

DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION



**COAST GUARD**

# **THE HISTORY OF BLACKS IN THE COAST GUARD FROM 1790**



## INTRODUCTION

### History of Blacks in the U.S. Coast Guard

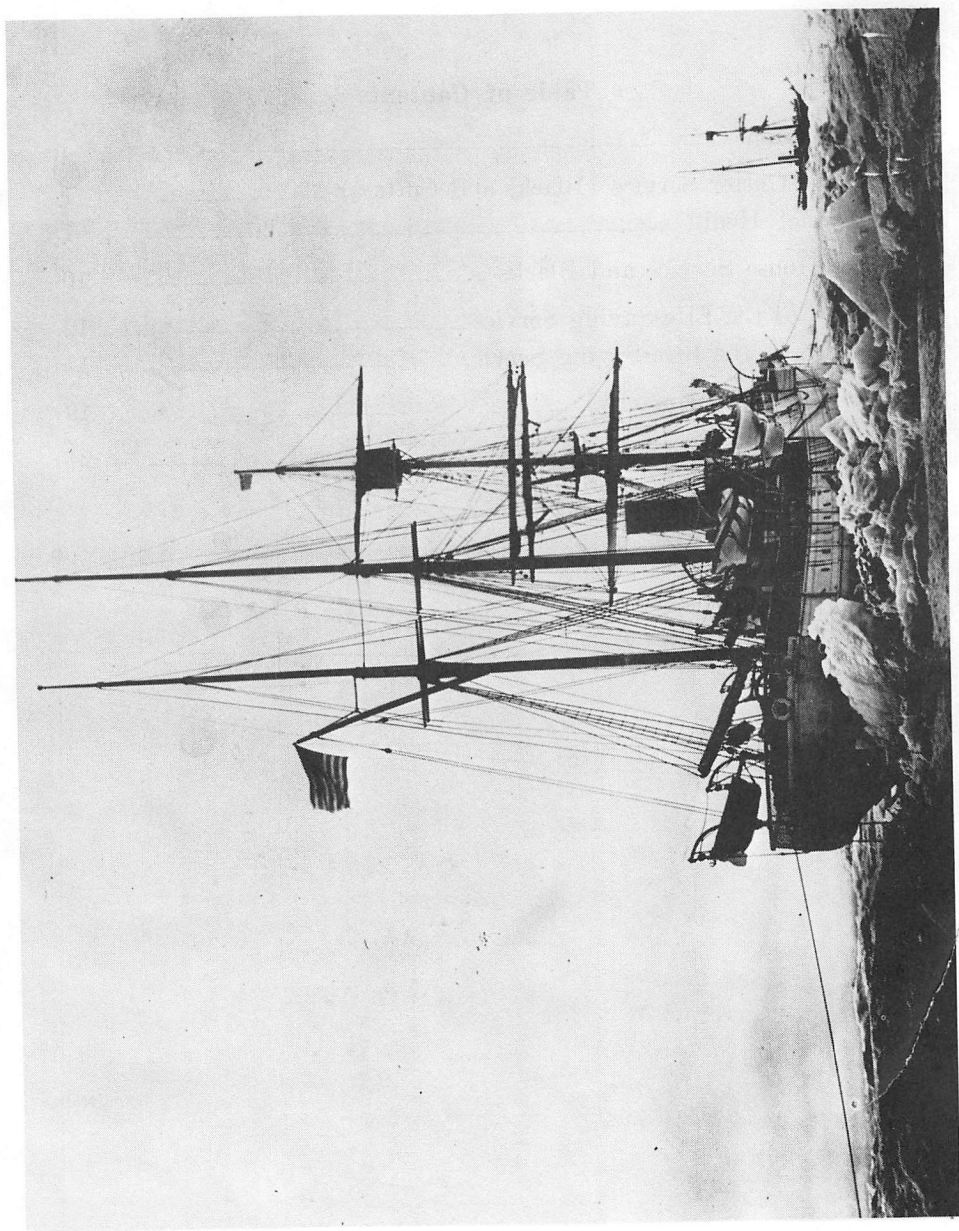
*History of Blacks in the U.S. Coast Guard* is written as an informative portrayal of the roles and accomplishments of black Coast Guardsmen throughout the history of the Coast Guard and its vestigial components: The Revenue Cutter Service and the Life-Saving Service. The purpose of this history is not to alienate or elevate the role of black Coast Guardsmen from that of other Coast Guardsmen, but serves rather to illuminate and interweave the activities of the blacks throughout the overall history. Their role has been neglected in most of the history books written on the Coast Guard and its predecessor organizations. At the same time, other compilations addressing blacks in the military offer scanty, if any, attention to the black Coast Guardsmen. This booklet is in no way exhaustive; research continues. However, it is presented to provide an overview of blacks from the beginning of the "Coast Guard" until . . .

Special thanks to the U.S. Coast Guard Public Affairs Office, U.S. Coast Guard Office of Civil Rights and U.S. Coast Guard Office of Recruiting, Coast Guard Headquarters, Washington, D.C., who funded the printing of this booklet. Thanks also to Truman Strobridge, former U.S. Coast Guard Historian, who has contributed much to the field of blacks in the Coast Guard through his research and writings and for motivating the authors which has led to the compilation of these articles. Included is a reprint of most of Mr. Strobridge's article "Blacks and Cutters." Those portions of his articles are in quotes. Thanks also to Dr. Holdcamper and Terry Machett from the National Archives, and the Archival Staff at Suitland, Maryland and the Navy Yard. Much appreciation to Betty Segedi who supplied us with many photographs and information and to Jose Braziel, Department of Transportation Graphics, who designed the cover.

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## Revenue Cutter Service (Blacks and Cutters)

A brief historical overview of the general conditions of the country in its post-revolution era and an examination of Alexander Hamilton's economic thought will show how these factors gave birth to a "System of Cutters" which eventually became the U.S. Coast Guard.

A plan by Hamilton designed to address the nation's economic problems was an attempt to: (a) eliminate the 70 million dollar debt inherited from the revolution. Levying a tariff on revenue which was provided for by the Revenue Act of 1789 was a means of doing this; (b) protect the small but growing American shipping and manufacturing industry; (British domination restricted American manufacturing because it conflicted with the idea that the colonies were only to provide raw materials to England) and (c) to re-establish the Merchant Marine and the importance of such an organization. The public demanded that shipping be protected by tax rates and aids to navigation. This in turn led Hamilton to formulate a plan for the operation of a Lighthouse Service.

Hamilton's proposal that the federal government accept public responsibility for safety at sea was received favorably, thus, on August 7, 1789, President Washington approved the Ninth Act of Congress which was to provide for public work.

Smuggling and other illegal activity were rampant. To counter such acts and as Hamilton expressed, "Set every possible guard" a seagoing military force was launched in support of the national economic policy. Mere legal paper statutes were not enough to combat the criminal activity. Thus, on August 4, 1790, the present day Coast Guard had its beginning.

The Organic Act provided for the establishment and support of ten cutters to enforce the custom laws. Hamilton further asked for a professional corp of commissioned officers. The first, Hopley Yeaton, commander of the Scammel, owned a slave named Senegal. This slave served and accompanied Yeaton on many cruises.

"Even before the first cutter was launched in 1791, a black had already rallied to the cause of the fledgling Service. When Secretary Hamilton asked Congress for "ten boats" for the protection of revenue, he specified that each one be 'armed with swivels.' Swivels

are simply just small cannons on a revolving base that could be turned in any direction.

