



USS Constitution  
Museum

---

# U.S. Naval Recruiting during the War of 1812

Lauren McCormack

---

*A publication of the USS Constitution Museum, Boston*

# U.S Naval Recruiting during the War of 1812

---

Lauren McCormack

## CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction .....  | 1  |
| Enlistment Terms and Pay .....  | 2  |
| Recruits .....  | 5  |
| Recruitment of Black Sailors .....  | 7  |
| Houses of Rendezvous.....   | 8  |
| Deserters .....   | 11 |
| Recruiting for USS <i>Constitution</i> in 1798 and during the War of 1812 ..... | 13 |
| Citing this publication.....  | 15 |

*A publication of the USS Constitution Museum, Boston*

# Introduction

---

Like many other aspects of the early United States Navy, recruiting was a somewhat informal affair. No specific regulations detailed the procedures involved. When a captain needed to fill his crew, he simply sent one or more of his officers out with orders to enlist a specified number of men. The officers opened houses of rendezvous in shore-side communities and advertised for recruits. When they had enlisted the required manpower, the officers and recruits returned to the ship. Nearly every captain during the War of 1812 seemed to follow this general process. While doing so, the navy produced a great deal of pay receipts, letters, advertisements, and other documents, which reveal the minutiae of the naval recruiting process leading up to and during the War of 1812.

# Enlistment Terms and Pay

---

When in need of crew, captains chose one or more, usually two, midshipmen, or sometimes a lieutenant, to act as recruiting agents. Captain Charles Stewart once even sent a master's mate named Joseph Fisher to Salem, Massachusetts on this duty. The \$500 entrusted to Fisher for procuring recruits was too great a temptation, though; he deserted and took the cash with him.<sup>1</sup> The captains sent the officers to the recruiting area with written instructions in hand specifying the number and quality of recruits needed, as well as the appropriate pay and bounty, or advance, to be offered. These letters often contained a description of the ideal candidate. The instructions tell us a great deal about the enticements for recruits and the prejudices of commanding officers.

On January 31, 1809, the United States Congress established a mandatory two-year enlistment period for enlisted members of the navy.<sup>2</sup> Since it often took anywhere from a few days to several weeks to get recruits from their place of enlistment to the ship, and the ship often stayed in port for an indeterminate amount of time before sailing, captains wanted no argument over the length of a sailor's enlistment. Officers frequently made it clear in their orders that the enlistment period started at a specified time. William Crane, commanding officer of USS *Independence*, in April 1815 ordered his recruiting officer to "enter the men for two years from the time the Ships Anchor is atrip for sea."<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, captains provided recruiters with a pay scale. During this period, captains determined the pay for able and ordinary seaman, as well as boys, though it usually fell within a certain range. On USS *Niagara* in March 1814, Jesse Duncan Elliot, aware that service on the Lakes was unpopular, instructed his recruiter to enlist able seamen at \$15 per month, ordinary seamen at \$10 to \$12 per month, and boys at \$8 a month. In November 1814, John Shaw offered able seamen \$12 a month, while ordinary seamen and boys could earn between \$6 and \$10 a month, depending on their skill level. Six months later, William Bainbridge, who hoped to man his new 74-gun ship with a top-notch crew, raised the pay scale to \$15 a month for able sea-

---

<sup>1</sup> Charles Stewart to Thomas J. Chew, May 12, 1814, Thomas J. Chew Family Papers, 1797-1875, Manuscripts Division, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Congress, An Act authorizing an augmentation of the marine corps, 10th Cong., 2nd sess., vol. 2, ch. 33, approved March 3, 1809.

<sup>3</sup> April 21, 1815, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts, RG 217, No. 3501, Roll 8, NARA, and February 28, 1809, John B. Nicholson Accounts, Fourth Auditor Settled Accounts, Alphabetical Series, RG 217, Box 1957, Roll 2, NARA. Samuel Nicholson wrote to his recruiting officer that recruits would serve two years "from the day the Frigate weighs anchor for a cruise."

men, \$10 to \$15 a month for ordinary, and \$8 to \$12 a month for boys.<sup>4</sup>

If the monthly pay itself was not enough to attract recruits – and it often was not – captains sometimes gave recruiting officers discretion to offer bounties (a sum of money at the end of their enlistment) or pay advances, or sometimes both.<sup>5</sup> For a man debating whether or not to sign aboard a navy ship or to go to sea at all, a \$10 to \$20 bounty – a month’s salary or more – could help make up his mind.<sup>6</sup> It is possible that the navy established large bounties in the later part of the War of 1812 to entice sailors who, by 1814 and 1815, were tiring of the conflict and were being lured away by privateers.

