

A “system of cutters”...

In 1789, Alexander Hamilton became the first Secretary of the Treasury and is considered the founder of the United States Coast Guard. On 4 August 1790, Congress passed Hamilton’s request for seagoing vessels to enforce trade tariffs. This marked the “birth” of the U.S. Coast Guard.

No U.S. Navy existed

The Continental Navy was disbanded in 1785, so there was no United States Navy when the federal government was formed under the Constitution.

The cutter fleet had no official name and was simply called “the cutters,” “revenue cutters” or “system of cutters.” Between 1790 and 1798, these cutters were the only federal vessels protecting the coast, trade and maritime interests of the new republic. Revenue cutters served under the Collector of Customs in the major ports. This is the reason for the Coast Guard’s status as the United States’ “oldest, continuously serving sea service.”

Revenue cutter missions

The cutters were the primary defense against attempts to avoid customs duties, the new nation’s only source of income except for the sale of public lands.



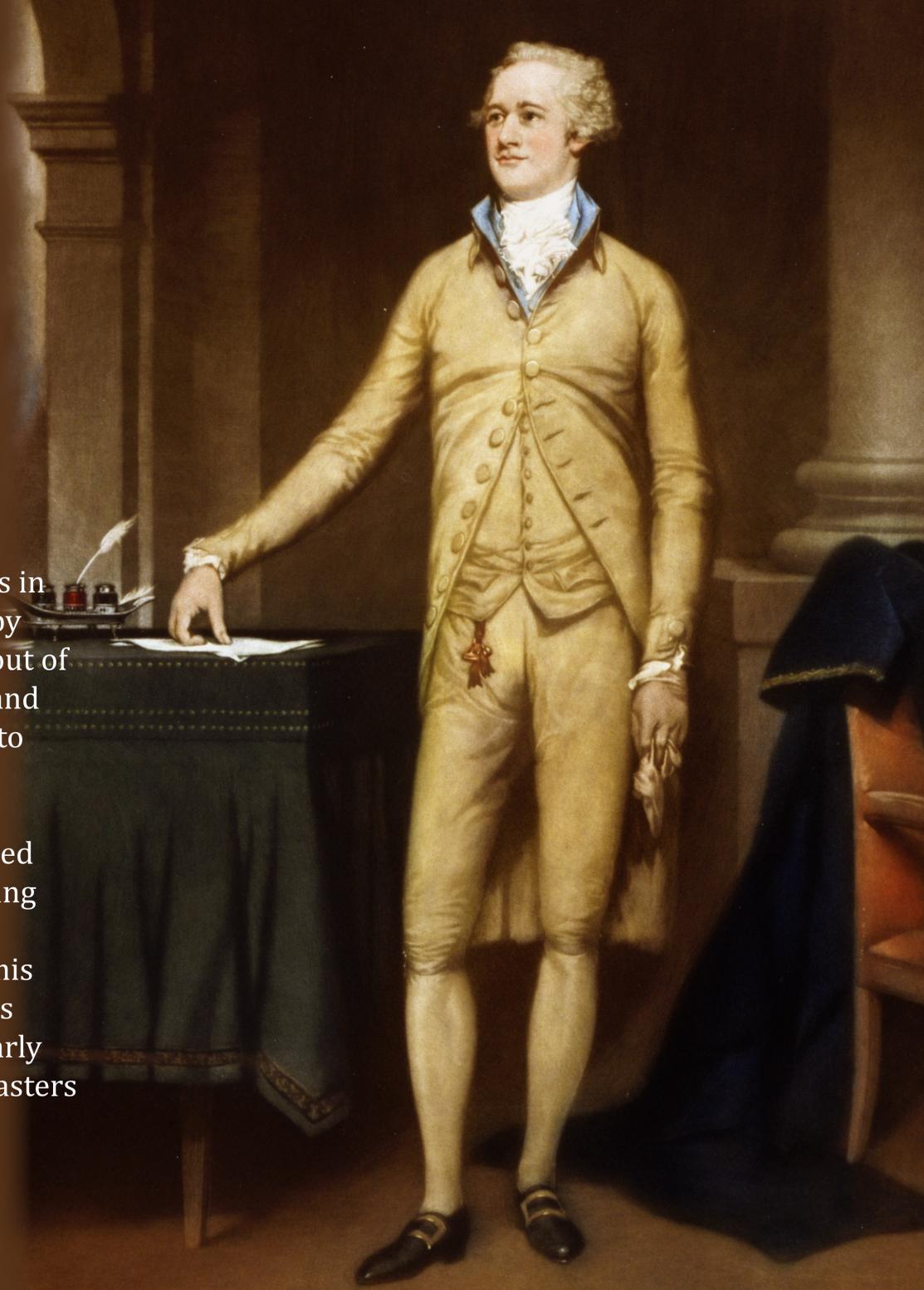
British-made pistol stamped “Customs,” ca. 1810. U.S. Coast Guard Historic Collection



The peacetime tasks specifically assigned to the cutters included boarding incoming and outgoing vessels, checking their papers; sealing cargo holds of incoming vessels; and seizing those vessels in violation of the law. In addition, the cutters deterred smuggling by sailing out of their home ports and intercepting smugglers well out of the harbor but within sight of the coast. If smugglers could not land their illegal cargoes directly onshore they unloaded the goods into smaller “coaster” vessels to avoid customs duties.

Soon, more missions not related to law enforcement were assigned to the service, including enforcing quarantine restrictions; charting the local coastline; carrying official passengers and papers; and carrying supplies and personnel to remote lighthouses. During this period, rescuing or assisting mariners in distress on the high seas fell unofficially upon the revenue cutters since these ships regularly patrolled U.S. waters and witnessed sinkings, strandings and disasters at sea.

