

A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession


The Creation of the U.S. Naval
Officer Corps, 1794–1815

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2. A Ranked Society

LTHOUGH MANY AMERICANS who lived during the two decades in which the navy's officer corps grew to maturity may have pledged intellectual allegiance to a democratic and egalitarian vision of society, at the visceral level almost all of them still lived by a view of the world according to which human beings had been perceiving themselves for hundreds of years. This way of seeing and ordering the world may have been dying, but it had so totally permeated every aspect of people's lives that the mindset could be neither quickly nor easily cast aside. That organizing principle is best captured by the term *deference*. The ethos of deference held that God (or Nature) had ordained a social and economic hierarchy in which some men were placed high and others low; that those who were placed higher had a right and a duty to command and lead; that it was the duty of those placed in subordinate stations to obey their social leaders and to be content with their lowly stations in life; and, finally, that the good of the whole social order depended on respecting this hierarchical social structure, for without that ordered ranking, anarchy, destruction, and unnameable evils would appear.

So it was in a ship of war. Its world rose in a hierarchy from the greenest landsman to the seemingly boundless authority of the captain. Indeed, life at sea could only reinforce a conviction of the essential rightness of the deference ethos. The safety of every individual on board depended in large measure on each knowing his station and his duties and in implicitly obeying those in authority over him. It is easy enough to criticize the self-serving character of a deference world view for those at the top of the social ladder; but deference had survived as a way of organizing and understanding one's life situation because it was instinctively accepted by most men and most women, on whatever rung of the ladder, as a system for insuring a measure of order and stability in an often chaotic and unpredictable world. Deference is an organizing principle to which this book will return more than once as it seeks to understand the way the pre-1815 U.S. Navy operated. To be sure, gale-force winds of democracy and egalitarianism were blowing in the larger society of 1794–1815, and not even the naturally conservative world of the ship of war could sail on unstrained by them; but throughout those years hierarchy and deference remained the bedrock principles of the naval world with which this book is concerned.

At the top of the ship's hierarchy or social order stood the officers, who themselves constituted but a tiny fraction of the ship's company. When *Constitution* sailed out to defeat *Java* in 1812, she carried a total complement of 436, including marines. Only 36 of these 436 men (or 8.3 percent) were officers.¹ Even this tiny elite of officers was not an undifferentiated lump. Neither was it a simple, easily understood order rising in one clean line from bottom to top. Rather, it formed four different hierarchies of status, of legal, and of social relationships. In no two of those hierarchies did all the members of the corps stand in exactly the same relationships to one another as they did in the other hierarchies. The hierarchies were defined in terms of naval ranks and stations. Because these ranks and stations will be repeatedly mentioned in the pages of this book, it will be desirable to take a brief overview of them here.

On the Ladder—or Off

The first, and the most important, distinction that has to be made among the navy's officers is between those who were eligible to ascend to the ultimate power and authority, command of a ship or squadron at sea, and those who were not. Of the ten ranks that an officer of the pre-1815 navy could occupy, only four—captain, master commandant, lieutenant, and midshipman—were on the promotion ladder.

The rank of captain is so well understood as to need no explanation here. It was the highest rank in the navy of 1794–1815, for Congress repeatedly declined to authorize the rank of admiral and would continue to do so until the Civil War. Failing the creation of admirals, commanders of squadrons had to content themselves as best they could with the courtesy title of *commodore*, which, once attained, customarily continued to be applied to the holder even after he had ceased to command a squadron at sea. Master commandant was the equivalent of the rank later called commander. That its holders were really junior captains is sufficiently indicated by the fact that masters commandant were unfailingly addressed as “captain.” By law ships of 20 guns or larger had to be commanded by captains. Though captains did sometimes command ships smaller than 20 guns, brigs and sloops of war—classes that embraced such well-known War of 1812 cruisers as *Argus*, *Hornet*, and *Wasp*—were normally the bailiwick of masters commandant. Lieutenants were the captain's or master commandant's principal assistants in his command functions, taking charge of watches at sea and divisions of guns in battle. Senior, experienced lieutenants could also be found commanding cruisers smaller than those of the classes normally assigned to masters commandant. John Shaw was a lieutenant when he commanded the schooner *Enterprize*, 12. This little vessel captured six French privateers and recaptured seven U.S. merchantmen during the Quasi-War with France to make *Enterprize* one of the most successful antiprivateer vessels of the war and establish the basis for Shaw's subsequent rise to prominence in the officer corps. At the lowest rung on the promotion ladder was the midshipman. Of his life, training, and duties this book will have a great deal to say. For the moment, it will be sufficient to note that this was the entry-level or apprentice rank for those young men who aspired to climb the promotion ladder to a command at sea.