## Bounties offered Recruits:

| Date               | Ship                     | Captain             | Able Seamen | Ordinary Seamen   | Boys              |
|--------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| September 30, 1813 | USS <i>President</i>     | John Rodgers        | \$10*       | No provision made | No provision made |
| March 21, 1814     | USS <i>Niagara</i>       | Jesse Duncan Elliot | \$30        | \$15              | No provision made |
| November 27, 1814  | USS <i>United States</i> | John Shaw           | \$20        | \$10              | \$10              |
| January 3, 1815    | New York Station         | David Porter        | \$20        | \$20              | \$0               |
| March 1815         | USS <i>United States</i> | John Shaw           | \$20        | \$10              | No provision made |
| April 21, 1815     | USS <i>Independence</i>  | William Crane       | \$20        | \$12              | No provision made |
| May 14, 1815       | 74-gun ship              | William Bainbridge  | \$30        | \$8-\$12          | \$8-\$12          |

\*Rodgers prefaced his instructions thus: “In no case are you authorized to give bounty to Men, excepting a very superior Seaman, whom it will be an object to the service to enter, and even then you will allow him but \$10.”

<sup>4</sup> March 21, 1814, Nelson Webster Accounts, Fourth Auditor Loose Accounts, RG 217, Roll 6, NARA, and November 27, 1814, John Sloat Accounts, Fourth Auditor Settled Accounts, Alphabetical Series, RG 217, Box 2404, Roll 2, NARA, and May 14, 1815, Fourth Auditor Settled Accounts, Alphabetical Series, RG 217, Box 1957, Roll 2, NARA. John Rodgers on USS *President* also offered \$12 per month for able seamen and \$10 per month for ordinary seamen.

<sup>5</sup> During the War of 1812, sailors entered for privateers with the hope of making large profits from prize money. In early periods, except during the Embargo, merchant ships provided a similar monetary attraction that was sometimes two or more times the navy’s pay.

<sup>6</sup> \$20 bounty for Able seamen; \$10 bounty for ordinary seamen, March 1815, John Sloat Accounts, Fourth Auditor Alphabetical Series, RG 217, Box 2404, NARA.

Issuing advances of pay was another strategy used by recruiting officers. Usually sailors received between one and three months' pay upfront. To do so, however, recruiters often required some form of surety to ensure the sailor would not disappear with the money. Instructions such as the following from William Bainbridge were normal: "three months advance may be given on their producing sufficient security."<sup>7</sup> Exactly what form such security took is unclear, though records from the period provide some insight. In March 1815, recruiters from *United States* wrote to their commanding officer from their rendezvous to report that one sailor deserted with his advance even though he had provided a local housekeeper as security. Supposedly, it was well known that local enlistees employed this housekeeper, who had a family and therefore ties to the community. However, after the sailor received his advance, both he and the housekeeper disappeared. After an extensive search throughout the area, neither the sailor nor his "security" could be found. Since many sailors had used the housekeeper as security without incident in the past, the captain ruled that the recruiting officer was not at fault and, therefore, did not have to repay the lost advance.<sup>8</sup> Seamen often had few possessions, most of which were not worth the value of the advance, so it is conceivable that a person with ties to the community would be used as security for the advance pay.

Recruiting officers could be held liable for the advance pay lost when a sailor absconded, particularly if the officers were unable to prove they had taken appropriate security. Local naval agents supplied recruiting officers with the necessary money for bounties, advances, travel, and general expenses.<sup>9</sup> The recruiting officers were charged with keeping receipts and accounts of all their expenditures, and they were liable if they lost any of the money or spent it unwisely.

<sup>7</sup> May 21, 1814, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts, RG 217, No. 3501, Roll 8, NARA.

<sup>8</sup> March 1815, John Sloat Accounts, Fourth Auditor Alphabetical Series, RG 217, Box 2404, NARA.

<sup>9</sup> November 27, 1814, Fourth Auditor, and February 28, 1809, Fourth Auditor.

# Recruits

---

In their letters of instruction, a number of captains specifically described the types of men they would accept as members of their crew. These directives were often explicit when it came to race, occupation, health, body type, and ability. With the exception of race and occupation, most captains requested the same type of man. Occupation requests differed based on the needs of a particular ship and also on the biases of its commander. Racial proscriptions clearly reflect the prejudices of the commanding officer.

Almost without fail, captains instructed their recruiters to enlist strong, healthy men. The exact wording of such instructions usually read something like Captain David Porter's 1811 instructions to "enter none but young Stout able bodied men capable of enduring service" aboard USS *Essex*. For USS *Hornet*, Captain James Biddle ordered: "You will recruit none but strong, healthy, able men."<sup>10</sup> Often surgeon's mates accompanied recruiting parties to examine potential recruits, but whether they could immediately determine their health, ability, or strength is debatable. Nevertheless, these instructions set the tone for the type of man officers sought.