"The shipyard that had the contract for building the SCAMMEL at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, had ordered the necessary 'swivels' from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, for delivery prior to the expected launching in October 1791. At this point in time, the lower Delaware Bay region was noted as a hangout for smugglers. Discovering that the 'swivels' were to be delivered overland, some of these evaders of the custom law banded together to hijack the shipment, thus thwarting the Government's attempt to 'protect the revenue' and securing the use of these cannon for their own nefarious purposes.

"Unbeknownst to them, however, the shipping company had hired a giant black teamstress by the name of Maria Lee. "Black Maria," as she was more commonly known, was famous for her brawn and capable of dispatching more than her share of men in any rough and tumble, knock down, drag out brawl.

"When the hijackers attacked the wagon train on the Philadelphia-New York Highway, "Black Maria" rose to the occasion by laying out six of the smugglers herself, while the other male teamsters were driving off the rest. Thus, by the grace of "Black Maria," Secretary Hamilton got his 'swivels' and Captain Hopley Yeaton took command of the SCAMMEL with orders as the first holder of a seagoing commission in the service of the United States to 'protect the revenue.'

"The practice of officers being permitted to utilize their slaves on board revenue cutters appeared to have been a common one, and slaves were shipped in the capacity of stewards, cooks, and seamen. A Service regulation, dated Nov. 1, 1843, officially prohibited this practice, by providing 'nor is any slave ever to be entered for the Service, or to form a complement of any vessel of the Revenue Marine of the United States.'

"Even before this date, however, some restrictions had been placed upon the use of blacks and slaves by the captain of the revenue cutters. Captain W. W. Polk, USRCS, commanding the revenue cutter FLORIDA, penned the following comments to Secretary of Treasury Samuel D. Ingham on June 22, 1831.

"In the general instructions for the government of the Rev. Cutter Service of Dec. last, by one paragraph is prohibited the employment of persons of colour, unless by the special permission of the Secretary of the Treasury.

"I respectfully beg leave to offer a few remarks for consideration on the subject.

"The custom which prevails at the Port of Philadelphia (where I ship my crews) of having coloured persons for cooks & stewards, renders it very difficult to procure suitable white persons to fill those stations. In compliance with those instructions, I endeavored to ship white persons to fill those stations—being unable to procure a white cook—I rated one cook who had been shipped at Boy's wages . . . The steward, the officer assigned to that duty, shipped him for a white man. He is one of those persons whose complexion renders it doubtful (on cursory observation) to what race he belongs. He called himself a white man, and a native of Norfolk, born of French parents, but on becoming acquainted with him, I have no doubt that he is a man of colour, and doubt whether he is a native.

"He is however incompetent, and it is my design to discharge him.

"I have for the reasons above . . . the difficulty of procuring suitable white persons to fill the stations of cook and steward, respectfully to request that the Honorable Secretary will permit me to fill those stations with persons of colour. They not being slaves.

"I beg leave here to observe that I have never owned a slave in the Cutter Service. I have however a coloured boy, a native of N. York and of course free, he was given to me by Capt. M. C. Perry of the Navy. He is now bound to me under the Laws of Delaware until the age of 21.

"If it not be incompatible with the rules laid down by the Hon. Secretary I have respectfully to suggest that I may be permitted to employ the boy as a servant on board. He is an expert sailor for his age and competent to the duty of a boy of the first class. I would further respectfully ask if the Commanders of Cutters are permitted to employ apprentices, and if so how many.

"Six days later, Secretary Ingham replied, stating that there 'will be no objection to your retaining your servant Boy and shipping coloured persons as cooks and stewards.' And the following month, on July 30, 1831, Acting Secretary of Treasury Asbery Dickens assured Captain Richard Derly, USRCS, commanding the revenue cutter MORRIS, that he had 'permission of the department to employ free colored persons as cook and steward of the MORRIS.'

"Meanwhile, ever since 1794, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service had been carrying on an important mission—that of preventing the importation of slaves into the territorial limits of the United States. Although the law of March 22, 1794 that inhibited the slave trade

between the United States and foreign countries did not specifically direct the revenue cutters to aid in its enforcement, 'they were nevertheless instructed to do so; and their connection with the efforts to suppress the traffic, begun under this Act, did not cease until the occasion for such efforts had entirely disappeared.' For instance, the revenue cutters stationed at the South Atlantic coast ports, operating under the authority of the Acts of March 2, 1807 and March 3, 1819, 'captured numerous vessels, having on board in the aggregate 487 negroes intended to be sold in bondage.'

"The following entry in the Service's annual report for 1846, therefore, was typical: 'Several captures of piratical vessels, which at the time infested the Florida keys, were made by Captain Jackson and others, and, having full cargoes of slaves destined for Amelia Island, were carried into American waters and confined.' Not so typical, however, is an entry for the annual report in 1844:

'One loss only has been sustained during the past year. The revenue boat 'Vigilant,' built for the purpose of cruising in the shoal water adjacent to the mouth of the Mississippi river, and placed in charge of inspector W. G. B. Taylor, had, without the knowledge of the department and against its express orders not to leave the station, been dispatched in quest of some slaves which had absconded, and continued the search as far as St. Augustine, East Florida; on her return, she was blown out of the harbor of Key West, in the hurricane of 4th and 5th of October last, and all hands, except two seamen were lost. As a steamer will shortly be stationed at the mouth of the Mississippi, it will not be necessary to employ any other force at that point.'

"Another example of the use of revenue cutter to assist a slave owner in recovering his property occurred in 1854. A fugitive slave by the name of Anthony Burns had made his escape from Virginia only to be apprehended in Massachusetts. The U.S. Court in Boston, subsequently, ordered him returned to slavery under the provisions of the fugitive slave law of September 9, 1850. However, 'the excitement in Boston was such as to render it probable that the people would prevent the execution of the decree of the court.' Accordingly, on May 29, 1854, Mr. C. H. Peaslee, Collector of Customs in Boston, placed the revenue cutter MORRIS at the disposal of the U.S. Marshal, 'should her services be required in executing the laws of the United States.'

"This offer was promptly accepted. The same day, Collector Peaslee directed Captain John Whitcomb, Commanding Officer of the MORRIS, to report immediately to the U.S. Marshal for in-

structions. Subsequently, on June 10, 1854, Captain Whitcomb reported as follows to Secretary of the Treasury James Guthrie:

‘ . . . in obedience to the order of the Collector of Customs at Boston, placing me under the orders of the U.S. Marshal, and in obedience to his verbal instructions, I arrived this day at Norfolk, with the U.S. Deputy Marshal and four assistants on board, with their charge—the fugitive, Anthony Burns. The owner of the Slave, Col. Suttle, and his friend Mr. Brent, sailed from Boston with me, but pressing engagements at home, I put them off at Sandy Hook on board a vessel bound into New York.

“In a letter to Collector Peaslee the following day, Secretary Guthrie set forth his approval of this course of action, remarking that he ‘entirely approves of your course in placing the cutter MORRIS at the disposal of the Marshal for the purpose of removing the slave, Anthony Burns, out of danger and if necessary to the place from which he escaped.’

“Six years later, on April 12, 1861, came the shot at Fort Sumter. Here, too, a revenue cutter played a distinctive role, for the HARRIET LANE, part of the naval relief squadron, was destined to fire the first shot from a vessel on either side in the Civil War. From then until victory four years later, the revenue cutters performed as ordered, mostly helping to enforce the blockade of the Confederacy and lending support to Army and Navy units striking into the South.

