



Captain John A. Henriques

Founder of the Revenue Cutter Service School of Instruction, later known as the Coast Guard Academy

by William H. Thiesen, PhD, USCG Atlantic Area Historian

When asked about the Coast Guard's famous World War II commandant, Russell R. Waesche, Sr., his son, Russell, Jr., replied, "He was the right man, at the right place, at the right time." This claim describes another important figure in Coast Guard history, Captain John A. Henriques, first superintendent of the Revenue Cutter Service School of Instruction, forerunner of the modern Coast Guard Academy. In spite of Henriques' importance to the Service and its officer corps, little is known about this cutterman except his role in founding the Academy.

John Ashcroft Henriques enjoyed three qualities that made him one of the most influential Revenue Cutter Service officers of his day. They included great intelligence, natural leadership ability and a love for the sea. He was born in New York in 1826 and his photographs show a man of Samson-like appearance, including chiseled face, full beard and a mane of thick curly locks. A Service doctor described him as "broad in proportion" and standing "more than six feet in height," a large stature for his day.

As a young man, Henriques set himself on a career in carpentry and, by the early 1840s, he completed apprenticeship training with an established carpenter. While he pursued carpentry, Henriques worked on coastal trading vessels to earn a living. His sailing journals, held by The Mariners' Museum Library, reflect a literate man who spoke foreign languages, played musical instruments, wrote poetry and exhibited great skill in sketching, painting and illustration. In the pages of these journals, Henriques finely documented such subjects as the ports he visited, his shipmates, and the intricacies of operating large sailing vessels.

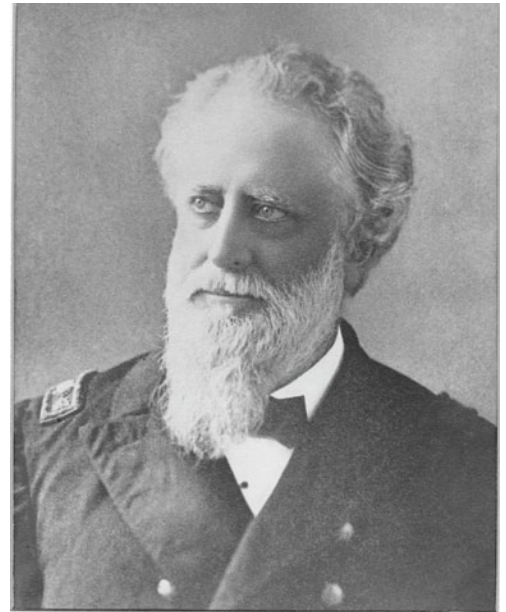


Photo courtesy of USCG Historian's Office

By 1850, Henriques became a journeyman carpenter, the competency level necessary to establish a business. Fortunately for the Coast Guard, his time at sea imbued him with a love for the nautical world. So Henriques abandoned carpentry and chose to serve before the mast for the next decade. During this time, he sailed to ports along the East Coast, gaining valuable experience and sea time, and worked his way up the merchant crew ranks to first mate.

Yet Henriques had a higher calling than working as a merchant seafarer and, perhaps more importantly, he started a family in the 1850s. He married Ellen Stoddard of New London in 1853 and they had two sons by the late 1850s. So, a year after the opening salvos of the Civil War, Henriques set in motion the process to compete for an officer's commission in the Revenue Cutter Service. On Henriques' behalf, the Paymaster

General of Connecticut wrote to Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase "He has seen service both as a [crew] man and an Officer. Is a man of good habits and would I think do credit to the service." Before the establishment of a Revenue Cutter Service school, officers received political appointments by transferring from the U.S. Navy or the merchant marine. So it was not uncommon for Henriques to receive a commission after working as a merchant mariner. But at the ripe age of thirty-seven, he was older than many of his peers at the lowest officer rank of third lieutenant.

Henriques started his Service career in March 1863. The next three years proved hectic ones, beginning with a tour on the *James C. Dobbin*, a sailing cutter that played a part in his later career. After the *Dobbin*, he received brief assignments as a junior officer on board the cutters *Crawford*, *Northerner* and *John Sherman*. During these tours, Henriques vaulted up the officer ranks. After a little over a year in the Service, he received a first lieutenant's commission and his promotion to captain took place two years after that, in 1866. This rapid rise testified not only to the need for officers during the war, but to Henriques' seafaring experience and command presence. Shortly after the war, a journalist writing about cutter *Sherman*, commented, "Captain Henriques is thoroughly posted and *every inch a sailor* [journalist's italics] and a gentleman, as is well known to all who have made his acquaintance."

Unlike the modern Coast Guard, the Revenue Cutter Service had no flag officers in the late 1800s, so Henriques retained the rank of captain for the rest of his career. However, Henriques' skill and competence assured him a succession of challenging assignments. In the decade following the War, he received orders to command the cutters *Reliance*, *Wayanda*, *Lincoln*, *Hugh McCulloch*, *Salmon P. Chase* and *Richard Rush*. As captain of the cutter *Reliance*, he sailed from the East Coast around hazardous Cape Horn to San Francisco. The voyage began August 1867 and included eight brutal days of gale-force winds and heavy seas while the 110-foot topsail schooner slugged her way around "the Horn." This trip also cemented a friendship between



The Salmon P. Chase replaced the Dobbin as the Revenue Cutter Service School's training vessel in 1878. Henriques claimed the new 106-foot bark was "one of the most gallant little sea-going vessels he has ever been in; very fast, and in heavy weather always reliable." Chase remained the school ship through Henriques' superintendency, which ended in 1883, and she served through 1907, a career of nearly thirty years.

