



DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

# COAST GUARD FEATURE

PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE  
Third Coast Guard District  
Governors Island, New York 10004  
(212 ) 264 - 8733

Release No.: 92-76

Contact: Chief Warrant Officer Jim Stephens

Date:

Time of Release: IMMEDIATE

New York's First Coast Guard Cutter

(by Public Affairsman First Class Nancy Robinson)

GOVERNORS ISLAND, N. Y. -- On the morning of July 4, 1791, the 30,000 inhabitants of New York City were awakened by the pealing of bells. It was the 15th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

The newly-formed Tamany Society, a patriotic organization, accompanied by a colorful military escort, paraded from their "Wigwam" in Broad Street to the New Dutch Church. From there the procession moved down to the Battery.

At noon a salute was fired from the deck of the new revenue cutter VIGILANT which had been in commission for three months.

According to an eyewitness, "On this occasion the officers of the Revenue Cutter deserve to be noticed for the handsome manner in which she was decorated: ensigns of various nations were displayed upon her..."

In retrospect, the master of the revenue cutter, Patrick Dennis, and his crew of four hardy men deserve recognition for a lot more than their ability to dress ship on this ceremonial occasion. From 1791 until 1795, the 48-foot two masted schooner armed with four swivel guns was the lone New York revenue cutter. Its task was enormous: to enforce the new measure passed by the First Congress of the United States -- a bill calling for the collection of tonnage dues and import duties from vessels entering United States waters.

The VIGILANT was one of ten small boats whose construction was authorized by Congress on August 4, 1790 for the purpose of guarding the coast against smugglers. Congress referred to the

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10 boats, the modest ancestors of today's Coast Guard by various names -- the Revenue Service, the Revenue Marine and the Revenue Marine Service. But the 32 - year - old "father" of the new nation's only armed sea-going service, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton was careful to refer to it in the least conspicuous manner possible. He simply called the floating police force "a system of cutters".

Little is known about New York's revenue cutter VIGILANT. The history of its construction, the records of its movements and the stories of its adventures and encounters in enforcing the nation's first maritime laws are surrounded in mystery. It was commissioned on March 31, 1791, but the records of its construction and of its first few months in operation were probably destroyed on September 20 of the same year when a fire erupted in lower Manhattan and seemed to concentrate its fury on the Custom House. During the six-hour blaze, the Custom House caught fire several times and was saved only by the efforts of a few citizens. But the records were destroyed.

The disappearance of later records may be attributed to a variety of causes, one of which was the 1833 fire in the Treasury Building in Washington D. C.

Despite the scarcity of information , it is possible to piece together a picture of what the early VIGILANT was up against in the performance of its duties.

With only ten boats patrolling the coast from Maine to Georgia, each boat was responsible for a sizeable portion of the coastline and inland waterways. The range of the VIGILANT's activity can only be gauged by the proximity of the two nearest revenue cutters, the ARGUS based in New London, Connecticut, serving Long Island Sound and the GENERAL GREENE, a 30-ton sloop carrying three guns, homeported at Philadelphia and assigned to cover the Bay of Delaware. If trouble developed within its station -- if its authority was questioned, the cutter had to handle the challenge alone. There was no Navy in existence at the time nor any legally armed U. S. vessels to come to its assistance. (The Continental Navy had been disbanded in 1785 and the

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United States Navy not established until 1798.) In 1795 Congress ordered the harbors fortified and laid plans for larger replacements for the armed cutters anticipating imminent war with France. But from 1791 until 1795, New York's one boat, 5-man Coast Guard was responsible for the surveillance of a vast geographical area.

To make things more difficult, in the 1790's "United States waters" were defined as extending 12 miles off the coast. The three-mile limit was not established until the 19th century.

The cutters, however, were not expected to patrol every inch of water within their territory. They were to cruise, not to anchor in port. They were to patrol their stations in a manner that their movements could not be calculated upon by law-breakers.