“While the fratricidal bloodletting of the Civil War, coupled with the Emancipation Proclamation, drastically changed the status of Blacks in the United States for all time, their position within the Revenue Cutter Service stayed pretty much the same. Only one startling exception stands out—Captain Michael A. Healy.”



## Michael Healy

Michael Healy was one of ten children born to an Irish immigrant and a mulatto slave girl in Macon, Georgia. In his youth he had constantly run away from several schools. His brother felt sea life would discipline young Healy and in 1855, at the age of 15, Michael Healy was hired as a cabin boy aboard the clipper fleet JUMNA. After travelling and learning the duties and responsibilities of sailors, Healy applied for and was accepted by the Revenue Cutter Service, March 7, 1865. He became Second Lieutenant June 6, 1886 and First Lieutenant July 20, 1870. As First Lieutenant he was ordered aboard the Cutter Rush, patrolling the Alaskan waters for the first time. While serving on this cutter Healy became known as a brilliant seaman and was often considered the best sailor in the North. The New York Sun described Healy in the following way in a feature article on January 28, 1884. "Captain Mike Healy is a good deal more distinguished person in the waters of the far Northwest than any president of the United States or any potentate of Europe has yet become . . ."

Healy's most remarkable period in the Service began in 1886 when he took command of the BEAR, which was considered by many as the greatest polar ship of its time. The ship's responsibility included "seizing any vessel found sealing in the Bering Sea." By 1892, the BEAR, RUSH and CORWIN had made so many seizures that tension between the United States and British merchants developed. Healy was also tasked with the job of bringing medical and other aid to the natives of Alaska, making weather and ice reports and preparing navigation charts, rescuing vessels in distress, transporting special passengers and supplies and fighting violators of federal laws. He served as deputy U.S. Marshall and was for many years the federal law in Alaska.

In 1911 Great Britain, the United States, Russia and Japan signed a treaty prohibiting all seal hunting in the North Pacific and Bering Sea. However, much damage had already been done before the treaty was put into effect. When the newcomers came to Alaska, they brought superior equipment, such as repeating rifles. The presence of this kind of equipment left the native population at a severe disadvantage: the Eskimos' primitive equipment was no competition for the foreigner's. On one of the BEAR's annual visits to King Island, Healy saw a starved native population of only 100 once proud people, begging for food. He ordered supplies for the natives, however he could not stop there. With the aid of Dr. Sheldon Jackson, Healy devised a plan to import reindeer from the Siberian Chukchi, a people very much like the Eskimo who depended upon these beast to survive. Healy and Jackson were faced



with great obstacles, however the two men were determined to implement their project. During the next ten years, the revenue cutters brought about 1,100 reindeer to Alaska. Dr. Jackson's Bureau of Education took charge of landing and distributing the deer, and the natives were taught how to raise and take care of the reindeer in missionary schools. By 1940 Alaska's domesticated reindeer herds had risen to 500,000 supplying ample food and clothing to the native population.

When Healy retired he was the third ranking officer in the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service.

"During the Spanish-American War, two black cuttermen distinguished themselves at the Battle of Cardenas Bay in Cuba. The revenue cutter HUDSON, armed with two six-pounders, joined two Navy gunboats and a torpedo boat for a raid into the Spanish-fortified Cardenas Bay on May 11, 1898.

"While one gunboat remained outside to provide supporting fire, the others made their way gingerly through the tree-edged channel, carefully avoiding mines. Once inside and having spotted their target, the HUDSON and the torpedo boat WINSLOW 'shot in' at full speed toward the Spanish gunboats moored to the sugar wharves, while the second Navy gunboat held back to support their attack with its 4-inch broadsides. Before the Americans could close to point-blank range, the Spanish shore batteries began ranging in on the faster WINSLOW, and the fight was on."

"The Spanish batteries fired smokeless powder and thus could be located only by their intermittent flashes. Gunners on the American ships were hampered by smoke from their own black powder but nevertheless kept up a rapid and fairly accurate fire, blazing away at every flash on shore. The HUDSON alone in 20 minutes threw 135 shells at the enemy; Savage, her Negro steward, stripped and sweating and roaring 'There'll be a Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight' passed up the ammunition in a steady stream.

"Possessing the 'advantages of position, cover, and continuously visible targets,' the Spaniards were 'able to smother the raiders in a torrential fire, which poured down on the two little ships from five different directions.' Not only did solid shot slam into both the American vessels, but shrapnel riddled their upperworks and stacks. 'Shells screamed overhead,' recalled one cutterman, 'and lashed the water all around.'

"For almost a half hour, they escaped a crippling blow. Then, the luck of the WINSLOW ran out, when two shells ripped into her, wrecking her steering engine and a boiler. Helplessly, she

began drifting toward the beach, while the concentrated enemy fire threatened to disintegrate her.

"The HUDSON now stood shoreward into the hail of 'very fierce' bombardment to take in tow the damaged WINSLOW that was riding before the freshening breeze to her doom. When only 100 feet away, the cuttermen watched in horror as four torpedoboatmen, waiting to catch the heaving line, were cut down by an exploding shell. Other hands caught the line and made it fast. Immediately, the HUDSON began moving toward safety. "The sound, smoke, and smell of battle faded into the distance, into the past, leaving Cardenas town the heat and humdrum of perpetual siesta and to the Coast Guard the memoried words 'Cardenas Bay.'

"In his after-action report, the Commanding Officer of the HUDSON spoke highly of all his men."

'Each and every member of the crew from the boatswain down to Moses Jones, the colored boy, who attached himself to the after gun and never failed to have a shell ready when it was needed, did his whole duty cheerfully and without the least hesitation. This appears the more remarkable in view of the fact that none of them had ever been under fire before, and that the guns were without protection or shelter of any kind. They deserve the most substantial recognition in the power of the Government for their heroic services upon this occasion.'

This gallant bravery did not go unrewarded, for Congress, by joint resolution, put the following recommendations of President William McKinley into effect:

In the face of a most galling fire from the enemy's guns the revenue cutter HUDSON, commanded by First Lieutenant Frank H. Newcomb, United States Revenue-Cutter Service, rescued the disabled WINSLOW, her wounded commander, and remaining crew. The commander of the HUDSON kept his vessel in the very hottest fire of the action, although in constant danger of going ashore on account of the shallow water, until he finally got a line made fast to the WINSLOW and towed that vessel out of range of the enemy's guns, a deed of special gallantry.

I recommend that, in recognition of the signal act of heroism of First Lieutenant Frank H. Newcomb, United States Revenue Cutter Service, above set forth, the thanks of Congress be extended to him and to his officers and men of the HUDSON: and that a gold medal of honor be presented to Lieutenant Newcomb, a silver medal of honor to each of his crew who served with him at Cardenas."

## The Light House Service and Blacks

The first lighthouse in America was built in 1716 in Boston. Before that, only bonfires or blazing barrels of pitch on headlands guided ships to port at night. Boston also had one of America's earliest fog signals and the first buoys had appeared in the Delaware River by 1767. The earliest lightship station was that at Craney Island in Hampton Roads, Va., where a decked over small boat was moored in 1820.