The remaining six officer ranks—surgeon, surgeon's mate, sailing master, purser, chaplain, and captain's clerk—were not on the promotion ladder. There



Almost all the portraits tell the same story: it was a young man's navy. Surgeon John Bullus, who wears the new uniform authorized in August 1802, posed for Gilbert Stuart sometime between 1803 and the summer of 1805 while Stuart's studio was located in Washington, D.C., where Bullus was stationed. Youthful as he may appear, Dr. Bullus was no novice: he had been a naval physician for not less than five years. Lawrence Park, Gilbert Stuart: An Illustrated Descriptive List of His Works (1926).

were established patterns of progression from certain of these nonpromotion ranks to other nonpromotion ranks, as well as two arduous paths by which holders of nonpromotion ranks might cross over to the promotion track.

Surgeon and surgeon's mate are two ranks whose role is obvious. The normal pattern was for a medical officer to enter the corps at the rank of surgeon's mate; then, after some years of service and (perhaps) additional formal medical education, to advance to the rank of surgeon. Throughout the pre-1815 period, it was perfectly possible, and often happened, that a physician of sufficient education and experience was appointed directly to the grade of surgeon without passing through that of mate.

If one can surmise what a surgeon or a surgeon's mate did, the rank of sailing master will have no recognition value except to those well versed in the era of sailing navies. According to the *Naval Regulations* of 1802 a sailing master was charged with navigating the ship under the direction of her commanding officer, supervising the keeping of her log, receipt and inspection of provisions and stores, stowage of the hold, maintaining the ship in her best sailing trim, and being accountable for the ship's charts as well as her navigation books and instruments. Only a minority of the men who held the rank of sailing master performed the duties defined by the *Naval Regulations*, and of that minority fewer still were competent to perform the duties well in a large or medium-size ship of war. To be the sailing master of a frigate or a sloop of war demanded seamanship of a high order. In actual practice in the pre-1815 navy the rank of sailing master was employed to bring into the service merchant

captains, somewhat older and considerably more experienced than the typical midshipman, and thereby to provide a corps of nonpromotion-track commanders for the navy's gunboat-size units, forces on which it could not afford to fritter away its precious cadre of commissioned lieutenants and which there were never enough suitable midshipmen to command. Far more will be said later about the navy's large body of sailing masters, their anomalous position in the corps, and the heart-burnings that position induced. Suffice it to note here that crossover from the nonpromotion-track rank of sailing master to the promotion track at the rank of commissioned lieutenant was always a theoretical possibility. Thereby hangs much of the masters' professional tale.

A purser may be thought of as a ship's business agent. His role was more comprehensive than that of the latter-day paymaster, his closest equivalent. He was, it is true, responsible for keeping the ship's pay- and muster rolls and for paying the officers and men at the end of a cruise. In addition, his steward issued, and the purser was accountable for, the ship's provisions. The purser also ran a kind of ship's store wherefrom he issued, to be deducted from the ship's company's end-of-cruise pay, essential articles of clothing and luxury items, such as tobacco, sugar, tea, or coffee, which were not part of the ration the men drew each day. Finally, when his ship was cruising far from major ports, the purser might be required to purchase certain articles for her—perhaps fresh beef or fruit. However, most major buying did not fall to his lot, because each port habitually used by the navy had a civilian navy agent. The latter was a patronage appointee, who acted as the Navy Department's purchasing arm for the vast bulk of all provisions and stores. As with the sailing master, so with the purser: more will be said of his duties and of his problems, financial and political, when the time comes to speak of money and the naval officer.

Chaplain is almost certain to be a misleading rank, because only occasionally during the pre-1815 years was its holder a clergyman, though the duties did require that its holder's education be of a superior order, comparable to that of a clergyman or an attorney. The chaplain had, according to the *Naval Regulations*, three official duties: (1) to read divine service at Sunday muster; (2) to perform funerals over those who died on shipboard;² and (3) to serve as schoolmaster to the frigate's midshipmen. By custom, the chaplain often had another assignment, one that must have consumed at least as much time as his three official duties combined, that of serving as secretary to the squadron commodore. Ships smaller than frigates were not permitted to carry chaplains. During the Quasi-War with France and the early days of the Tripolitan War some ships bore, at a reduced rate of pay, an officer with the title of *schoolmaster* in place of a chaplain, but this practice appears to have died out around 1802. Thereafter the title *chaplain* was used exclusively to designate the holders of the post.³ In this book no attempt will be made to distinguish between chaplains and schoolmasters, for the duties were largely identical and the distinct ranks soon merged into one.