In effect, the cutters were to operate in a manner similar to the smugglers and pirates they were after.

For this reason the cutters were designed along the lines of the privateer ships that had proved most successful during and before the American Revolution. Even though the choice of design and builder was up to the local Collector of the Port, the boats evolved in a remarkably similar style. The VIGILANT was a sharp-model schooner, later known as the pilot-boat or "Baltimore clipper type". According to H. I. Chappelle, an authority on American sailing ships, "The cutter could be lightly armed and manned, but speed was an absolute necessity if the vessels were to be successful. Since the cutters spent much of their lives at sea, the need for reasonable sea-worthiness was obvious. In order to catch smugglers and other law-breakers, weatherliness was also very important. On many stations a shoal-draft vessel would be most efficient -- excessive draft, in any case, was undesirable."

During its first year in service, the daily operations of the revenue cutter were left up to the skipper, Patrick Dennis. In 1792, the Collector of the Port of New York, General John Lamb,

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was authorized to direct its movements, but up until then, the Collector had been responsible only for its supplies and maintenance. The officers of the VIGILANT were "deemed officers of the customs", having the right of search and seizure. As such they were directly responsible to the Department of the Treasury. Great precautions were taken to ensure that the officers did not take advantage of their vested authority. They were to be men "of respectable character", and to make sure it would be to their advantage to remain respectable, they were paid well considering the standards of the day. (Congress upped their salaries in 1793.) The master, first, second and third mates were given military rank which, Alexander Hamilton explained "would attach them to their duty by a nicer sense of honor".

The masters of the first ten cutters were almost all hand-picked by Hamilton. Two had been in the Continental Navy during the Revolution, but the master of New York's cutter, Patrick Dennis, had been an Army man. He had served under Captain Alexander Hamilton as First Lieutenant in the Second Company of Artillery which had defended New York City in the last days before its capture by the British. Although Patrick Dennis may have been highly trusted by his superiors, it seems he was little-known to New Yorkers. The compiler of the 1791 New York City Directory never even bothered to find out his first name, but lists him as follows:

"Dennis, —————, sailing master, 13, New Do."

On the other hand, the Collector of the Port of New York, General John Lamb, was a popular and colorful figure. He had gained notoriety during the Revolution when he seized the Custom House from the British and held onto it for a number of days. It has been alleged that he had been an experienced smuggler himself, but, in those days, it made him a man more fit for the job of Collector.

Among the crews of the first ten cutters there were undoubtedly men who had gained their knowledge and familiarity with secret hideouts along the coast by virtue of their own experience

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as smugglers. Their past record, however, did not eliminate them as men "of respectable character".

Far from it. In fact, one of the greatest difficulties in enforcing the new nation's Tariff Act was that, over the years, both "respectable" and "unrespectable" citizens had gotten into the habit of smuggling. The new measure passed by a shaky Federal government did not automatically convince Americans that the avoidance of customs duties was a crime.

New York City, especially, had a traditional tolerance for piracy. Throughout its colonial history, New Yorkers had carried on a large trade with British East Indian pirates, exchanging liquor and ammunition for Oriental rugs, perfumes and spices at pirate haunts along the coast. The leading New York merchants outfitted pirate ships, and most of the English governors shared in the booty. Famous pirate chiefs were welcomed in New York and recruited the crews for their latest voyage from among New York's Dutch and English families. They were at home in such fashionable establishments as Delmonico's and dined comfortably alongside New York's leading citizens. When the British home government finally sent out an incorruptible governor to put a stop to piracy, the new governor made the unfortunate mistake of commissioning the frigate of Captain William Kidd to carry out the mission. In a matter of days, Captain Kidd was out-pirating the pirates.

During the long French-Indian wars, many New Yorkers depended for their livelihood on illegal trade with the enemy, much to the dismay of the British.