Henriques and Michael A. Healy, who served as *Reliance's* navigation officer and third in command. Healy later earned the moniker "Hell Roaring" Mike Healy and became possibly the most famous captain in Coast Guard history.

A few months after *Reliance* arrived in San Francisco, the Treasury Department ordered Henriques to set sail for Alaska to enforce customs laws. Henriques sailed for Sitka in October 1868, becoming one of the first cutter captains to serve in the treacherous waters of Alaska Territory, and the first one to enforce U.S. laws in Alaskan waters. From *Reliance*, Henriques transferred to the *Wayanda* and, within four months, he commanded the steam sailing cutter *Lincoln*. Lieutenant Healy followed Henriques in this succession of transfers and both men returned to the East Coast after their tours ended on board the *Lincoln*. In 1874, when Henriques received orders to ferry the new cutter *Rush* around Cape Horn to San Francisco, he chose Lieutenant Healy as his executive officer. Healy must have learned a great deal from Henriques before becoming renowned for his association with the Bering Sea Patrol, command of famous cutter *Bear* and his role in taming Alaska's maritime frontier.

No individual may claim sole credit for founding the Revenue Cutter Service School of Instruction for the Service had an interest in officer training and professionalism prior to the Civil War. However, Henriques bore the greatest responsibility for the planning, establishment, oversight and initial success of the original institution. While still in Alaska on board cutter *Rush*, Henriques received orders to Washington, DC, for the special duty of developing a new Revenue Cutter Service cadet program. For this assignment, Henriques joined Captain George W. Moore, Superintendent of Construction, and Captain James H. Merryman, Chief Inspector. The three officers devised a system of practical education based on the use of a sail-training ship and forwarded their concept to Service head, Sumner I. Kimball. In turn, Kimball submitted the plan to Congress, which passed legislation to establish the school in July 1876. In early December of 1876, Henriques convened a board to examine the first candidates, which resulted in the first group of cadets.

After selecting the school's first cadets, Henriques returned home for Christmas before receiving orders to the old wooden cutter *Dobbin*, which he had sailed during his first tour of duty in 1863. Henriques fitted out *Dobbin* to serve her new role as the School's classroom and living quarters; and he signed on her crew of officers, enlisted men and a surgeon. He also visited the U.S. Naval Academy, and worked out the final plan for the curriculum, with junior and senior years and one sea term and two academic terms per year. The School of Instruction commenced on May 25, 1877, when nine cadets boarded *Dobbin* and started their course of study under Henriques' supervision. The Service selected New Bedford, Massachusetts, as the School's homeport over Henriques' suggestion of New London, Connecticut.

By 1878, the School of Instruction had enjoyed a year of successful operation. During that year, the venerable old *Dobbin* had served well the purpose of school ship. And though the twenty-year-old wooden schooner had proven the importance of practical sailing instruction, it was time to introduce a new purpose-built cutter for cadet training. Henriques took charge of the *Salmon P. Chase* in August 1878, claiming the new 106-foot bark was "one of the most gallant little sea-going vessels he has ever been in; very fast, and in heavy weather always reliable." *Chase* remained the school ship through Henriques' superintendancy, which ended in 1883, and she served through 1907, a career of nearly thirty years. In 1900, the School of Instruction moved to Curtis Bay, Maryland; and, in 1910, it moved to New London, the site Captain Henriques originally suggested and the home it has enjoyed ever since.

After his tour as superintendent of the Revenue Cutter Service School of Instruction, Henriques worked another twenty years in various assignments. He served on examining boards for prospective cadets and superintended the construction of cutter *Commodore Perry*. He enjoyed sea duty as commander of cutters *Louis McLane*, *Commodore Perry* and *Levi Woodbury*; and he served as an inspector for the U.S. Lifesaving Service as did many officers at that time. In 1902, after a career of nearly forty years, he retired to Waterford, Connecticut. He died just four years later, in 1906, at the age of seventy-nine, and was interred at Cedar Grove Cemetery in New London.



Portrait of Revenue Cutter Service Captain John A. Henriques. Oil on canvas by Irwin D. Hoffman.

The father of two sons, he was survived by his wife Ellen Stoddard Henriques and son John Philip Henriques, who attended Yale University and became an accomplished surgeon.

Captain John Ashcroft Henriques lived a full life and proved one of the most important Revenue Cutter Service officers of the 19th century. During his career, he saw a lot of sea time in the Atlantic, Pacific, rounding Cape Horn, and in Alaskan waters. As a mentor, advisor and senior officer, he influenced the careers of numerous cuttermen and, similar to Coast Guard reformer Admiral Russell Waesche, Henriques helped usher in a new age of professionalism and organizational change. Throughout his life and career, he embodied the modern Coast Guard's "Core Values" of honor, respect and devotion to duty.

Dr. Thiesen received a Master's degree from East Carolina University's Program in Maritime History and earned a Ph.D. from University of Delaware's Hagley Program in the History of Technology and Industrialization. His research interests include Coast Guard history, naval history, ship design and construction, and the history of technology.