Individual captains had their own specific parameters, which they imparted to their recruiting officers via the letter of instruction. Both William Bainbridge and John Rodgers wanted only "native Americans" (that is, native-born white Americans) and "American Citizens" respectively, though Rodgers admitted that he preferred "native born Citizens."<sup>11</sup> Later in the same letter, Rodgers described for his recruiting officer the appropriate traits of both able and ordinary seamen: "The Able Seamen are to be such in every respect, that is to say not only good Seamen, but at the same time active, Robust, healthy men; the Ordinary seamen are to be active Young Men, capable of doing the duty of Fore and Main Top Men." Such detail was unusual and probably either aided Rodgers' recruiting officer or made it easier for Rodgers to reprimand the officer for bringing back men who did not fit his description.

Each captain also had his own opinion concerning the suitability of men of various occupations for service on his ship. John Shaw told his officer, "I can have no objection in your picking up as many useful mechanics as may offer particularly Carpen-

---

<sup>10</sup> September 6, 1811, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts, RG 217, No. 386, NARA, and August 9, 1813, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts, RG 217, No. 1171, NARA.

<sup>11</sup> May 17, 1814, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts RG 217, No. 3501, Roll 8, NARA, and September 30, 1813, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts, RG 217, No. 4567, Roll 9, NARA.

ters Black Smiths a Cooper and a good Tailor.”<sup>12</sup> William Crane, the commanding officer of USS *John Adams*, then in New York, also allowed his recruiter to “possibly enter some good Mechanics as seaman if you can get a tailor or two and some shoemakers joiners carpenters of all kinds.”<sup>13</sup> The specific needs on the ship influenced the type and variety of desirable occupations. Joiners and carpenters were undoubtedly needed to work on the ship. Shoemakers could mend the crew’s footwear, provided the ship stocked the necessary materials. Even though most sailors knew how to mend their clothes, experienced tailors could provide more complex alterations to the ready-made slop clothing supplied by the purser.

Personal biases also played a role in the composition of a particular ship’s crew. James Biddle of USS *Hornet* wrote adamantly in June 1814: “I want no Taylors or Shoemakers or people of Colour.”<sup>14</sup> He was consistent in these demands. A year earlier, he instructed, “on no account ship Tailors, Shoemakers or blacks, as these for their accustomed occupations rarely possess physical force.” It was well known at the time that shoemaking was the occupation of smaller, weaker, and poorer mechanics.<sup>15</sup> The nature of tailoring probably was also less physical and certainly did not produce the type of strength necessary aboard ship.

<sup>12</sup> November 27, 1814, Fourth Auditor.

<sup>13</sup> May 4, 1813, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts, RG 217, No. 5290, Roll 9, NARA.

<sup>14</sup> June 3, 1814, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts, RG 217, No. 2649, NARA.

<sup>15</sup> See Alfred F. Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999).



# Recruitment of Black Sailors

---

Biddle's prohibition against black sailors, and his comment on their physical strength, reflected nothing but racial prejudice.<sup>16</sup> Biddle, however, was not alone in that view. American society as a whole supported his statements, as did other naval commanders during the War of 1812. Oliver Hazard Perry, commanding officer of USS *Java*, in July 1815 also wanted "only sound able bodied white men."<sup>17</sup> Some captains gave slightly less stringent orders concerning black sailors. William Crane ordered "coloured men [to] be rejected, unless you discover extraordinary merit."<sup>18</sup> Crane's desire to ship only meritorious black men was not new. In May 1813, while in New York, Crane provided his recruiting officers with similar advice, saying they had "...here shipped as many Negroes as I believe we shall want unless they possess some excellent quality such as mechanicks musicians or prime seamen[.] [I]n these cases only you may enter a few."<sup>19</sup> Crane would countenance only a small number of black sailors aboard his ship even if their skills served his needs. On October 7, 1813, Lieutenant Thomas Gamble of USS *President* offered his recruiters an example from his crew by which to judge possible black recruits: "I wish you to...ship no blacks unless they are extraordinarily good at least equal to Prince Murry."<sup>20</sup> Like Crane, Gamble was wary of enlisting black sailors, but he would make an exception provided they lived up to the good example set by other black sailors.

<sup>16</sup> Biddle may have also thought that enlisting blacks would create racial discord among his crew, which would in turn negatively affect the moral and effectiveness of the ship.

<sup>17</sup> July 15, 1815, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts, RG 217, No. 624, Roll 6, NARA

<sup>18</sup> April 21, 1815, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts, RG 217, No. 3501, Roll 8, NARA.

<sup>19</sup> May 8, 1813, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts, RG 217, No. 5290, Roll 9 NARA.

<sup>20</sup> October 7, 1813, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts, RG 217, No. 4567, Roll 9, NARA.