Smuggling was so popular during the Revolution that it was with the greatest difficulty that the Continental Navy could find recruits. Not only was it popular, it became downright patriotic. Although the first revenue-raising measure was desperately needed to save the new nation from default, there seemed to be little chance that it would be respected.

The merchants made little fuss about the Tariff Bill itself, partly because duties imposed on goods carried on American ships would be slightly less than on foreign imports. But, when Hamilton requested 10 armed cutters to enforce the law, the merchants raised a loud protest.

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In spite of their proven talent and proclivity for smuggling, they claimed themselves aghast at the suggestion that they were not to be trusted!

Upon the commissioning of the officers of the cutters, Alexander Hamilton carefully mapped out a public relations policy governing the new service. "Prudence, moderation and good temper" were the bywords, and he called upon the crews "to refrain with the most guarded circumspection from whatever has the semblance of haughtiness, rudeness or insult" -- a boarding code of etiquette that is followed by the Coast Guard today, whether in enforcing customs, international fisheries or boating safety law.

But courtesy and politeness went just so far. On March 2, 1792 Congress authorized the cutters to fire on merchant ships who refused to "bring to" upon command of the cutter master.

The VIGILANT's purpose was to ensure the collection of the revenue, but it doubtless performed other tasks in New York Harbor of the 1790's.

Its homeport was one of the busiest harbors on the eastern seaboard and the traffic flowing in and out was steadily increasing. Its recovery, both as a harbor and commercial seaport, after the seven-year British occupation amazed the world. Just a few months after the British evacuation, however, the port opened again with the sailing of the American-built ship, EMPRESS OF CHINA, bound for Canton. Trade with European ports picked up quickly and by 1788 it was not unusual to see 100 vessels at a time loading and unloading along Little Dock Street, now part of Water Street and Front Street -- the center of the port's foreign commerce.

At the end of 1791 New Yorkers had reason to be proud. As a seaport they had bypassed Philadelphia the leading port since the Revolution, having suffered little setback during the war. In December a New York magazine boasted that 550 more vessels had arrived in New York that year than had arrived in Philadelphia. New York City was well on its way to becoming Number One.

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In the thriving port the revenue cutter VIGILANT spent much of its time functioning as messenger, informing arriving ships of the new regulations pertaining to customs duties and ship registration. When yellow fever broke out at Peck's slip and spread through the city in the fall of 1791, it is highly probable that the VIGILANT enforced the Mayor's order that all ships carrying the disease fly a black flag. In those days, many of the duties now performed by the U. S. Department of Public Health were under the jurisdiction of the Collector of the Port.

It was as conveyor of messages that Patrick Dennis made the newspapers in 1793, but only in connection with a spectacular event:

The French frigate L'EMBUSCADE was moored on a wharf on the East River at Maiden Lane and South Street. She was a colorful sight with her bow, foremast and stern ornamented with flags - "Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite" ----a revolutionary sentiment that found favor with many New Yorkers.

On July 28, 1793, according to the newspapers, "Captain Dennis of the US Revenue Cutter VIGILANT arriving in port states that Captain Courtenay of the British warship BOSTON off Sandy Hook sends a challenge to Captain Bompard of the French frigate L'EMBUSCADE. . ."