The responsibility for aids was taken over by the Federal Government in 1789, when the Lighthouse Service was under the Treasury's Revenue Marine Bureau, which was from 1845-1852. From 1852-1910 the responsibility for aids was under the rule of the Lighthouse Board, and then the Commerce in 1903. The Service was a Commerce responsibility until it was returned to the Treasury and the Coast Guard.

The history of blacks in the U.S. Lighthouse Service is scanty. The first recorded mention of a black within the Service was as early as 1718. A Negro slave worked at the Boston Lighthouse and perished along with the Keeper and his family.

There are recorded instances of Negroes serving aboard early lightships, serving as cooks, probably due to an 1835 regulation that specifically forbade vessels hiring blacks except as cooks.

One famous instance of a black dying in connection with lighthouses came during the Seminole Indian Wars, early in 1836. The black assistant, a slave, died defending the lighthouse when it was raided by Indians.

An old black woman was described as badly keeping the St. Simons Island light in 1836. The keeper, suffering from gout, was not able to attend the light.

On a stormy March evening in 1847, at the Isles of Shoals Lighthouse off the coast of New Hampshire, a huge Negro banged on the tower door. He informed the assistant Keeper that a brig was ashore on the rocks below the light. The Keeper, Downs, later learned that the Negro sailor had faced almost certain death to get help for his shipments.

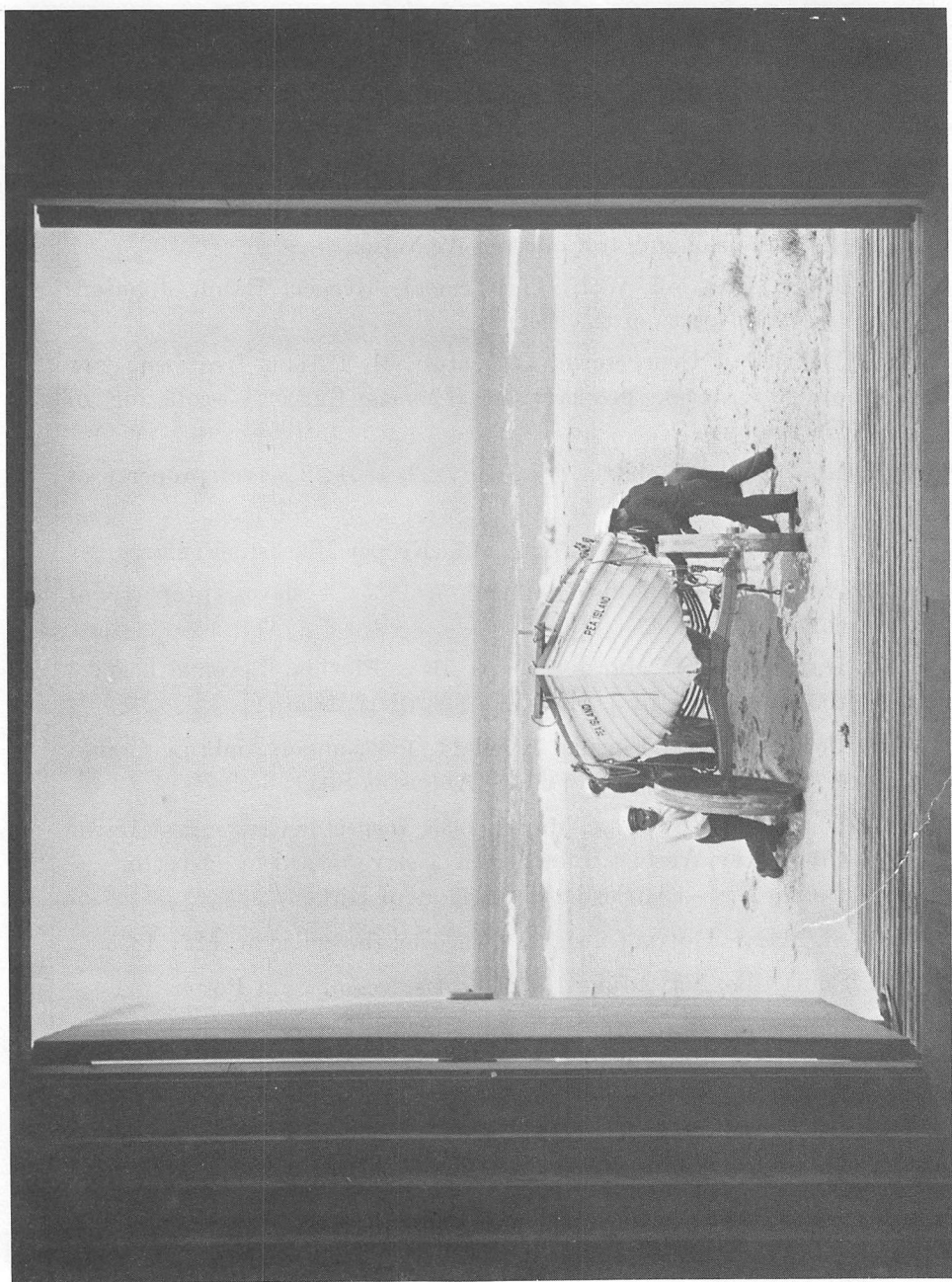
The New Point Comfort Lighthouse in Virginia was manned in 1852 by a retired sea captain and his assistant—a female Negro slave. And the keeper of the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse in North Carolina was dismissed from the Service when it was discovered that he was using his Negro slaves to tend to the light.

In 1862 there was a lightship that was reestablished during the Civil War off the coast of South Carolina that was manned solely by blacks.

Listed below are vessels that had crews of black slaves. This information is again brief but does give an indication of the presence of blacks.

1. U.S. Revenue Cutter Taney, 1843: four slaves
2. Revenue Boats in Norfolk District, Va., July 7, 1834, slaves
3. Revenue Boat Station at Hampton, commanded by John L. Westwood, one slave, property of Captain Westwood
4. York District, Va. (Custom House York Town, July 9, 1834: 4 slaves belonging to Collector W. Nelson
5. Light Boat off Wolf Trap Shoal—Keeper, Ralph Johnson: slaves, property of the keeper
6. District of Georgetown, D.C., July 21, 1834: 2 free men, crew of two slaves, property of Thomas Carberry—collector of Georgetown
7. Rowboat—Alexandria, Va., July 23, 1834: 2 slaves property of Collector
8. Light Boat off Cedar Point, Md., Keeper Blackstone: slaves
9. Appapachicola, Florida, April 5, 1835: 4 slaves, property of collector
10. District of St. Marks, Tampa Bay, Florida, Revenue boat: 3 slaves property of J. H. Willis (April 17, 1835)
11. Fort St. Mark, Florida, April 17, 1835, under Ambrose Crane: 4 free men Tampa Bay under Augustus Steel: 3 slaves
12. District of Key West, May 2, 1835, Inspector Crews: 2 slaves of Crews Key West: 4 colored men, 1 slave owned by inspector Indian Key—Charles Howe: 3 slaves of Howe
13. St. Mary's George: 2 slaves owned by the collector, May 1835
14. Smithville, N.C., June 15, 1835: 4 slaves of Sam Potter
15. District of Beaufort, N.C., June 1835: 2 slaves owned by James Rumley
16. District of Ocracoak, N.C., June 1835 Sq. Sylvester Brown: 2 slaves owned by Brown
17. District of Pensacola, March 1835: 1 slave, property of Mrs. Overton

The foregoing list is compiled from a Revenue Cutter inspection during the years 1834 and 1835 and originally came from records at the National Archives.



