

## *U.S. Coast Guard History Program*

---

### **Joseph C. Jenkins, USCGR**



#### **First Officially Recognized African-American Officer in the U.S. Coast Guard**

In 1865, Captain Michael “Hell Roarin’” Healy of cutter BEAR fame received his commission Revenue Cutter Service and rose through the ranks to become a senior officer and ship’s captain in the late nineteenth century. Even though he could be defined as African American by today’s ethnic definition, he was never recognized as such during his career nor did he ever self-define himself as African American.

The distinction as the Coast Guard’s first recognized African-American officer belongs to Joseph Charles Jenkins, who enlisted at the age of twenty-eight after completing an engineering degree at the University of Michigan and establishing a career as a civil engineer for the State of Michigan. In June 1942, Jenkins began his service as a BM1; however, by April 14, 1943, he had completed Reserve Officer Training at the Academy and received an officer’s commission. By August of 1943, Jenkins was

one of two African American officers in the Coast Guard. In a September memo to Navy Secretary Frank Knox, navy attorney and special assistant, Adlai Stevenson, recognized this distinction and decried the absence of African American officers in the U.S. Navy.

Joseph Jenkins pioneered the way for minorities not only as the service's first recognized African American officer, but also as the ranking African American officer on the historic USS SEA CLOUD, the nation's first integrated sea service vessel. He also served as ranking African American officer on board the service's second integrated vessel, USS HOQUIAM. Jenkins completed his active duty in November 1945 and resigned his commission in the Reserves in 1947.



*Joseph Jenkins' official USCG ID portrait.*

**William H. Thiesen, Ph.D.**  
**Coast Guard Atlantic Area Historian**

