A contemporary painting depicting a War of 1812 cutter, likely the Massachusetts off Rockport, Mass., bound toward Salem. Held by the Peabody-Essex Museum, this painting is one of the earliest known illustrations of an American revenue cutter.

Defense of the Cutter Eagle against the attack from the British brig HMS Dispatch. *Painting by Aldis B. Browne, II.*

For information contact:
U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office
Commandant (CG-09224)
U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters
2100 Second Street SW
Washington, DC 20593

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United States Coast Guard History

United States Revenue Cutters and the War of 1812

Revenue Cutter Vigilant vs. British privateer Dart, Oct. 4, 1813. *Painting by Dean Ellis.*

Revenue Cutters in the War of 1812

Instituted in 1790, the U.S. revenue cutter fleet served in every major American combat operation up to 1915, when the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service was combined with the U.S. Life-Saving Service to form the modern U.S. Coast Guard.

The War of 1812 served as an early test of the revenue cutters' naval warfare capability.

When President James Madison signed a declaration of war against Great Britain in June 1812, the revenue cutter fleet had 14 cutters armed and ready.

Nine of these cutters served actively during the war and within a week of the war's declaration, the cutter *Thomas Jefferson* had captured the British brig *Patriot*, the first maritime capture of the war.

While the revenue cutters served on the blockaded East Coast, their diminutive size required some caution on the part of their captains.

Designed primarily to interdict illegal smuggling into America's major ports, the cutters measured little more than 100 feet in length and carried no more than eight light cannon with a crew of fifteen to thirty officers and men. During the war, the cutters typically operated out of American controlled ports and defended American merchantmen from British privateers and small units of the Royal Navy.

In the latter half of 1812, and in 1813, they met with great success. Commanded by William Ham, the *Thomas Jefferson* captured three Royal Navy barges manned by more than 60 men.

In addition, cutter *Gallatin*, captained by Daniel McNeill; cutter *Surveyor*, commanded by Samuel Travis; and cutter *James Madison*, captained by George Brooks; all seized British merchant vessels, adding further to the service's war record.

Based in Newport, Rhode Island, the *Vigilant* boasted the most impressive seizure by a cutter. Throughout much of 1813, the British privateer sloop *Dart* operated in Long Island Sound, capturing more than 20 American merchant vessels.

On Oct. 4, 1813, *Dart* appeared off of Newport and *Vigilant* gave chase. *Vigilant*'s captain, John Cahoone, ordered the cutter to lie alongside *Dart*, fired his cannon and captured the privateer with an armed boarding party.

Despite the successes enjoyed by revenue cutters, the small vessels proved too small to defend themselves against heavily armed Royal Navy patrols.

In August 1812, the enemy trapped the cutter *Commodore Barry* in an inlet on the Maine coast.

In the same month, after capturing several enemy vessels early in the war, the cutter *James Madison* succumbed to the frigate HMS *Barbadoes*. At the time of her capture, *Madison* was attacking a British convoy sailing off the coast of Savannah.

On a rainy and foggy night in June 1813, the cutter *Surveyor* found itself trapped by units of the Royal Navy in a shallow estuary of the Chesapeake Bay.

A British force of barges attempted to take the small cutter by boarding. *Surveyor*'s crew fought stubbornly; however, the overwhelming British boarding party captured the cutter.

The officer in charge of the boarding party returned the sword of *Surveyor*'s captain, commending him for the valiant defense of his ship.

In October 1814, after receiving word that an American merchantman was in danger of capture by the British, New Haven-based cutter *Eagle* sailed into Long Island Sound to assist the hapless vessel.

The next morning, the Eagle was becalmed not far from the brig HMS *Dispatch*. With only six small cannon on board, the cutter faced the Royal Navy warship of eighteen cannon and its armed boarding barges, so *Eagle* beached in shallow water.

The cutter's crew hauled the ship's guns on shore to fire on the British from the heights overlooking the sound.

Eagle was later re-floated, but the British brig and the frigate HMS *Narcissus* closed in to capture the crippled cutter before it could reach the safety of its homeport.

In the War of 1812, as it did throughout its history, the revenue cutters demonstrated the bravery and resourcefulness vital to a small sea service in time of war.

News of the service's hard-fought battles spread to the American public at a time when combat successes helped raise their spirits.

In spite of its diminutive cutters and the long odds pitted against them during the war, the revenue cutter fleet maintained a reputation as a small but valiant naval service.

In addition to protecting American merchant shipping and fighting against units of the Royal Navy, revenue cutters served as law enforcement for ports and coastal areas, provided vital intelligence regarding the movement of enemy naval vessels, escorted convoys of American merchantmen, transported important government cargoes, dignitaries and diplomats, and delivered vital dispatches between government officials and military personnel.

After the War of 1812, the role of the revenue cutters and, later the Coast Guard, would forever include all of these important wartime missions.

On July 23, 1812, Cutter James Madison, commanded by Captain George Brooks, captured the 300-ton British brig Shamrock after an eight-hour chase. Shamrock carried six guns and a crew of sixteen men, and was bound from London to Amelia Island, Spanish Florida, with a cargo of arms and ammunition.