Portrait of Alexander Hamilton. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress

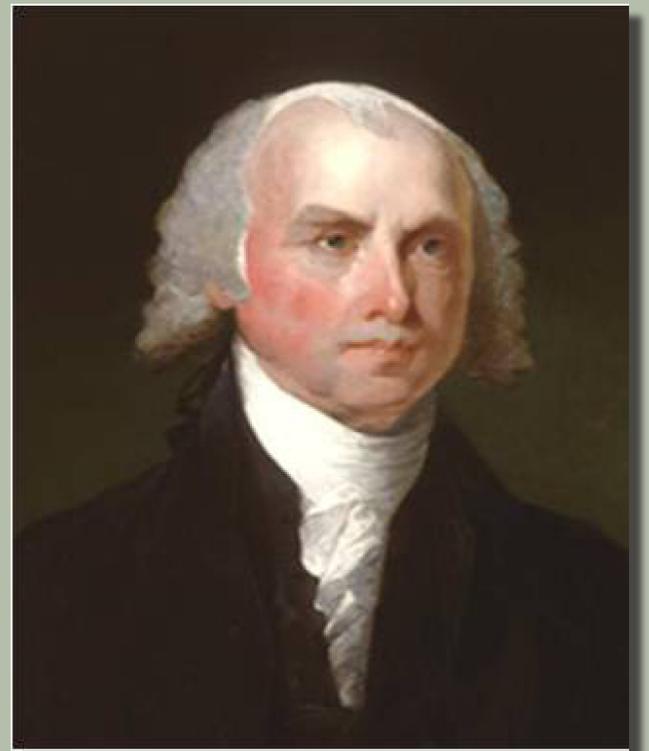


Origins of the War of 1812

Violation of American neutrality

During the Napoleonic Wars, Britain and France both violated American neutrality. British warships stopped U.S. vessels and impressed American seamen into the Royal Navy, while French privateers captured unsuspecting American cargo vessels despite the neutral status of the merchantmen.

For these and other reasons, the Jefferson and Madison administrations tried to assert American neutrality through economic pressure from embargoes and trade restrictions, and many U.S. ships were forbidden to sail for foreign ports.



President James Madison. Image Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery



Cartoon, A Sketch for the Regent's Speech on Mad-Ass-Son's Insanity, Great Britain, 1812. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Enforcing the Embargo

Similar to Prohibition in the early 20th century, revenue cutters and crews were required to enforce these unpopular laws that put thousands of Americans out of work. All but the Non-Intercourse Act were repealed before the war, but these trade restrictions contributed to the outbreak of fighting between Great Britain and the United States in 1812.

Cartoon, The happy Effects of that Grand System of shutting Ports against the English!, 1808. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.



The Declaration of War

After a concerted effort to remain neutral through embargoes, the United States finally became entangled in the conflict between France and Great Britain. On 18 June 1812, President James Madison had no choice but to sign a declaration of war against Great Britain.



Somerset Lowry-Corry, 2nd Earl Belmore purchased the James Madison after her capture. Earl Belmore re-named the vessel Osprey. Image courtesy of John Armar Lowry-Corry, 8th Earl Belmore.

The odds of beating the Royal Navy

At the start of the conflict, the United States faced the Royal Navy's 600 ships with 16 navy vessels, a fleet of small navy gunboats, and 14 revenue cutters.

On the day war was declared, Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin sent a one-sentence circular to his customs collectors, writing "Sir, I hasten to inform you that War was this day declared against Great Britain." And he ordered that the news be dispatched to U.S. Navy vessels by cutters stationed along the East Coast.

