

Concern for crew comfort — habitability — although not new has been active for some 20 years. Some feel there has been too much emphasis in this area. They recall the good old days of an issued hammock and life “riding on a hook.” A look at the good old days, though, may give you an appreciation for our rather plush shipboard atmosphere.

Crewing a revenue cutter of the early 1800s was by no means an easy — or comfortable — way to make a living. Each seaman “shipped” on a cutter for three months and could expect about \$15 a month (some received \$17 — it depended on experience or length of service).

Crew comfort was not of paramount importance to the Treasury Department, or to the many captains who actually designed their own ships. Comfort had

nothing to do with their primary duty of enforcing the revenue laws. The Department’s concern was for speed, as illustrated by a letter written to the collector at Boston by Treasury Secretary Samuel Ingham in June, 1830: “It is indispensably necessary that the Revenue Cutters in the Service of the U States should be very fast sailers, so as to enable them to overhaul any vessels they may fall in with.” There was no mention that the crew need anything more than a Spartan life common on board ship at the time.

So, cutters were designed for speed, as well as for shallow-water cruising, to let them chase smugglers across shoals, into bayous and to the beach if necessary, lest the vital import duties be lost and the illicit cargoes be put ashore.

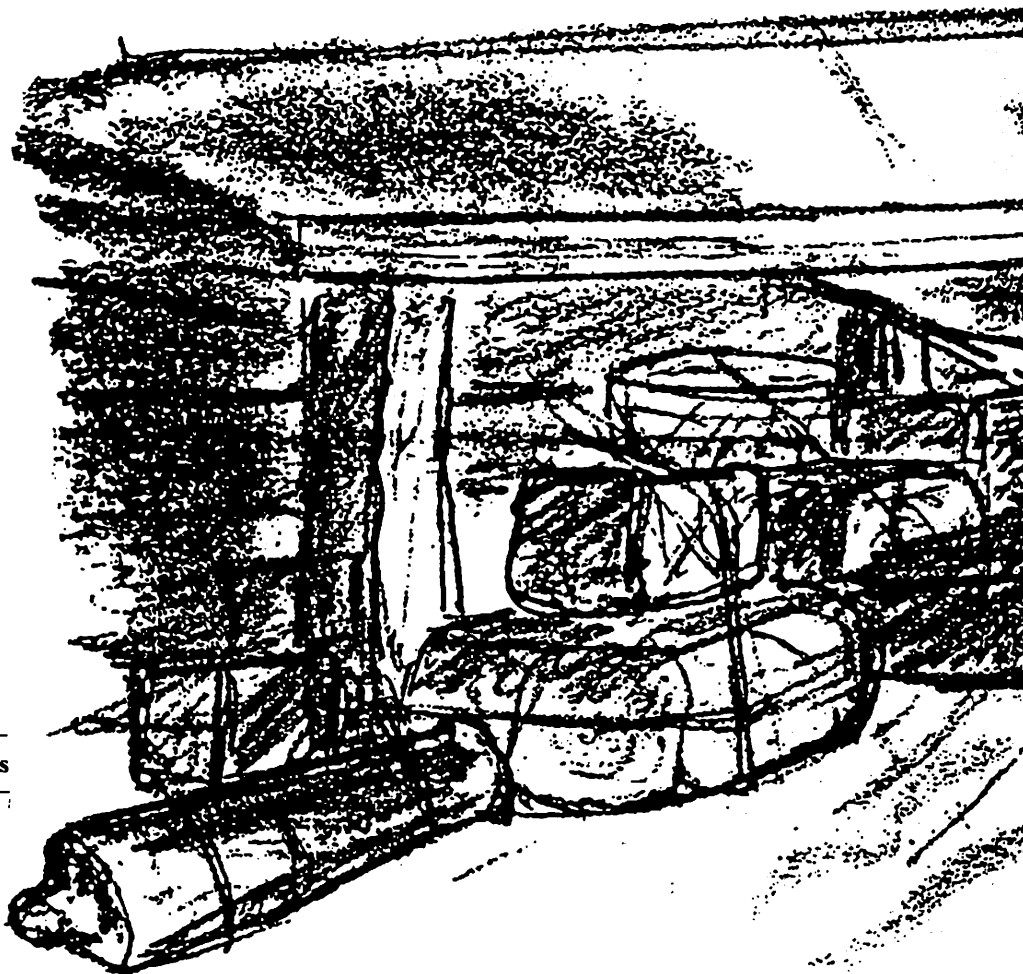
Cutter captains did not always agree. But while such captains as Hopely Yeaton and J.F. Williams petitioned the

Secretary for higher wages and improved rations, there was little they could do about living conditions on board. Perhaps the higher compensation would make life a bit more tolerable, they hoped.

Captain Trevett, commanding the cutter *Search* recommended in 1828 a better way to carry fresh water on board. He claimed that an iron tank on his cutter would take less space than the 6½ kegs then in use, would hold enough water for a month at sea and also “the water keeps sweeter and is more salubrious [in] nature.” There is no record of Secretary Rush approving the plan, probably because it was *not* approved. It was uncommon for the Department to expend large sums on older cutters, except to somehow keep them in service. *Search* was at the time eight years old and closing in on the end of its useful lifespan.

Life below decks

By GMCM William Wells, Headquarters



Two years later, in March 1830, Captain John Cahoon asked for new ballast in *Vigilant*. He wanted new *kentledge*, as pig iron was then called. New ballast would then allow him to better organize and remove "a quantity of Stone that is in the birth deck, which must be removed to make room for the addition of Stores and crew." It seemed Cahoon cared more for his crew than for a pile of seagoing rock but, being a good seaman, ballast and stores must come first. His crew would have to fit in between.

Another skipper, CAPT Shaw, commanding *Portsmouth* wrote a similar letter of complaint in 1832. *Portsmouth* had been designed and built as a pilot boat 12 years before. "Her accommodations are very inconvenient having no Wardroom and we are compelled to carry all the provisions and part of her ballast on the birth deck," including his four cannon. "With the necessary wood,

water, provisions, peoples' dunnage & there is little room for much else...."

The three captains were asking for big-bucks items. In the latter, Shaw asked for a whole new cutter, in the name of better crew accommodations. But the Treasury Department, in business to fill the nation's coffers, was not inclined to spend large sums on "unnecessary items."

Records indicate it was not until 1836 that a less expensive solution was found, at least for one cutter. Portsmouth, N.H. Collector Daniel Brown wrote to Secretary Levi Woodbury complaining that the birth deck on *Madison* was only three feet, seven inches in height. This crawl space "not only subjects her crew [16 men, including petty officers and four boys] to very great inconveniences, but is injurious to their health." Health concerns were coming of age, and Col-

lector Brown had a definite concern for the men under his charge.

Madison's birth deck enlargement came about after he examined the same arrangement on another cutter. *Hamilton's* crew's quarters was palatial in comparison, with an overhead fully five feet seven inches high — almost as much room as on our new 270-foot cutters! *Hamilton* also had a foot less draft than *Portsmouth*. The cost — approved in Washington — was a hefty \$275 for lowering the deck and adding bulkheads and even crew lockers.

Instead of lounging in your air-conditioned quarters today, you could be stretching out between the pig iron and cordwood, with your head nestled on a cozy cannon, reading the *Customs Collector's Bulletin* by the light of a candle-lantern strung from the four-foot overhead. //