## History of the Life-Saving Service

Up until 1854, the 17-year-old Life-Saving Service was practically defunct. No real organized system existed and Congress had simply allocated funds for equipment and a few lifeboat stations on the New Jersey and New York shores. No provisions had ever been made for any paid personnel to maintain the stations or to be directly responsible for the equipment or the execution of their use. Volunteers, who were haphazardously gathered by someone who had been left the key to the boathouse, provided some assistance to shipwrecked vessels. Public interest mounted only when big disasters occurred and many lives were lost or when economic losses were great. And, when the POWHATAN crashed in 1854 on the shores of Long Beach, New York and 311 men, women and children perished, public indignation prompted Congress to pass a bill approving the appointment of keepers at \$200 per year and also allotted more money to support the stations. The administration was still loose, and although a keeper had been hired, no provision had yet been made for any crew, nor was the keeper accountable to anyone. The lifesaving stations therefore continued to be run disorderly until after the Civil War when some semblance of organization began to form.

During the post-Civil War years shipping increased and vessels were built stronger and larger. The larger the ships, the larger the cargo and the greater the finances involved. The more shipwrecks involving these larger vessels, the more lives lost, the greater the economic losses and the greater the interest of the public heightened on the subject of safety at sea. The public demanded the maintenance of the life-saving stations and lighthouses to minimize the dangers of ocean travel along U.S. coasts.

George S. Boutwell, Secretary of Treasury under President Grant reestablished a Revenue Marine Bureau in the Treasury Department and assigned to it the duty of administering the lifesaving stations. Sumner I. Kimball, a civilian, was chosen to head the Bureau. He is often considered as the cause for the reconstruction of the Revenue Marine and the Life-Saving Service.

Congress was called upon in 1869 to employ paid experienced surfmen but they voted it down. It wasn't until 1870 that Congress authorized the pay of six experienced fishermen to each boat at alternate life-saving stations along the New Jersey coasts. This employment became the beginning of a government supervised system.

During the winter of 1870-1879, a number of fatal disasters occurred along the Atlantic coast. It was then revealed that the coast was not properly guarded and that the Life-Saving Service was

inefficient and in need of a more complete organization. Captain Faunce of the Revenue Marine investigated the various life-saving stations and established that they were inefficient and decayed. Kimball commenced to rehabilitate the decadent life-saving stations. He received about \$200,000 from Congress to establish more stations and by 1874 many had been constructed in New England, the Southern part of the Atlantic, on the Great Lakes and the Pacific Coast. During this period beach patrols and signals were introduced and the breeches buoy was developed. Regular inspection and reconditioning of life-saving stations were executed.

### **Blacks in the Life-Saving Service**

Through ongoing research, additional blacks who served at various life-saving stations have been identified. The majority of the published information and history concerning the Life-Saving Service only cite the accomplishments of the all black crew at Pea Island Life-Saving Station, neglecting to acknowledge other black lifesavers who were stationed at least along the Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina shores.

One is not always able to distinguish black personnel from white while researching old records because race was not always differentiated. However, all names mentioned below have been definitely identified as blacks. All of the information concerning these men and the lifesaving stations where they served (except most of the information on Pea Island) has been obtained from original logs, letters and other authentic documents housed at the National Archives in Washington, D.C.

The blacks employed by the Life-Saving Service were experienced fishermen and oystermen who had lived along the Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina coasts. They were well-equipped to handle boats and were knowledgeable of the surf and sea. Upon clearance from the medical surgeon, these men were issued Articles of Engagements and became paid U.S. Lifesavers.

Commencing about 1875, records show the presence of blacks at the following lifesaving stations. In the Fifth District: Station #3, Green Run: James H. Shields and Alexander Ames; Station #5, Cedar Island, A. Finney; Station #7, Cobbs Island, Warner Collins. The Sixth District appeared to employ many more blacks during the mid-1870's than did the Fifth District. Station #1, Cape Henry, employed George Owens, William Olds, T. Cuffey, Luther Owens and Peter Fuller. Station #4, Jones Hill hired Jerry Munden. William C. Bowser, Miles Tillet and George Reed served at Nags Head, Station #7 and Station #8, Bodies Island, employed Fields Midgett, G. W. Boswer, Robert F. Toler and the



renowned Richard Etheridge. Station #16 could boast of George R. Midgett, Lewis Westcott and King Daniel. Station #25, Cape Fear, employed John W. Smith, Robert Smith and Gibb McDonald about 1882.

These experienced seamen cooked as well as patrolled the beach and were also involved in an array of duties which became an integral part of the duties of the lifesavers. A typical day, applicable to all lifesaving stations, could include routine duties such as cleaning the station, patrolling the beaches, drilling in the use of life cars, practicing launching the station's lifeboat, practicing with the breeches buoy, throwing a line (firing the gun) to a representation of a wreck, painting and sandpapering the boats, travelling to pick up the mail or supplies, practicing resuscitation or repairing the apparatus.

Like all other lifesavers, however, these crewmembers' primary duty was to aid ships in distress, and like other crewmembers at other stations, the black lifesavers saved many lives and much property.

As previously mentioned, the most celebrated existence of blacks in the Life-Saving Service was the all black crew at Pea Island. Various stories have been offered as to how an all black crew became stationed at Pea Island Station.

However, the following is the authentic story culled from original correspondence of the Life-Saving Service.

About two on the clear, moonlit morning of November 30, 1879, Surfman Leonidas R. Tillett left Pea Island Life-Saving Station to patrol the south beach. He returned about 5:20 a.m., made a fire and called the cook. Peering out of the south window with field glasses, Tillett saw a man coming from the beach. His first inclination was that the man was a fisherman, however, seconds later he thought he could be coming from a wreck. Acting upon this latter proposition, Tillett notified the keeper, George C. Daniels, and the crew, and then started for the beach towards the man.

The man, later identified as a survivor from the M&S HENDERSON, exhaustedly said only, "Captain drowned, masts gone." Tillett assisted the survivor to the station and left him in the care of the "colored, female cook." The keeper and crew then started for the beach to look for other survivors. They encountered debris from the wreck and also part of the vessel about 300 yards off shore, heaving from the motion of the sea. The crew arrived at New Inlet where they met some fishermen, Ira, J. B. and W. A. Stowe, brothers, who informed them (lifesavers) that they had found a man floating in the channel and had taken him to their camp at Jack's Shoal and were out looking for others.

The lifesaving crew proceeded to the camp and two of them went back along the beach to investigate what they thought was a figure. They found another survivor from the HENDERSON, and with the aid of the fishermen carried the man back to the camp.

An investigation of the wreck to establish the participation of the Pea Island lifesaving crew was conducted by Charles F. Shoemaker, Assistant Inspector of the Life-Saving Service. It was ascertained that the wreck of the HENDERSON, which left four persons dead, occurred between 4 and 5 a.m. and that "she must have been very near the point of grounding when Tillett passed it on his way north from the end of his beat." The Inspector concluded, "It is plain that surfman Tillett should have discovered this wreck if he had kept a bright lookout. His failure to do so is evidence of the neglect of the most important duty of a patrolman."

The investigation also detected "false swearing" of Keeper Daniels on the actions of his crew, and concluded that the lifesavers assisted the fishermen in saving the life of the second survivor who was taken to the fishermen's camp but that the rescue of the first man taken to the camp was "due entirely to efforts of the Stowe brothers."