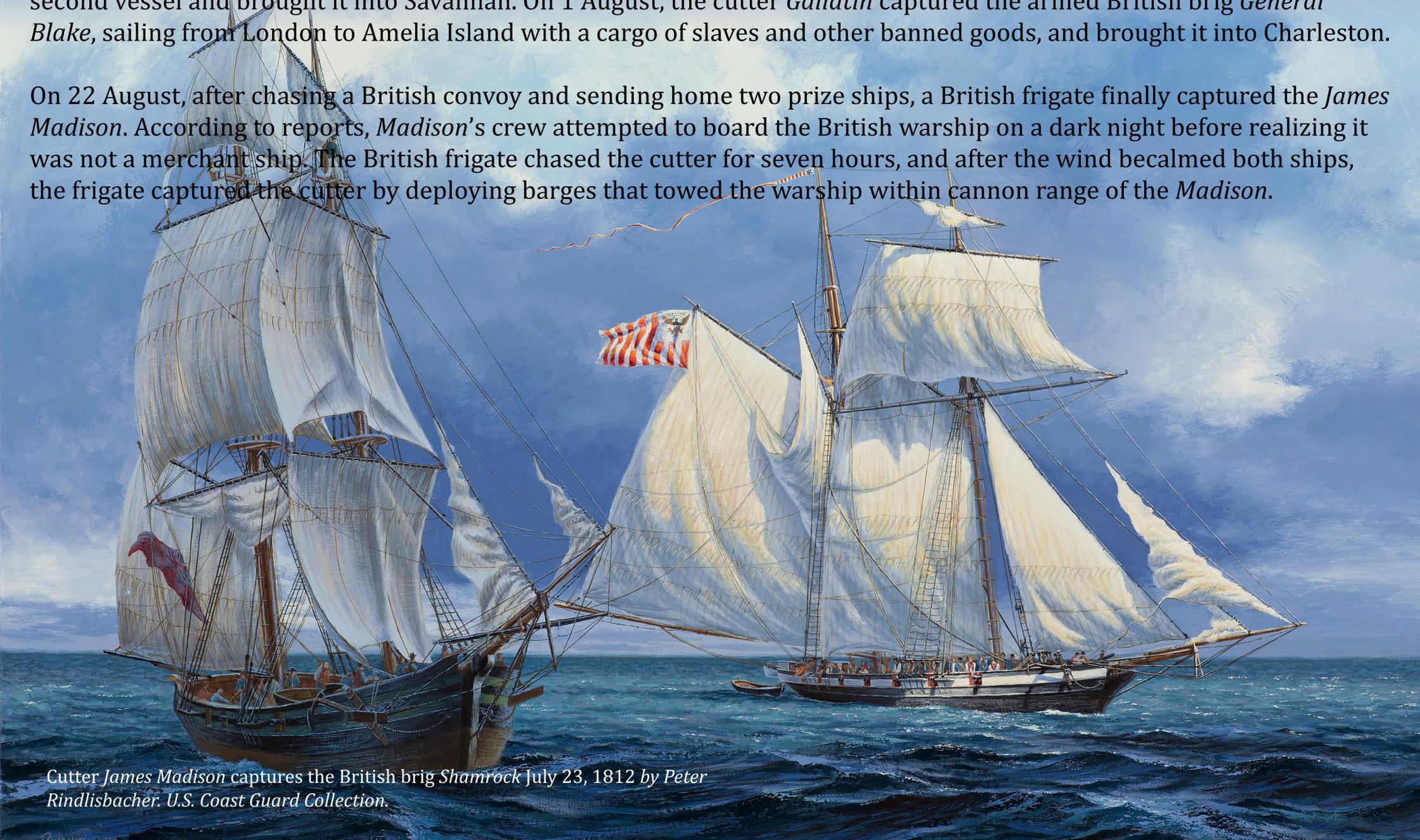
Before the war, the revenue cutters served a multi-faceted role in service of the federal government. They would expand this role during the war to include new naval and combat-oriented missions.

Early captures by revenue cutters

As they would in future conflicts, the cutters served on the front line of the naval war. On 25 June 1812, the Norfolk-based cutter *Thomas Jefferson* made the first maritime capture of the war, seizing the British schooner *Patriot*.

Cutter *James Madison*, of Savannah, captured an armed British brig on 23 July; and, on 1 August, this cutter seized a second vessel and brought it into Savannah. On 1 August, the cutter *Gallatin* captured the armed British brig *General Blake*, sailing from London to Amelia Island with a cargo of slaves and other banned goods, and brought it into Charleston.

On 22 August, after chasing a British convoy and sending home two prize ships, a British frigate finally captured the *James Madison*. According to reports, *Madison's* crew attempted to board the British warship on a dark night before realizing it was not a merchant ship. The British frigate chased the cutter for seven hours, and after the wind becalmed both ships, the frigate captured the cutter by deploying barges that towed the warship within cannon range of the *Madison*.



Cutter James Madison captures the British brig Shamrock July 23, 1812 by Peter Rindlisbacher. U.S. Coast Guard Collection.

Protecting American Merchantmen

By early 1813, the Royal Navy established a tight blockade of the East Coast forcing the diminutive cutters to serve as frontline units against enemy patrols and Royal Navy warships.

Revenue cutters escort convoys

The cutters' mission of protecting the revenue required them to guard American coasting vessels navigating the sounds, bays and inland waterways of the U.S. Several cutters carried on this tradition of escorting convoys, which the cutters established during the Quasi-War with France in the late 1790s. For example, cutters *Active* (New York) and *Eagle* (New Haven) were kept very busy escorting merchantmen between New England and the Mid-Atlantic states.

On 18 June 1814, a New York newspaper wrote "Yesterday at 4 P.M. Passed the New-Haven Revenue Cutter *Eagle, Lee*, from New York, with 20 sail of coasters under convoy, standing into New-Haven. No enemy's cruizers in the sound."

