." Angered that the United States had remained neutral in its struggle with Great Britain, France issued letters of marque, papers permitting armed privateers to prey on American merchant vessels sailing the high seas. American naval strategists called on the Revenue Cutter Service to help battle the privateers, and the Service's cutters distinguished themselves fighting side-by-side with units of the U.S. Navy.

The Treasury Department commissioned the Merrill Shipyard of Newburyport, Massachusetts, to build *Pickering* on the plans of renowned designer Josiah Fox. Named in honor of then Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, the sleek two-masted cutter carried double headsails and double topsails fitted to each of its raked masts. This spread of canvas provided greater speed and would enable the cutter to catch the highly mobile privateers. Smithsonian maritime historian Howard Chapelle referred to the cutter's sail configuration as a "jackass brig," but contemporaries just called it a brig. *Pickering* also carried fourteen cannon, even though a contemporary rendering shows the brig pierced by ten gun ports per side, and *Pickering*'s crew of seventy included a master, mates, able seamen, ordinary seamen, marines and boys.

On board *Pickering*, Benjamin Hiller served two successive ship's masters early in the Quasi War. Revenue Cutter Service Master Jonathan Chapman commanded the brig through the end of 1798 before resigning. In January 1799, at a time when Revenue Cutter Service masters commanded all the Service's cutters, distinguished Navy lieutenant Edward Preble received command of *Pickering* to occupy him temporarily while shipbuilders completed the 40-gun frigate *Essex*, in which Preble later made his name. Meanwhile, Hiller advanced up the ranks, serving as a Revenue Cutter Service mate through 1798 then receiving a Navy lieutenant's commission in late January 1799 backdated to October 31, 1798. After seeing nearly a year of action under Chapman and Preble, the Revenue Cutter Service transferred control of *Pickering* to the Navy in late May of 1799 and newly commissioned Hiller assumed command a month later.

As *Pickering*'s skipper, Hiller was highly esteemed by the press, his superiors and likely his crew. In March 1800, the New England newspapers printed the following: "We learn, that complaints are made in the West Indies of our naval commanders lounging at St. Kitts; except Lieut. Hiller, in the *Pickering*, who bears the reputation of an

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enterprising zealous officer.” After *Pickering* returned to port in May, another paper reported, “The greatest praise is due to this enterprising commander, both for his vigilance in protecting the convoys under his care, in scourging the spoliators of our commerce, and in the excellent management and discipline of the ship and crew under his command. The crew without exception of an individual, are all returned in perfect health.” A later article claimed that “The activity of her commander is warmly spoken of at the southward—it deserves praise all around the compass.” Navy Secretary Benjamin Stoddert was also aware of Hiller’s qualities, writing to others “The Commander is an active and enterprising man, and well qualified to do good Service.” In portending Hiller’s future, Stoddert wrote to him, “The President is sensible of your merit, & will not be unmindful of it.” By 1800, the merchants of Boston lobbied Secretary Stoddert for a captaincy on behalf of Hiller and later that same year he received a promotion to master commandant.

Hiller established quite a reputation. While the *Pickering* came under navy control in its last year of service, Hiller transferred to that service and most of his crew likely did to profit from prize ships they captured. Between early 1799 and the summer of 1800, *Pickering* captured between fifteen and twenty privateers and merchant vessels. During Hiller’s command, *Pickering* captured a French merchant vessel allegedly valued at \$100,000 (in 1799 dollars!) and re-captured at least ten merchant vessels the French had taken. In addition, Hiller commanded *Pickering* in the capture of at least five armed privateers, a few of which rivaled the fighting strength of *Pickering*’s own weapons and crew.

*Pickering*’s battle with the privateer *l’Egypte Conquise* serves as a testament to the bravery of Hiller and his crew in the face of tremendous odds. In early October 1799, the French sent the most powerful privateer in the West Indies on a mission to capture *Pickering*. With between fourteen and eighteen nine-and six-pound cannon, and double-manned with between 175 and 250 men, the privateer out-gunned and out-manned *Pickering*’s defenses of fourteen four-pounders and a crew of less than one hundred. Termed by witnesses as “severe,” the nine-hour duel occurred around October 8<sup>th</sup>, 1799. It continued for five hours, ceased for an hour and re-commenced for three more hours after which the privateer struck its colors and surrendered. As often happened with reports from the Caribbean, it took the news a month to travel north and initial reports misrepresented aspects of the battle. Even some of today’s accepted histories of *Pickering* claim that Lt. Preble commanded the ship during this capstone achievement despite the fact that Hiller had taken command of *Pickering* three months before.

After the deadly hurricane of September 1800 had moved on, only one of the three sailing vessels remained afloat. It was *Scammel*, however, and not *Pickering* that survived to fight another day. As if in an instant, mountains of water had swallowed the frigate *Insurgent* and 400 men without leaving a trace. With the sudden disappearance of *Pickering*, rumors spread in the papers that the French had massacred Hiller and his crew after capturing the island of Curacao. The massacre never happened and by the time newspapers printed this rumor in October, the ship, skipper and crew had been missing for a month. A newspaper article printed in December probably provided a more likely account. It noted that a merchant vessel sailing behind the hurricane’s track after the storm had passed, reported “a large copper-bottomed brig, with quarter-boards and a range of ports, was seen bottom upwards.”

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The case of *Pickering* underscores the obstacles to documenting the early history of the Revenue Cutter Service. When *Pickering* went down in that September storm, it took with it many historical documents, including bookkeeping records, letters, logbooks and memoirs. In addition, the sacking of Washington by the British in the War of 1812 and fires at the Department of Treasury in the early 1800s destroyed much of the archival material that documented this majestic cutter and crew. Only contemporary accounts from newspapers, a few Treasury Department letters that survived destruction and some navy records can trace *Pickering*'s distinguished history.

During his day, Master Commandant Benjamin Hiller rose to become an American hero. Had *Pickering* survived that September hurricane, Hiller could have achieved even greater feats of heroism and joined the pantheon of early American naval figures, such as Decatur, Truxtun and Preble. Now, over 200 years since the Quasi War, Hiller is a forgotten warrior from a forgotten war. No portrait or rendering commemorates his existence and no obituary or grave stone memorializes his death. Hiller is one of the many unrecognized heroes from the Coast Guard and its predecessor services who have sacrificed their lives in the line of duty.