

# Commerce ruled in "Old

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***Our humanitarian traditions aren't as traditional as you may have thought. Behind almost every mission the Coast Guard carries out, there was originally a profit motive — Congress wanted the Treasury Department to build a commercially-healthy and wealthy America.***

Cutters, lighthouses, marine inspectors, and, — to a degree — lifesaving stations were authorized and established to improve, increase and encourage coastal and international trade. And to collect the import duties that healthy trade generated.

Our search and rescue role of recent times has saved countless lives and millions of dollars worth of property. But rescue operations were not an original revenue cutter duty. In fact, cutters were often prohibited from aiding ships in distress.

Early revenue cutters reported to and worked directly for the port's Collector of Customs — a sort of District Commander relationship. Collectors felt they had no legal authority to divert official government law enforcement units solely to aid a vessel in trouble. When collectors asked the Treasury Secretaries for advice on the matter, the secretaries were non-committal. After all, the people of the country bought us those cutters so we could enforce revenue laws — not to help a bunch of sailors out of a jam.

The entire matter was left to the judgement of the local collector — who ended up in a difficult situation. If he sent the cutter to aid a distressed vessel,

he would be praised locally as a truly generous and considerate man. But if the cutter was damaged in the process, which was highly likely, he would be on the Secretary's carpet for using the cutter on non-revenue collection duties, unnecessarily spending public funds and endangering the safety of the cutter. Even the safety of the crew was taken into consideration.

Most collectors compromised. If a vessel was in distress in or near the harbor, he sent the cutter to help. They received great local publicity without unduly risking injury to ship or crew, or drawing the wrath of the Treasury Secretary.

It was not until the Secretary started feeling public pressure — mostly from merchants — that he authorized direct help to distressed vessels.

Today, a common call for assistance is a request for fuel from a powerless powerboat. In days of sail, the most common call was for the delivery of cordage for ships which lost their rigging in gales. But cutters seldom had spare rigging of their own, much less enough to supply a larger merchant vessel. Cutter captains called for funds to stock cordage for this purpose, and they usual-

ly got it. But they soon found that the stockpiled cordage laid on board and rotted before it was needed. The policy of carrying spare cordage was soon discontinued. The Department had gone full circle.

The primary object of early search and rescue was probably less humanitarian-motivated than today. The federal treasury depended heavily on customs duties on imported and exported goods. America's economic strength was also based on these shipments.

Collectors continued to use cutters to aid other vessels, because it was just plain "good business." Even if the distressed vessel could not be saved, the cutter was to try to save as much of the cargo as possible (and, of course, the crew). When the cutter returned to port, the cargo would be placed in "the public store" so that the duties could be paid.

Since there was no general decree or public policy, the secretary and collector could be very selective of which cutters would perform the work and which vessels would receive assistance.

During December 1831, reportedly a very harsh winter, Secretary Louis McLane ordered the collector at Portsmouth, N.H., to have the cutter *Portsmouth* "to be furnished without delay, with such quantities of provisions, water, wood, and other necessary supplies as can be conveniently stowed in the vessel and direct him [CAPT Thomas Shaw] to cruise between Cape Ann and Cape Elizabeth" to assist vessels in addition to normal duties. The Secretary also directed Shaw not to "return to port until forced to do so from stress of

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weather or want of supplies." This was quite a chore for the 11-year-old, 61-foot schooner whose sailing qualities were much less than the vessels it was to assist.

The supplies Shaw was to carry — six barrels of beef, 400 pounds of bread, six barrels of water, 50 pounds of candles, 10 pounds of tea and one cord of dry hardwood — were not to be free. The Secretary ordered Shaw to "charge such as he may deliver to vessels requiring them at the cost value, taking the bills of their masters for the amount upon the owners or consignees..." The collector would ensure that the bills would be paid.

The Treasury Department apparently felt some outside pressure on the matter. The Secretary closed his letter to the collector with the order, "should circumstances oblige her [*Portsmouth*] to return within less than a fortnight, you will promptly dispatch her on a second cruise with similar objects...."

Records indicate *Portsmouth* made only the first cruise and did not assist many vessels. About two months later, the collector wrote Secretary McLane asking for permission to sell the unused beef and bread at public auction before it spoiled. The remaining items could be used by the cutters.

Our predecessors' mercenary view of saving lives at sea has taken an almost complete about face. People, as well as money and goods, make our nation strong and healthy. Thus our evolution from a law enforcement agency to a humanitarian law enforcement agency. //



This was the reaction of many sailors when they saw "the price of being rescued."  
Artwork by PA2 Dale Miller, HQ