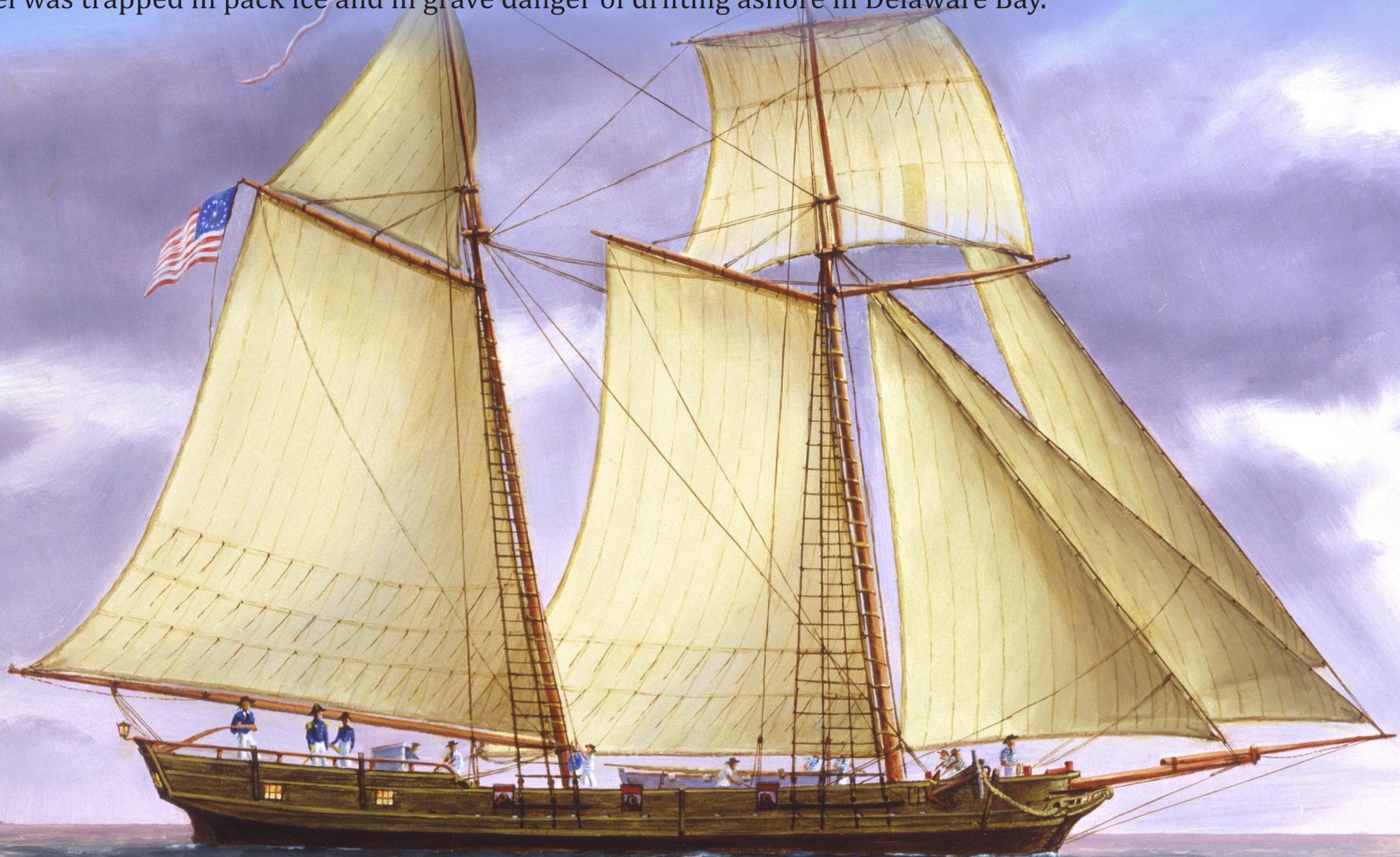
Revenue cutters perform rescue operations

Another cutter mission, although unofficial at the time, was rescue and life saving. The revenue cutters had supported this role since the establishment of the fleet. During the war, there were likely numerous rescues performed by cutters, but there were only a few noted in contemporary newspapers, such as those listed below.

On 23 November 1812, crew members of Wilmington, Delaware-based *General Greene* used axes to cut open the bow of the brig *Rattlesnake*, which capsized during a severe storm. They saved eighteen men and a boy who had been trapped in an air pocket under the hull for four hours in frigid chin-deep water.

On 29 November, the Wilmington, North Carolina-based *Diligence* rescued survivors of the brig *Defiance*, bound from New York to Savannah, which capsized in a violent offshore storm. The crew saved the cargo, buried the dead and delivered the survivors to Wilmington.

On 31 January 1813, the crew of the *General Greene* saved the prize ship *Lady Johnson*, whose crew was sick and disabled, while the vessel was trapped in pack ice and in grave danger of drifting ashore in Delaware Bay.



Maritime Interdiction

Capturing enemy merchantmen was not an officially sanctioned mission, but enforcing trade restrictions and monitoring shipping in and out of American ports was. In addition to the Non-Intercourse Act, which was in force throughout the conflict, cutters had to enforce an additional seven trade restrictions passed by Congress during the war.



Revenue cutter ensign, ca. 1812. U.S. Coast Guard Historic Collection

for supplying the enemy on our coast, in Canada and in the West Indies, &c., &c. premising the development of a most nefarious and long continued system of smuggling, [and] victualing the British and contravening the most imperious laws and highest interests of the country."