At the close of the written report to the General Superintendent of the wreck, Shoemaker recommended that "Keeper George C. Daniels be removed immediately; cause, false swearing and personal acknowledgement of his unfitness for position and that surfman L. R. Tillett be discharged; cause, neglect of patrol and that Charles L. Midgett be discharged; cause, not a competent surfman . . ." Others at the station were transferred to different stations and the two blacks already there remained.

Richard Etheridge was recommended by Shoemaker to assume keepership at Pea Island. Shoemaker wrote, in a letter to Sumner I. Kimball, then General Superintendent of the Life-Saving Service, that, "I examined this man, and found him to be 38 years of age, strong, robust physique, intelligent and able to read and write. He is reputed one of the best surfmen on this part of the coast of North Carolina." Shoemaker also recommended that Etheridge be able to select a crew composed of colored men, two from stations No. 10, two already at Pea Island, W. B. Daniels and W. R. Davis, and two others of his choosing.

Shoemaker added that he was "aware that no colored man holds the position of Keeper in the Life-Saving Service" but explained that Etheridge was such an excellent surfman that "the efficiency of the Service at (Pea Island) the station will be greatly enhanced."

In another letter to Kimball, Frank Newcomb, Assistant Inspector of the Life-Saving Service also highly recommended Etheridge. He and Shoemaker, who endorsed the letter, both remarked that

Etheridge "had the reputation of being as good a surfman as there is on this coast, black or white."

Appointed Keeper of Pea Island Life-Saving Station January 24, 1880, Richard Etheridge became the first black keeper in the Life-Saving Service. He was born in 1842 and raised near Pea Island. His continued exposure to the sea and surf enabled him to become an adept fisherman and surfman.

Soon after his appointment, the station burned down. But Etheridge was determined to execute his function as expertly and as devoutly as possible. He supervised the construction of a new station on the same site as the original station.

The rigorous lifesaving drills Etheridge expected from his crew prepared the men to tackle any task which they might be faced with as lifesavers. His station earned the reputation of being "one of the tautest on the Carolina Coast" and Keeper Etheridge enjoyed the title as one of the most daring lifesavers in the service.

On October 11, 1896, Etheridge's stringent requirement of excellent preparation proved profitable. On this day a three-masted schooner, the E. S. NEWMAN was caught in a terrifying storm. En route from Stonningham, Conn., to Norfolk, Va., the vessel was blown 100 miles south off its course, slamming onto the beach near Cape Fear, N.C. two miles south of Pea Island Station.

The storm was so severe that Etheridge had suspended normal beach patrol that day. But the alert eyes of surfman Theodore Meekins saw the first distress flare and immediately notified Etheridge.

The crew was rounded up and launched the surfboat. Fighting the strong tide and sweeping currents, the dedicated lifesavers strugglingly made their way to a point opposite the schooner, only to find that there was no dry land. The daring quick-witted Etheridge tied two of his strongest surfmen together, and connected to shore by a long line, they fought their way through the roaring breakers and finally reached the schooner. The seemingly inexhaustible Pea Island crewmembers journeyed through the perilous waters ten times and rescued every one of the nine persons on board.



## Wars

The Coast Guard has contributed vitally to every war since the American Revolution. Coast Guardsmen joined forces with the Navy to fulfill its military obligation. When the U.S. entered WWI, April 6, 1917, against Germany, fifteen Coast Guard cutters, about 200 officers and 5,000 enlisted men went into action as part of the Naval force. By WWII the Coast Guard had 802 vessels and personnel manned Navy (351) and Army (288) craft. Shore stations increased from 1,096 to 1,774 and by the end of the War Coast Guard personnel numbered 171,168.

The role of blacks throughout the various wars laid the foundation for the total assimilation of blacks into the rates and ranks today. However, this assimilation was not welcomed with open arms. The Coast Guard, like most other institutions at that time had remnants of the segregation attitudes that existed during the pre and post Civil War years.

Since the Coast Guard comes under the Navy during wartime, its racial policy is greatly influenced by that of the Navy. "Up until about 1922, all recruiting facilities were authorized to recruit Negroes under exactly the same conditions as other races were recruited. In June, 1922, enlistment of the Negro was discontinued." In many cases assignments had to be found where the small percentage of the blacks who were rated would exercise little or no military command. In view of these conditions, it was decided that the loss of efficiency, lack of harmony and co-operation, and the lack of mobility of personnel, justified the discontinuance of enlisting Negroes in ratings other than in the messman branch. By 1942 such instructions were still in effect.

As the war progressed, however, public sentiment and concerned military personnel began to challenge this restriction. Potential racial problems could not be ignored if blacks were to be integrated into the general services. The Coast Guard joined the General Board's discussion of this expansion and specific objections were voiced as to why this policy would be detrimental and why the Board could not recommend areas in which blacks could serve. Some general consensus of the Board included (a) "that the enlistment of Negroes for general service would lower the high morale of Navy (and Coast Guard) personnel and reduce the efficiency of the fleet, (b) because the Negroes have lower health, educational and intelligence ratings than white men, it is necessary to process many more Negroes than white men to find the necessary qualifications." This processing was thought to tax the recruiting facilities, (c) "the white man considers that he is of a superior race and will

not admit the Negro as an equal and that (d) the white man will not accept the Negro in a position of authority over him."

When President Roosevelt made it clear that blacks would be integrated into the general rates in the Coast Guard and Navy, Secretary of the Navy Knox, announced in April 1942 that blacks would be accepted in other capacities than messmen. Coast Guard Commandant at that time, Rear Admiral Russel R. Waesche, had a plan ready to test if integration of blacks would be effective.

The Coast Guard would enlist approximately 500 blacks in the general service. Three hundred of these men would be required for duty on small vessels; the rest would be used for shore duties. Eighteen vessels would be used by black crews after they underwent basic training at Manhattan Beach Training Station in New York. Under this plan more than half of the blacks would serve in intimate living conditions with white petty officers. No other blacks would be enlisted until the first group was trained and assigned to duty for a period long enough to permit a survey of their performance.

The program was a major innovation in the Coast Guard's manpower policy. It was the first time that blacks would undergo regular Coast Guard recruit and specialized training.

The first group of 150 black volunteers was recruited and sent to Manhattan Beach in the spring of 1942 and formed into a separate training company. Here the black recruits received instruction in seamanship, knot tying, life saving and small boat handling. Classes and other official activities were integrated, while sleeping and mess facilities were segregated.

Those blacks who qualified for specialized training after the four week basic courses (which were longer and more intensive than regular basic courses) became radiomen, pharmacists, yeomen, coxswains, electricians, carpenters, boatswains and other skilled laborers in the seaman branch.

This plan for orderly induction and assignment of a limited number of black volunteers was terminated in December, 1942 when President Roosevelt ended volunteer enlistment for most military personnel. For the remainder of the war years, the Coast Guard came under the Selective Service Law, which included a racial quota system. An average of 147 blacks were inducted each month during 1943. The sudden influx of blacks necessitated a revision of Coast Guard personnel planning. Many blacks were still assigned to Steward duties and were often ordered to serve at important battle stations.

The majority of the blacks were assigned to shore duty. Their jobs included security and labor details, working as yeomen, store-

keepers and in other capacities. An all black station (second in the Coast Guard, Pea Island the first) was organized at Tiana Beach, New York. Other blacks served on horse and dog patrols as look-outs for enemy infiltration on the coast line.