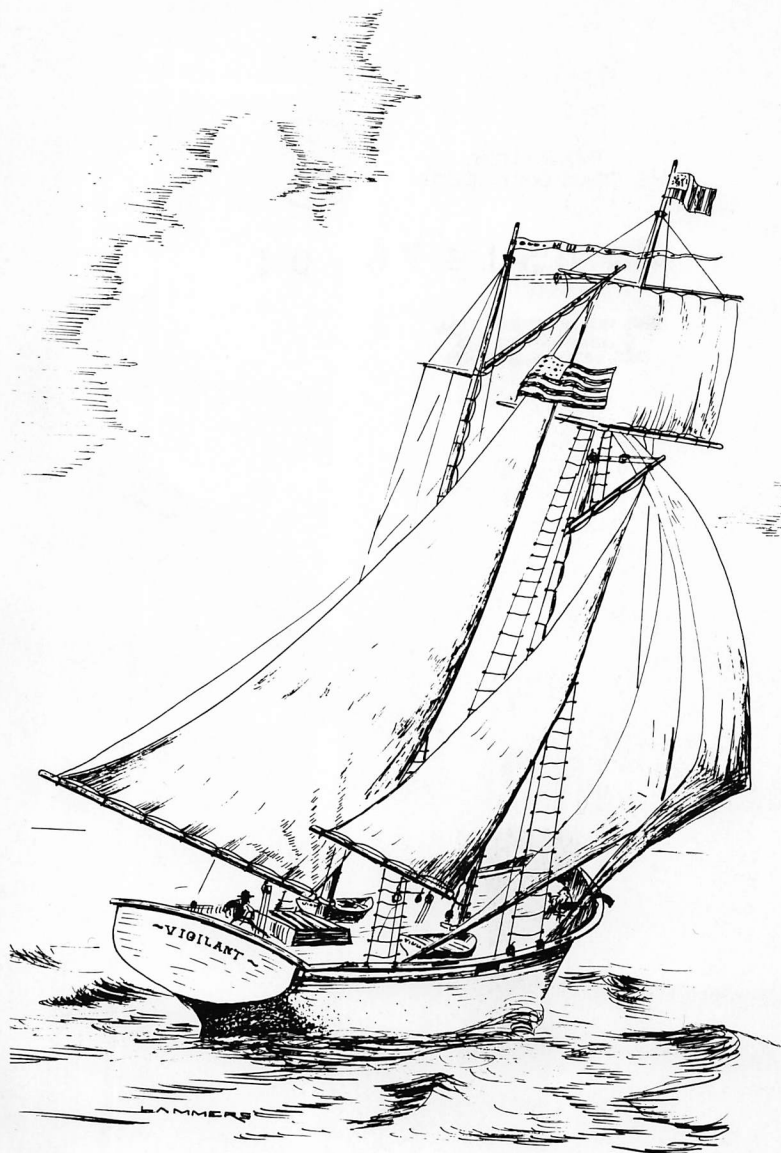
Captain Bompard quickly accepted the challenge. The private duel between ships of warring nations was fought off Sandy Hook on August 3rd. New Yorkers, out to make a quick dollar, chartered nine vessels and provided ringside seats for the duel. Betting was heavy on the tragic event which left Captain Courtenay dead and the BOSTON badly damaged. When L'EMBUSCADE limped back into New York Harbor, the women of New York were said to have run down to meet it, tearing off strips from their chemises to bandage the wounded.

The duel was a public spectacle, but it took a public spectacle to bring the name of the revenue cutter VIGILANT into the news at all.

Someday, historians may track down accounts of the first VIGILANT, but, for the time being, the stories of its encounters with pirates and skirmishes with smugglers are lost in the waterfront bars of old New York. Without a Department of Public Information, the crew of New York's first Coast Guard cutter got little attention either from the press or the public.