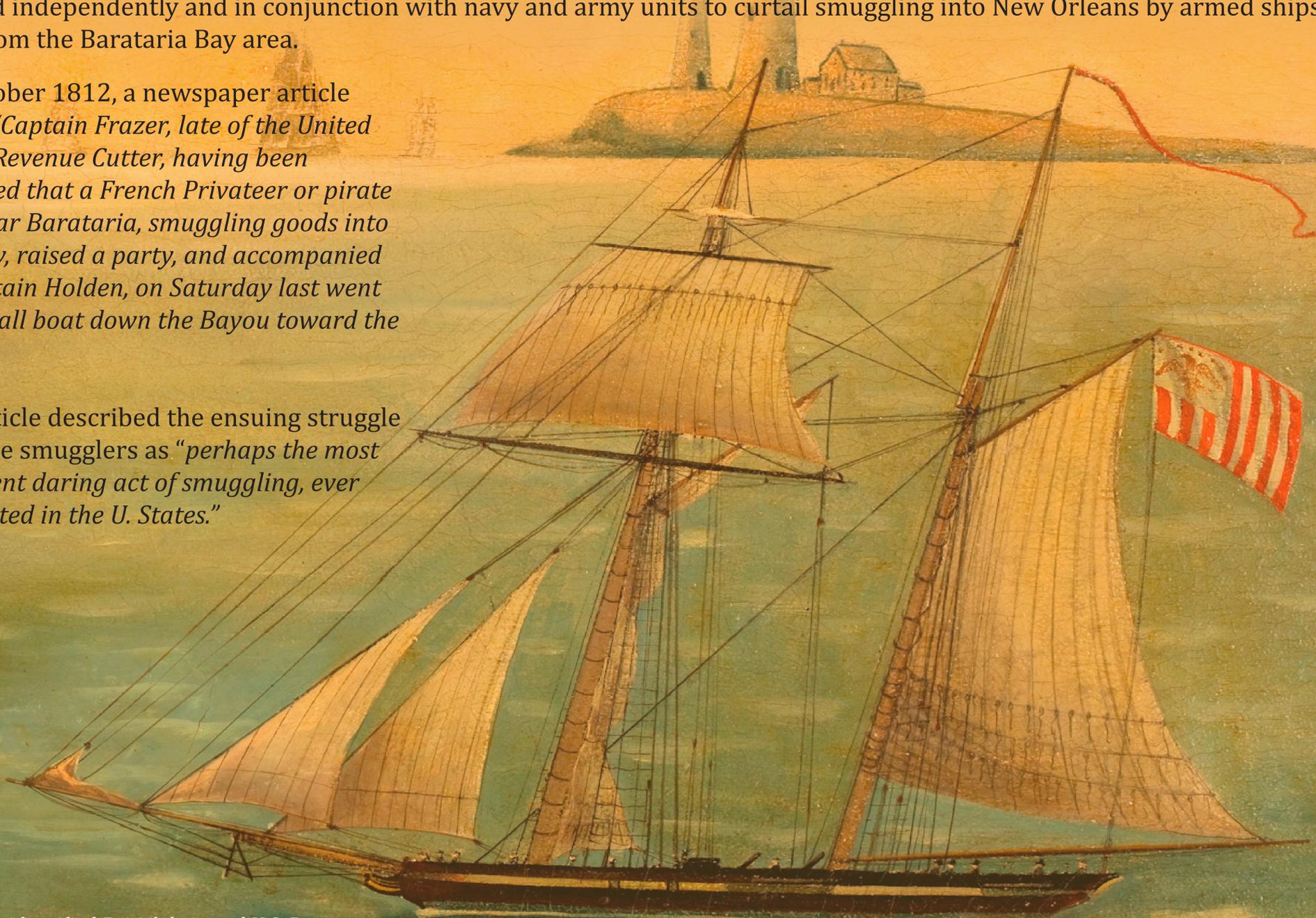
During the war, cutters continued to interdict smugglers. The busiest areas for this mission were the border areas between Georgia and Spanish Florida and Maine and Canada, and the region around New Orleans. During its career patrolling the Passamaquoddy District of Maine, located along the border with Canada, the cutter *Commodore Barry* apprehended numerous smuggling vessels and brought them into port for adjudication by the local courts. During the war revenue officers and crew worked independently and in conjunction with navy and army units to curtail smuggling into New Orleans by armed ships and men from the Baratavia Bay area.

In October 1812, a newspaper article noted *"Captain Frazer, late of the United States Revenue Cutter, having been informed that a French Privateer or pirate was near Baratavia, smuggling goods into this city, raised a party, and accompanied by Captain Holden, on Saturday last went in a small boat down the Bayou toward the lake."*

The article described the ensuing struggle with the smugglers as *"perhaps the most impudent daring act of smuggling, ever attempted in the U. States."*

Revenue cutter officers and crew had to be thoroughly familiar with the fine print of these myriad laws, for shippers and ship captains would often challenge, in court, any seizures, forfeitures or detentions of ships they believed to be wrongful or illegal. For example, on 22 January 1814, New York-based cutter *Active* detained at Sandy Hook the ship *Fair American*, bound for Liverpool. The cutter crew found eleven men with no passports concealed in the ship's hold. Several of them were men of wealth disguised as seamen.

Regarding the incident, a newspaper reported that, *"two prisoners of war are amongst the men taken out, and a large quantity of letters were found in the baggage (some say 500 and others more) containing draughts, bills, orders, &c."*



Detail: Unidentified British brig and U.S. Revenue Cutter. Image courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

New Wartime Missions

During the War of 1812, revenue cutters undertook new combat missions and established their role as effective shallow water naval vessels. The sailing warships of the U.S. Navy were too large to enter the inland waterways of the American coastline. Designed to catch smugglers in these waters, the revenue cutters proved very effective in navigating such areas.

The battle of the *Commodore Barry*

After effectively patrolling and interdicting smuggling along the Maine-Canada border, the cutter *Commodore Barry* found itself on the frontline of the naval war with the larger warships of the Royal Navy.

Commodore Barry and an American privateer battled British forces at Little River, Maine. The two American vessels were run ashore and guns mounted behind a battery of cordwood. A fisherman recounted to the local newspaper “at about 1 p.m. five launches of men (about 250) started from them [Royal Navy warships] for the harbor. In a few minutes the firing commenced and continued for nearly two hours, then it ceased.”

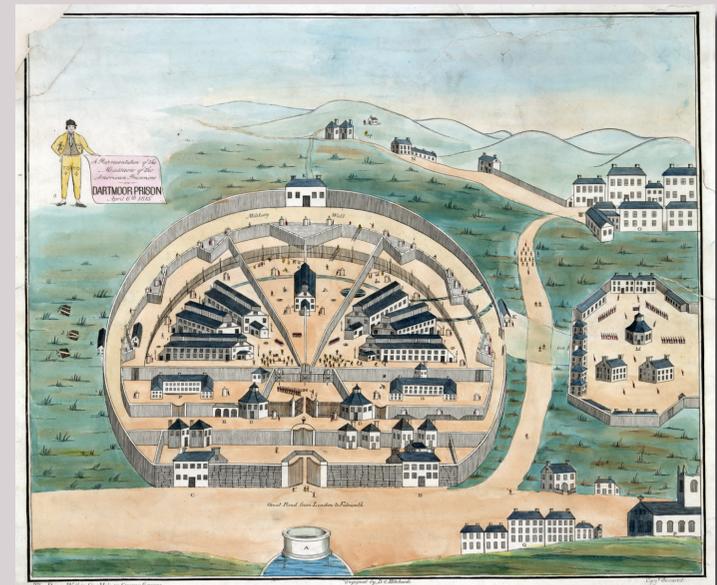
The cutter was taken on 3 August 1812 after a Royal Navy force of 250 officers and men attacked with heavy losses. Three of the cutter’s crew were captured, but the rest escaped into the woods. The three captured crewmembers were the first prisoners of war in Coast Guard history.