One of the problems which had been anticipated by the General Board came to fore. Because so many blacks were assigned to shore duty, manpower planners had a problem trying to rotate white Coast Guardsmen from sea to shore duty without transferring blacks to cutters which would result in integrating the vessels. The problem was enhanced by Naval segregation policies of which the Coast Guard had to obey since during the war it came under the Navy's jurisdiction. To help remedy the problem, Lieutenant Carlton Skinner proposed, in June 1943, that a group of black seamen be provided with practical seagoing experience in a completely integrated operation. The Commandant agreed and Lt. Skinner was promoted to Lieutenant Commander and assigned to the weather ship SEA CLOUD as Captain. He had an integrated crew of 173 officers and men; four officers and 50 petty officers were black.

Although the SEA CLOUD was decommissioned in November 1944, after a year's operation, its purpose was rudimentarily fulfilled. It was determined that the crew was like any other crew, with the same problems and achievements, and that no racial outbursts ever evoked. The accomplishments of this experiment were not magnanimous, but it paved the way for other blacks to commence serving on crews that were not completely segregated.

The only other Coast Guard vessel with a significant amount of integration operating in the war zone was the destroyer escort HOQUIAN, which operated out of Adak in the Aleution Islands during 1945.

A well known example of blacks exhibiting military expertise was exhibited by a crew of stewards who manned a battle station. This crew of the cutter CAMBELL earned medals for "heroic achievement" when the cutter rammed and sank an enemy German submarine on February 22, 1943. Louis Etheridge, Captain of the black gun crew, was presented the bronze medal on February 25, 1952 and a personal letter of congratulation from the Commandant.

Charles W. David, Jr., a messman aboard a Coast Guard cutter, was one of the several black mess attendants who gave up their lives in the line of duty in the Coast Guard. When his ship went to the aid of a torpedoed transport in the North Atlantic, David dove overboard repeatedly and rescued several men. His last rescue was that of Lt. Langford Anderson, executive officer of the cutter.



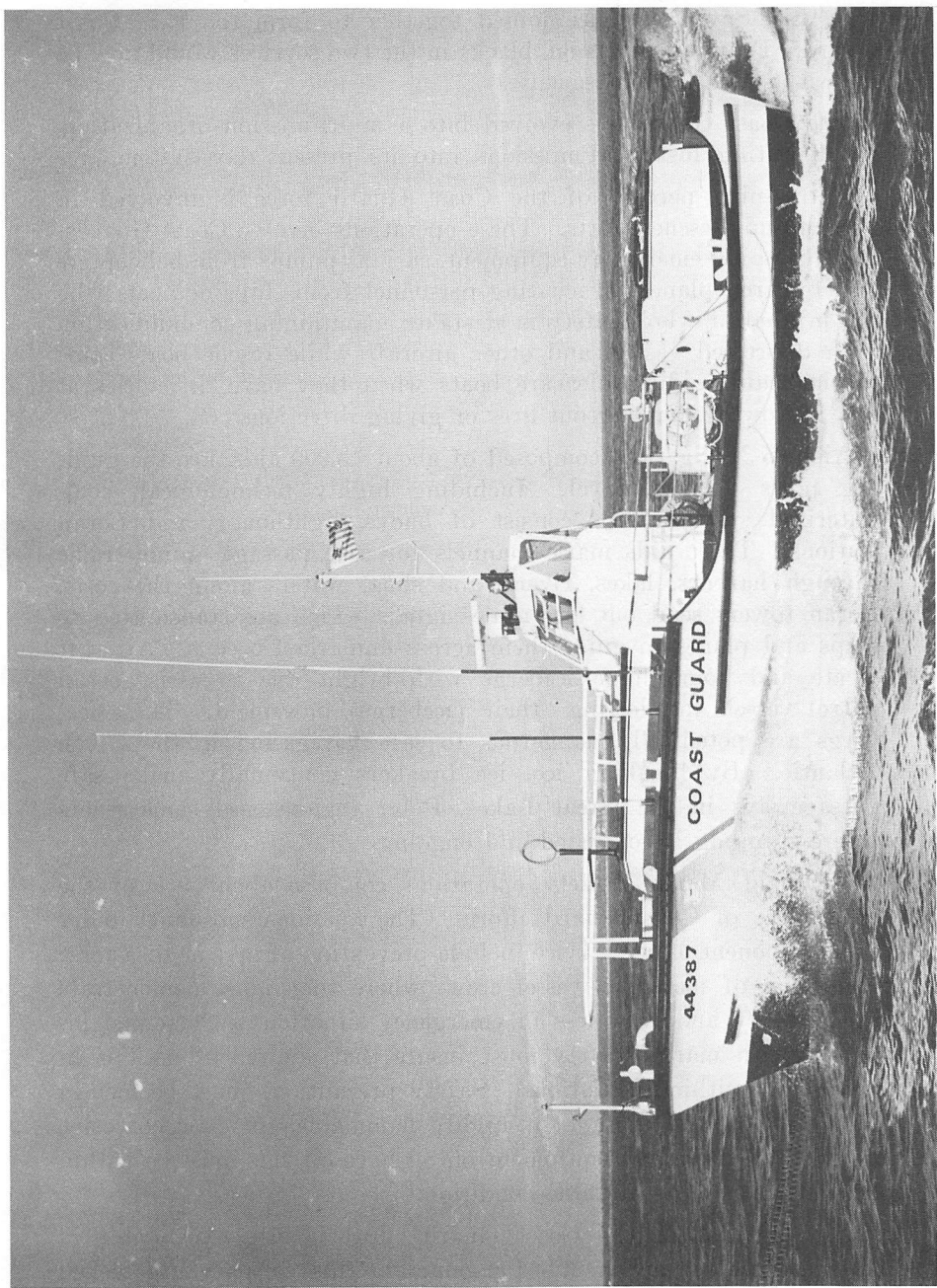
As the war progressed, blacks advanced into the petty officer ranks. By August 1945, 965 blacks were petty officers or warrant officers, many in the general services. Many of these officers worked shore stations and some were instructors at Manhattan Beach. This latter assignment was significant because it was the usual avenue for blacks to become commissioned.

Joseph Jenkins went from Manhattan Beach to Officer Candidate School (OCS) at the Coast Guard Academy. He graduated as the first black Ensign in the Coast Guard Reserve in April 1943; almost a full year before the first blacks were commissioned in the Navy. Harvey C. Russell also graduated from the HOQUIAN to serve as executive officer on a cutter in the Philippines where he assumed command of a racially integrated vessel shortly after the war. Clarence Samuels, a warrant officer, was commissioned as a Lieutenant Junior Grade and assigned to the SEA CLOUD.

Black women also played a role in the Coast Guard during the war. In the fall of 1944, the Coast Guard recruited five black women as Reservists. The presence of black female reservists can be classified as a good gesture of tokenism, though important, because the black females were enlisted four weeks after it was announced that the recruitment of women, except for replacements, would be stopped as of November 23, 1944.

The Coast Guard, now fully integrated, utilized black Coast Guardsmen in every capacity during the Viet Nam War. No policy now exists which limits black Coast Guardsmen from fully being an integral part of the team, whether during the war years or serving in the many peacetime humanitarian duties of the Coast Guard.

Sources for the above information were found in the following references. *Octagon*, February 1972, A Black History in WWII; Chapter IV, *Racial Policy in WWII: The Marine Corps and Coast Guard*; Archives, Suitland, Maryland; General Board Meeting Reports, 1941-1942, on file at the Archives in Suitland, Maryland.