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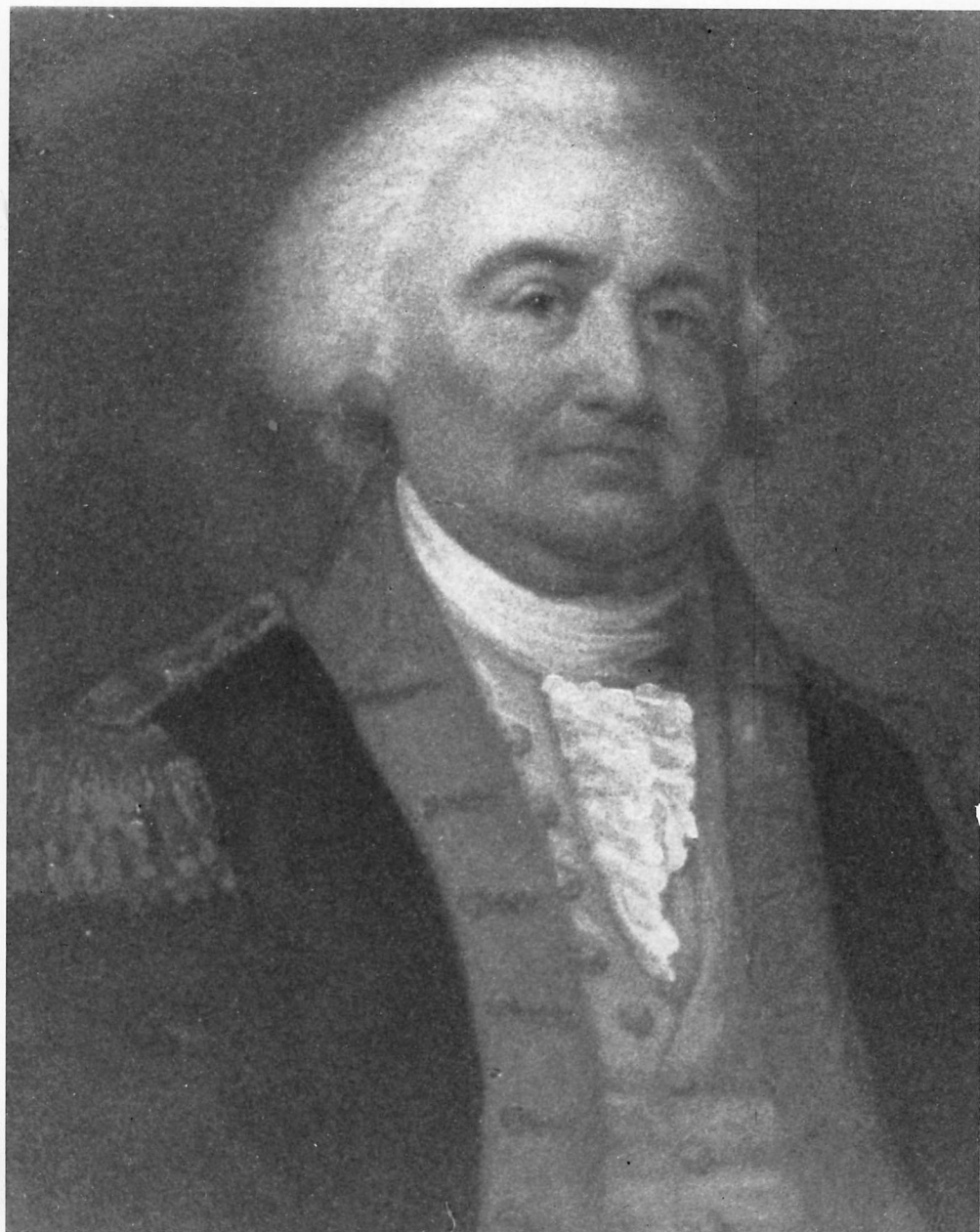
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GOVERNORS ISLAND, N.Y. -- Commissioned in March of 1791, the VIGILANT was New York City's original revenue cutter. Patrick Dennis was the master of the 48 foot, two-masted schooner, which carried a crew of four men. One of ten boats authorized to be put in service by the Congress of 1790, the VIGILANT's mission was to guard against smugglers. The ten boats patrolled inland and offshore waters from Maine to Georgia.

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VIGILANT rendering by Public Affairsman Jim Lammers



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GOVERNORS ISLAND, N.Y. -- A year after the VIGILANT was placed in service, General John Lamb was authorized to direct the cutter's movements by Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton. Lamb, then Collector of The Port of New York, gained notoriety during the revolution when he seized the custom house from the British.

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