Commodore Barry’s master, Daniel Elliott, continued to serve with distinction out of Machias, Maine. Using the revenue boat *Income*, he skirmished with British privateers and captured a number of enemy prizes. However, the battle of the Baltimore cutter *Surveyor* was the most hotly contested revenue cutter engagement of the war.

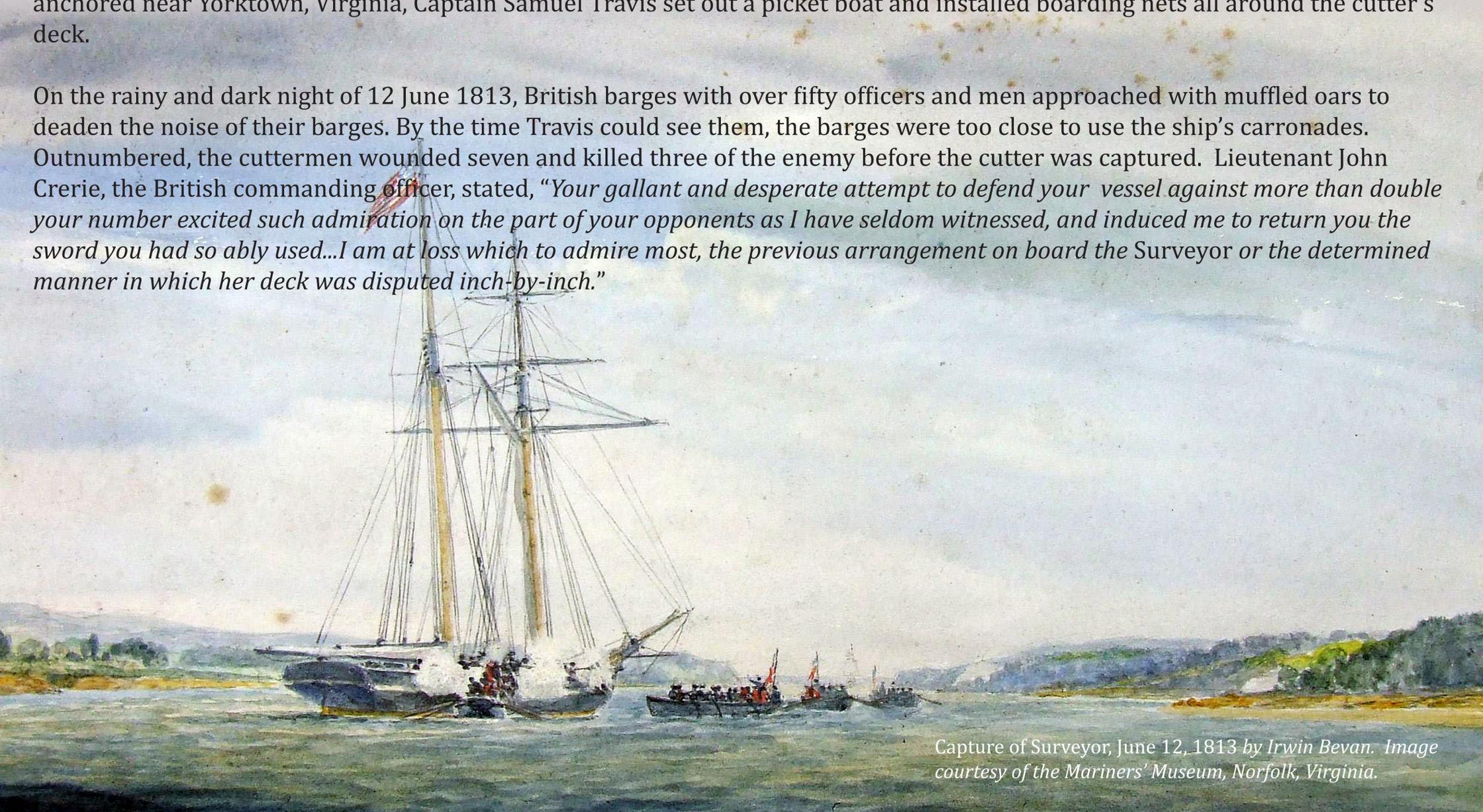
The battle of the *Surveyor*

The Royal Navy’s close blockade of the East Coast brought the naval war to home shores, especially in the Chesapeake Bay, where a British squadron established a base of operations at the bay’s mouth. Not knowing the proximity of British forces to his cutter, anchored near Yorktown, Virginia, Captain Samuel Travis set out a picket boat and installed boarding nets all around the cutter’s deck.

On the rainy and dark night of 12 June 1813, British barges with over fifty officers and men approached with muffled oars to deaden the noise of their barges. By the time Travis could see them, the barges were too close to use the ship’s carronades. Outnumbered, the cuttermen wounded seven and killed three of the enemy before the cutter was captured. Lieutenant John Crierie, the British commanding officer, stated, “Your gallant and desperate attempt to defend your vessel against more than double your number excited such admiration on the part of your opponents as I have seldom witnessed, and induced me to return you the sword you had so ably used...I am at loss which to admire most, the previous arrangement on board the *Surveyor* or the determined manner in which her deck was disputed inch-by-inch.”