## **The U.S. Coast Guard**

On January 30, 1915, the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service and the U.S. Life-Saving Service joined together to form the U.S. Coast Guard. From that time on, blacks in the two services would now be known as Coast Guardsmen.

The Coast Guard has evolved into a multi-mission organization, incorporating historical missions into its present day system.

Thirty-nine percent of the Coast Guard force is involved in Search and Rescue efforts. These operations involve Coast Guardsmen dropping emergency equipment, such as pumps from helicopters and research planes; evacuating personnel from ships or boats who are injured or who's safety is at stake; maintaining communication with distressed vessels and other aircraft while rescue boats come to their aid; aiding pleasure boats when they have difficulties at sea, by towing, putting out fires or giving directions.

Aids to Navigation, composed of about 43,000 aids, are the guiding posts of sea travel. Including highly technological, computerized systems, aids consist of buoys, lighthouses and Loran stations. These aids mark channels for safe passage, guide traffic through harbors, lakes, rivers, and shoal waters along the coasts. Loran towers send out electronic signals which are transmitted to ships and planes to guide them across unmarked oceans. Aircraft locate and bomb huge icebergs with bright dye to assist ocean patrol vessels in plotting their (icebergs) movement. These icebergs are potentially dangerous to safe navigation in the North Atlantic. By breaking ice, ice breakers continually make safe passageways in the Great Lakes, Polar regions and some rivers where shipping is congested and ongoing.

Merchant Marine Safety operations compose about 9% of the total force of Coast Guard efforts. The missions subsumed under this component of the service include prevention of marine disasters; inspection of merchant vessel crews where they must demonstrate their ability and readiness in emergency situations. Personnel involved with marine safety must insure that equipment used is in order and within regulations. Safety precautions must be met in the handling and storage of highly flammable, toxic or corrosive liquids and lifesaving equipment on offshore oil rigs must be within regulation and in workable condition.

Nine percent of the Coast Guard effort is also expendable in Marine Law Enforcement. Personnel in this capacity are tasked to enforce international conservation treaties and to protect the territorial waters against foreign fishing fleets.

Port Safety operations require safe storage of military and commercial explosives; inspection of waterfront facilities for fire safety and safe equipment; boarding and inspection of American and foreign vessels and safe loading and unloading of dangerous cargo.

Inspecting pleasure craft to insure that safe equipment is aboard, and that operators know safety precautions and correct handling of equipment are preventative measures to reduce accidents that are employed by Boating Safety Teams. Courtesy examinations of craft are extended to the public on safe pleasure boating, as well as education classes. Regatta patrols cruise the waters to aid pleasure riders if difficulty should arise. These patrollers also caution riders who are breaking rules of safe boating or of dangerous conditions which lead to unsafe boating.

Recently the Coast Guard has become involved in Marine Environment Protection. Strike teams respond to major pollution incidents, providing equipment, communications and assistance for the control of major pollution by petroleum or other substances dangerous to the marine environment. Drug traffic elimination is another job of the Coast Guard, working with the Customs Office.

Despite the humanitarian-type efforts and missions of the Coast Guard, it is still a military operation. In times of War, or when ordered by the President of the U.S., the Coast Guard becomes a part of the Navy. It is therefore necessary for men to be continually trained in Military Readiness. Men are trained regularly to meet Navy fleet performance standards, and to continually prepare men for high performance during wartime.

The Coast Guard, now under the Department of Transportation, can boast of the increasing enlistment of black and other minority personnel in the service. However, many areas are still lacking in black participation, such as in the officer ranks. The following is a distribution of black participation in the Coast Guard as of December 1976. There is presently one black Commander (who is on the list for Captain) in the Coast Guard and five black Lieutenant Commanders. Included herein is a brief biography of their Coast Guard career.

	<i>Total in CG</i>	<i>Total Blacks</i>	<i>% Blacks</i>
Commissioned Officer (01-010) --	4,361	53	1.2
Warrant Officer (W1-W4) -----	1,281	24	1.9
Enlisted (E1-E9) -----	31,012	2,010	6.5

**Top Ranking Black Officers in the U.S. Coast Guard  
&  
Noted Black Coast Guardsmen**

**Commander Bobby C. Wilks:** The Highest Ranking Black Officer; First Black Aviator; On Advancement List for Captain.

**Lieutenant Commander Franklin L. Fountaine:** CG Marine Inspection Office, Seattle, Washington

**Lieutenant Commander Jesse L. Long:** Administrative Officer, U.S. Coast Guard Electronics Engineering Center, Wildwood, New Jersey

**Lieutenant Commander Merle J. Smith, Jr.:** Law Instructor, U.S. Coast Guard Academy; First Black graduate of the CG Academy

**Lieutenant Commander Charles A. Thornton:** Chief, Customer Service Division, U.S. Coast Guard Yard, Curtis Bay, Md.

**Lieutenant Commander Antonnealle G. Townsend:** Medical Administrative Officer, Coast Guard Training Center, Alameda, California

**Ensigns Linda Rodriquez & Thomasina Sconiers:** First Black Female Graduates of Officer Candidate School (OCS)

**Clarence Samuels:** First Black Chief Photographer in the Coast Guard; First Black to command a cutter and to do so during war

**The Berry Family:** Joseph Berry, Maxie McKinley Berry, Sr., Maxie McKinley Berry, Jr., Malloyd Berry, Oscar Berry, Ralph Berry and Herbert Collins. This family from the Outer Banks of North Carolina has been active in the Coast Guard for over 73 continuous years

**Alexander Palmer Haley:** Alex Haley was born in Ithaca, New York, August 11, 1921. He attended State Teachers College in Elizabeth City, N.C. and enlisted in the U.S. Coast Guard as a steward in 1939. The steward rank, which involves assisting cooks in numerous capacities, was then the only rate in which most blacks could enter the Coast Guard during the time Haley enlisted. However, during the ten years he served as steward, he sharpened and developed writing skills which later proved to shape his present life.

Haley attributes the launching of his literary career to the experiences in the Coast Guard. While stationed aboard a ship in the

South Pacific, Haley used to type so many letters to friends and relatives that he received impressive amounts of mail consistently. Of course it didn't take long for his fellow shipmates to find out that Haley was a writer and soon he was writing love letters. In 1944 Alex Haley returned to the United States and was assigned to edit the "Out Post", then the official Coast Guard publication. In 1945 he won the Ship's Editorial Association Award and served as assistant to the public relations officer at Coast Guard Headquarters until 1959.

Haley became the Coast Guard's first Chief Journalist. During the last few years of his twenty year Coast Guard career, Haley enjoyed lucrative pay from publications of his works. He wrote many articles and consistently researched the historical references of the Coast Guard. This latter skill proved valuable in enabling him to tackle the task of seeking information which has formalized into his celebrated book "ROOTS".

Haley, working for "Readers Digest" and "Playboy Magazine", combined the communication skills he had developed and learned while in the Coast Guard with the memory of the personalities and characters of the numerous persons he encountered. These articles were very successful. While employed by "Playboy", Haley was given the assignment of interviewing Malcom X, an opportunity which latter precipitated Haley's writing of *"The Autobiography of Malcolm X"*.

In 1973 author Haley was presented the Distinguished Public Service Award and a citation, on behalf of Admiral Bender, the Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard at that time, by Rear Admiral John F. Thompson, Superintendent of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.