Captain's clerk, the final rank on the nonpromotion track, was not a rank in the same sense as the others that have been discussed. The register of officers in the secretary of the navy's office contained no pages for captain's clerks; they carried no documents of appointment signed by the president and the secretary of the navy. To the naked eye he might look like a midshipman, because he often wore that uniform; but, in reality, a captain's clerk was simply

a young man hired by the captain to assist him with his paperwork and serving at his pleasure.⁴ There is an important reason for including this rank when one is examining the officer corps, for it was a point of entry into a professional naval career. Quite typically a young man might start out as a captain's clerk. If he proved capable, the captain might secure him a chaplain's warrant; thereafter, experience, demonstrated ability, and the powerful support of one's captain or commodore made the successful chaplain a strong candidate for a coveted post, one that often brought big financial rewards: a pursership.

Perhaps the captain's clerk might conclude that a purser's career of peddling small stores and acquiring tension headaches over the tiny columns of a payroll was not for him. Was a life more action-filled his true calling? If his captain was convinced that he had the right stuff to make a good fighting officer, the clerk could often persuade the captain to procure him a midshipman's warrant and, thereby, transfer to the promotion track. This happened to Pennsylvania-born Charles A. Budd, who later recalled,

In July 1803 I entered with Captain [Charles] Stewart on board the Syren as his clerk, and, having been to sea three years previously in the merchant service, after doing what little writing was incumbent on me, I preferred



When Samuel Curwen Ward died in November 1817, sharp-penned Salem, Massachusetts, diarist and clergyman William Bentley summed up his life: "Sam was not without talents or wit, but embarrassed in his business, he became at last a gay companion and lost that rank in society which in more early life he maintained. He had an excellent wife and able friends, and he became content in this dependence." One of those "able friends" was Edward Preble, who gave Ward the job of captain's clerk during the frigate Essex's pioneering voyage to Java in 1800 and who tried (unsuccessfully) to secure him a more permanent appointment as a purser. Michel Felice Corn 's likeness of Ward, India ink wash and Chinese white on paper, was taken in 1803, about two years after the close of the former clerk's naval service. Essex Institute, Salem, Massachusetts.

standing a watch and doing midshipman's duty on board than lounging below. At the first unsuccessful attempt to enter the harbor of Tripoli for the purpose of destroying the captured frigate Philadelphia Captain Stewart placed so much confidence in me as to give me command of the green cutter and seven armed men to assist at the destruction of that frigate; but, which owing to the heavy sea running at that attempt, in hoisting out, [the cutter] was unfortunately bilged by striking against one of the guns in a deep roll of the brig, which deprived me of my command, but which I remedied by volunteering myself as second [in command] with Mr. [Samuel B.] Brooke in the barge on the night of [Philadelphia's] being fired.⁵

By the Senate's Advice and Consent—or Without

Officers were not simply divided into those who could be promoted and those who could not. At least three other divisions complicated life even further. The second division was purely a legal one. Some officers held their ranks by virtue of commissions. This category comprehended captains, masters commandant, lieutenants, surgeons, surgeon's mates, and (after April 1812) pursers. To hold one's rank by commission, an officer had to have been nominated to, and confirmed by, the Senate of the United States. Midshipmen, sailing masters, chaplains, and (before April 1812) pursers held their appointments by virtue of warrants, signed by the president and the secretary of the navy, but which did not require Senate approval. Captain's clerks and schoolmasters possessed neither commissions nor warrants, being appointed by the ship's captain for a particular cruise. The more distant from the District of Columbia a ship or a squadron might be, the more likely it was to have acting midshipmen, acting sailing masters, acting surgeons, acting surgeon's mates, acting chaplains, and (occasionally) acting pursers, all of whom held their offices by virtue of letters of appointment from the captain or commodore, and whose existence might not be officially known in Washington until months, or even years, after the fact.