At least two cuttermen captured by the British were held in Dartmoor prison, south Devon, England. Image courtesy of the Library of Congress.



Capture of *Surveyor*, June 12, 1813 by Irwin Bevan. Image courtesy of the Mariners’ Museum, Norfolk, Virginia.

Port Security Mission



Cutlass, ca. 1812. U.S. Coast Guard Historic Collection

Under orders from the local customs collectors, each revenue cutter took responsibility for the security of its home port and surrounding coastal waters. Cutters *Thomas Jefferson* and *Gallatin* proved worthy examples of cutters securing their respective East Coast ports.

On 11 April 1813, in the shallows of Hampton Roads, cutter *Thomas Jefferson* ran down and captured three Royal Navy barges, including over sixty British officers and men. In the process, the cutter repatriated the crew of an American merchantman captured by the barges.

Charleston-based *Gallatin* patrolled, or “cruised,” the coastal waters between Savannah and Charleston and served for a time out of Norfolk, Virginia. It was destroyed by a mysterious and fiery explosion in Charleston harbor on 1 April 1813.

Vigilant* captures privateer *Dart

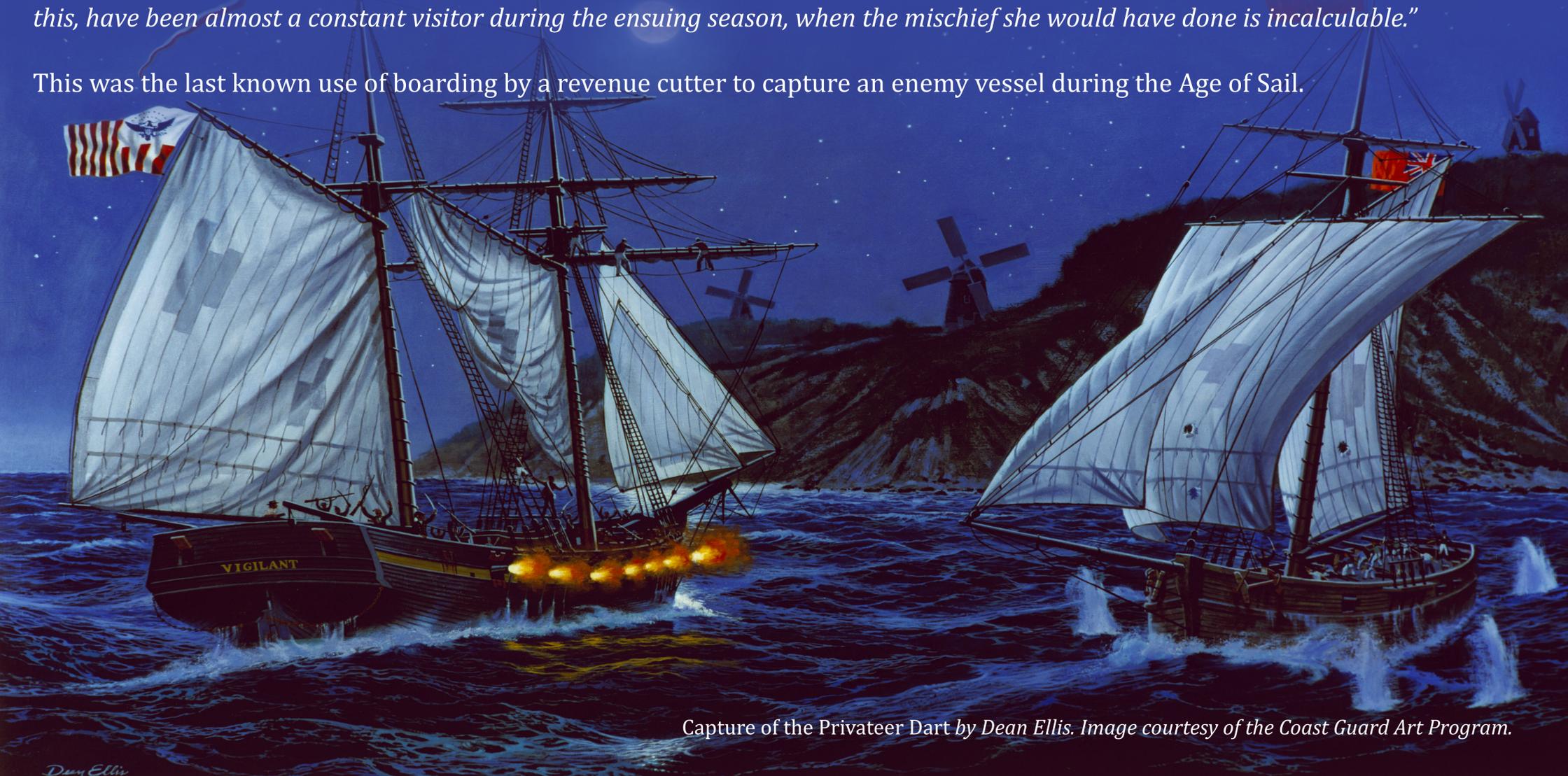
To keep regional waters secure for American commerce also meant fighting British privateers, which patrolled off East Coast ports and preyed on American merchantmen. Fights between cutters and privateers occurred regularly and included the battle between *Vigilant* and the British privateer *Dart*. This engagement was one of the most impressive captures of an enemy ship by a revenue cutter.

