

Sailor's Story

## Purser Thomas Chew

### Who am I?

I am Thomas Chew, the ship's purser. I was born 35 years ago in New London, Connecticut. The town has a fine harbor and a seafaring history, so it should be no surprise that I was drawn to a life on salt water. I entered the navy as a purser when I was 22. I learned my craft on three other ships before joining *Constitution* just two months ago, in June 1812.



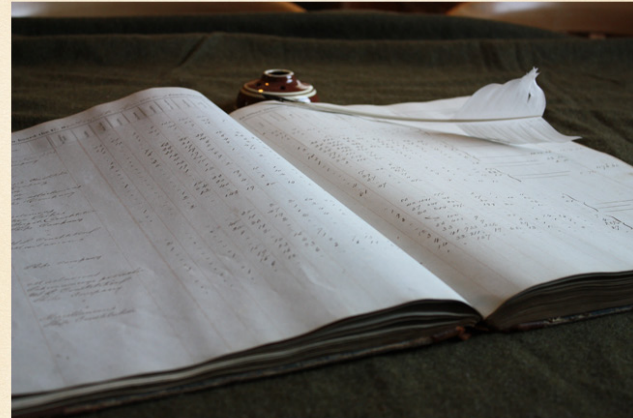
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## My tasks on board

I am the crew's banker and accountant. I keep track of every man aboard: of the pay he earns, and the food and drink he is due. I record what the navy owes each man, and what he owes the navy. This I do for everyone, from the captain down to the lowliest boy. I am a shopkeeper, too, for I sell men the clothes they need, and the little luxuries they crave.





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## So many ledgers . . . so little time!

Despite my title, I have no purse! For I deal not in coins and banknotes, but columns of numbers. I scratch these with my pen in a pile of books: I have one for provisions, one for pay and one for slops. My muster books and register shows everyone's credit or debt. There is so much to record that I would be thrown into confusion if my accounts fell but two days behind.



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## A purser's curse

Pity the poor purser! Our pay is slight, for the navy expects us to work like businessmen, and profit from our account books. If battle or wreck destroys them we are ruined! I am an honest man, but sailors always suspect pursers of cheating them with underweight rations. The superstitious ones even believe that the wandering albatross is the soul of a dead purser, endlessly following his old ships in search of miserly "savings."





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## **I recorded a melancholy message**

After serving on *Constitution*, I become purser of *Chesapeake*. James Lawrence, *Chesapeake*'s captain, fell in the battle with HMS *Shannon*. As he lay mortally wounded in my arms, I heard his last command: "Don't give up the ship!" A legend grew up around these words. In the happier times that followed, my pretty wife gave me a family of seven little pursers. We named the first of them James Lawrence after my lost friend.



*Thomas Chew resigned from the navy in 1821. He died a quarter of a century later.*