In the pre-1815 years the commissioned/warranted distinction was of much less importance than the division into promotion and nonpromotion tracks. In theory it may have been more difficult for the Navy Office to rid itself by administrative action of an unwanted commissioned officer than was the case with a warrant officer, but in practice secretaries of the navy dismissed holders of every rank, from captains, through sailing masters and midshipmen, down to chaplains, without benefit of court martial. The Senate-approved commission's lack of clout, when it went up against the promotable/nonpromotable distinction, was redemonstrated every time the question arose whether surgeons and pursers, who were commissioned officers, were eligible to sit as members of courts martial. Such bodies were, by law, to be composed of "officers . . . ranking agreeably to the date of their commissions." Always the answer was the same—though rarely was it so baldly stated as by Secretary William Jones: "Pursers in the navy, though commissioned officers, have no rank or command and, therefore, have no common interest or feeling with those officers who have, and were not contemplated by the law as competent to sit on courts martial. Surgeons, surgeon's mates, and marine officers are commissioned, but it has not been supposed that they are competent to sit on courts martial."⁶

. . . and Gentlemen

The notion, often cited in relation to the British army and navy, that it was the possession of a commission that automatically conferred the status of a gentleman on those who did not already possess it, appears not to have prevailed in the U.S. Navy of 1794–1815.⁷ Sailing masters, midshipmen, chaplains, and pre-1812 pursers would have rushed to assert that they were every bit as much gentlemen as captains, masters commandant, lieutenants, surgeons, and surgeon's mates. Although all of these officers thought of themselves as gentlemen, and although the words *gentleman* and *gentlemanly* must have been used hundreds of thousands of times in naval correspondence between 1794 and 1815, no one in the navy ever attempted to define the term. This vagueness allowed the title to be applied to those who were (or thought they were, or wished they were) at the upper end of the status spectrum of the pre-1815 United States. Calling a naval officer a gentleman did not necessarily imply birth into a clearly defined social class, or possession of inherited or earned wealth, or attainment of a carefully specified level of education. Of all the definitions of *gentleman*, the one that most closely approximates what the naval officer had in mind when he identified himself with the term is that which describes a man who does not engage in any menial occupation or in manual labor for gain, and who lives by a certain code of behavior thought appropriate to his exalted status.

There existed in the pre-1815 U.S. Navy a caste of officers who were never considered gentlemen by their contemporaries, even though they held warrants that were in no way distinguishable from those held by sailing masters, midshipmen, chaplains, or pre-1812 pursers. These were the navy's boatswains, carpenters, sailmakers, and gunners. Although they were all warrant officers, their contemporaries never regarded them as gentleman officers. Boatswains, carpenters, sailmakers, and gunners were, in the minds of the gentleman officers, relegated to a separate and inferior status category. The reason is not difficult to see. Each of these "officers" was perceived as engaged in a menial or manual occupation and could not, by definition, be a gentleman. This distinction, the third division of the officer corps, is nowhere explicitly stated in contemporary records; implicitly it is everywhere, lurking between the lines of any document referring to a holder of one of these four ranks.⁸ This book concerns itself with those whom contemporaries saw as the true officers: the gentleman officers, men trained and socialized to live by a particular code of behavior signaled by words like *honor*. Boatswains, carpenters, sailmakers, and gunners were not officers in that sense.

Eating and Sleeping

One is still not done with the hierarchies by which the pre-1815 officer corps was organized. A fourth and final status was based on shipboard living arrangements. The captain (or master commandant) lived, of course, in isolated grandeur in the cabin, usually inviting his subordinate officers to dine with him in rotation, one, two, or three at a time. Those subordinates were divided into two groups, depending on where they lived in the ship. Messing together in the wardroom, and living in their diminutive but private cabins off it, were the lieutenants, the sailing master, the surgeon, the purser, the chaplain, and the marine lieutenant(s). Unless irresolvable personality conflicts destroyed

harmony, they formed a cohesive cadre of social equals, taking liberty together ashore, dining as a group every day, inviting the captain for dinner once a week and counterparts from other ships when opportunity and mess funds permitted. The other cadre of social equals comprised the midshipmen, the surgeon's mate(s), and the captain's clerk. They were relegated to the steerage, where they kept their somewhat rowdier mess and slung their hammocks in one common space.⁹ Wardroom and steerage will be revisited later. For the moment, one may leave their denizens, wine bottles uncorked, singing around the mess tables, and direct attention to another face of the naval society: its numbers.