The sloop *Dart*, formerly an American ship, was turned into a British privateer, which had captured over 20 American merchantmen. News of the privateer reached Newport, Rhode Island, on 4 October 1813, so revenue cutter captain John Cahoon placed extra armed men on board *Vigilant* and set out in search of the raider.

Cahoon located *Dart* off the east end of Block Island, closed for action and ordered *Vigilant*'s crew to fire the guns. After firing on the privateer, the cutter ran alongside the enemy vessel and the cuttermen boarded the privateer. Cahoon's men quickly chased below deck the enemy crew, and took her as a prize.

The *Columbian Patriot* wrote “Captain Cahoon, with the volunteers under his command, deserves the highest credit for the spirit and promptitude with which this affair was conducted; and it is of the utmost importance, as it is probable she [*Dart*] would, but for this, have been almost a constant visitor during the ensuing season, when the mischief she would have done is incalculable.”

This was the last known use of boarding by a revenue cutter to capture an enemy vessel during the Age of Sail.



Capture of the Privateer *Dart* by Dean Ellis. Image courtesy of the Coast Guard Art Program.

Battle of the *Eagle*

Another battle between a revenue cutter and enemy ships began on 10 October 1814. That day, news arrived in New Haven, Connecticut, that a privateer in Long Island Sound had captured an American merchantman. Captain Frederick Lee assembled local militia to join his cutter *Eagle* before departing to re-capture the American vessel and take the British vessel as well.

Lee sailed throughout the night and found out at daylight that the British vessel was actually a large Royal Navy warship. Outgunned, Lee had to beach the cutter *Eagle* on the north shore of Long Island, where his crew dragged the cutter's guns onto a high bluff. They fought the 18-gun brig HMS Dispatch and a second armed ship from 9 o'clock in the morning until late in the afternoon.

After they exhausted their large shot, they tore up the ship's logbook to use as wadding and fired back the enemy shot that had lodged in the hill. During the engagement, the cutter's flag was shot away three times and was replaced each time by volunteers from the crew.

An eyewitness to the battle held in the captured merchantman recounted:

"The cutter was stripped of her sails, &c, and her guns dragged up to a high bluff, and there fought against the brig and tender with bravery until two o'clock. The brig opened fire against the cutter and our people on the hill about 9 o'clock, and by two the cutter's masts were cut away, and her hull appeared to us . . . to be a wreck."

Lee later noted, *"The officers and crew, together with the volunteers, on board the cutter, have done their duty as became American sailors."*

Miniature portrait of Captain Frederick Lee, ca. 1820. Image courtesy of the Connecticut Commission on Culture & Tourism



Intelligence Gathering



Reproduction weapons from the War of 1812. U.S. Coast Guard Collection.

Cutters also adopted the new mission of intelligence gathering. They did their best to monitor enemy naval movements, locate British privateers and U.S. Navy vessels, and gather any news regarding American merchantmen. At a time when news of naval units and merchantmen was scarce, revenue cutter captains collected and shared this information with customs collectors, government officials, newspapers and American military personnel.

For example, in late May 1813, Captain Caleb Brewster, commanding the cutter *Active*, sailed off of Montauk Point, Long Island, to maintain surveillance of the British blockading squadron and, by using local fishing smacks, relayed the latest information to Commodore Stephen Decatur's flotilla in Long Island Sound.

During the British blockade of Delaware Bay, the primary mission of cutter *General Greene* was to monitor enemy vessels and report numbers and position of enemy ships, landing of troops, provisioning of enemy vessels, and any Americans providing support to the enemy.

On 12 July 1813, New Bern, North Carolina-based cutter *Mercury* saved the day by quickly gathering local customs papers and funds and escaping an ambush of enemy barges at Ocracoke. The British hoped to capture the cutter so that their naval force could take the coastal city of New Bern by surprise. *Mercury* thwarted those plans by outrunning the barges and sailing directly to New Bern to warn the city of probable attack by British troops. This forewarning allowed local officials time to muster army and militia forces and it convinced the British to cancel the invasion.

Vital communications and important cargo

Best suited to swiftness and agility, revenue cutters provided multi-mission platforms during the war. Beside their primary mission of law enforcement and their newly adopted combat missions, the cutters also delivered messages and dispatches to American naval units and transported naval personnel to and from ships of the U.S. fleet.

In addition, cutters were entrusted with significant cargoes, including diplomats and important papers, such as the peace treaty (Treaty of Ghent), a copy of which cutter *Active* attempted to deliver to the British squadron sailing off the coast of New York.

On 21 February 1815, the *Connecticut Herald* reported: "Brig. Gen. Boyd, the commanding officer in this District, received a letter from the Secretary at War, announcing that the President had received and examined the [peace] Treaty, and that there was no doubt it would be ratified. . . . Gen. Boyd immediately wrote to the British officer, and enclosed a copy of Mr. [Secretary James] Munroe's letter. These letters were sent to the squadron by . . . the Revenue Cutter *Active*, commanded by Capt. Brewster."



Unidentified British Brig and U.S. Revenue Cutter. Image courtesy of the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

War's End

Before the war, the revenue cutters already protected the revenue, enforced U.S. trade laws and quarantine restrictions, interdicted smuggling, facilitated the operation of lighthouses and, unofficially, conducted rescue operations.

During the War of 1812, the cutters adopted new combat missions, including port and coastal security, convoy and escort duty, brown-water combat operations, intelligence gathering, delivery of dispatches and important cargoes and other naval support missions.

After the war, as a part of their longstanding multi-mission role, revenue cutter operations would continue to include their previous peacetime missions and their new wartime missions. Most of these remain core missions that the United States Coast Guard supports today.