# Houses of Rendezvous

---

Once the recruiting officer received his orders, he proceeded to the designated city or region and looked for an appropriate place to hold the rendezvous. Usually, officers rented a private house or rooms in a house. There seems to have been no fixed rental rate. Recruiters paid anywhere from \$5 to \$10 per week to rent houses during the war. A receipt given to one Samuel Ash, written on December 21, 1813, reads: “To use of a room for the purpose of keeping a Rendezvous for the US Sloop of War Frolic, being seven weeks & four days, at \$5 per week.”<sup>21</sup>

Recruiting officers rented the homes of people of various backgrounds and occupations. Certain landlords were well known by both sailors and recruiters and, therefore, may have been favored by naval recruiters. Recruiters tended to hold rendezvous near the waterfront, in streets easily accessible and familiar to sailors. It appears they most often rented from those landlords whose businesses served sailors. In 1798, officers of USS *Constitution* advertised for recruits in one of the local papers, the *Columbian Centinel*. The advertisement called on “those brave New England seamen...to call at the sign of the Eagle kept by Mr. Thomas Sheridan.”<sup>22</sup> In the Boston directories of 1789, 1800, 1803, and 1805, Sheridan is listed as a boardinghouse keeper on Fish Street, along the waterfront. In 1796, he is listed as an innkeeper, still on Fish Street.<sup>23</sup> Years later, in 1813, Samuel Batts received \$15 “for house rent for a rendezvous” for three weeks.<sup>24</sup> Early in the century, Batts was a boardinghouse keeper. By 1807, the directories list him as a retailer and, from 1818 onward, as a grocer. Batts’ shop was found on Ship Street, which ran along Boston’s waterfront.<sup>25</sup> In Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the sloop *Frolic* held rendezvous at a boardinghouse.<sup>26</sup> Other recruiting advertisements from Philadelphia and Baltimore list addresses in close proximity to those cities’ respective waterfronts.

Renting one’s house as a rendezvous had other advantages besides the rental fee re-

---

<sup>21</sup> December 21, 1813, Samuel Ash, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts, RG 217, No. 443, NARA. Officers may have sometimes rented more than one room. Often, a receipt reads like Isaac Story’s from Marblehead, Massachusetts in January 1813: “Five dollars & fifty cents for my house as a Rendezvous.” January 30, 1813, Isaac Story, Fourth Auditor Numerical Accounts, RG 217, No. 5290, Roll 9 NARA.

<sup>22</sup> *Columbian Centinel* (Boston, MA), November 21, 1798.

<sup>23</sup> 1789-1820, Boston Directories, *US & UK Directories, 1680-1830* (Provo, UT: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2003), www.ancestry.com.

<sup>24</sup> July 24, 1813, Samuel Batts, Fourth Auditor Alphabetical Series, Amos Binney, RG 217, No. 39, NARA.

<sup>25</sup> 1807 and 1818, Boston Directories, *US & UK Directories, 1680-1830*.

<sup>26</sup> *War Journal* (Portsmouth, NH), October 8, 1813.

ceived from the navy. Rendezvous attracted people to one's business establishment. Whether boardinghouse keepers, slop shop owners, innkeepers, or grocers, proprietors could profit from the presence of the recruiters and the recruits, as well as any friends or family that accompanied them. Drinks could be sold, rooms rented, clothes bought, and food devoured. In addition, some landlords received recruiting commissions. In 1812, Carlton Allen of Norfolk, Virginia, received a bounty for each of the 25 men he enlisted for the *United States*.<sup>27</sup> A landlord in Portsmouth, New Hampshire in March 1813 billed the navy \$5 for his "assistance in Recruiting."<sup>28</sup> Another in New York received a bounty of \$1 for each man he recruited while the navy rented his house.<sup>29</sup> An enterprising landlord could make quite a profit from this arrangement with the navy.

Even if recruiters chose a well-known or well-situated rendezvous location, they still advertised their presence. Recruiters placed advertisements in local newspapers, made banners, and printed broadsides to announce their location. On March 5, 1815, Zachaeus R. Fuller paid \$5.50 to "William McDougall for Cloth for Rendezvous Coullar [Color] & Painting."<sup>30</sup> Another receipt exists for "One Motto Flag."<sup>31</sup> A third bill reveals just what these "cloths" and flags may have said. In 1814, a painter, Thomas Gallaway of Baltimore, received \$4 for "4 yards Muslin @37p[er yard]... [and for] Letter[ing] Ditto as p[er] Rendezvous For U<sup>d</sup> S<sup>s</sup> Sloop Argus."<sup>32</sup> These signs likely hung above the door to the house of rendezvous.<sup>33</sup>

To advertise in the neighborhood of the house, recruiters circulated small posters or broadsides. In Baltimore, two printers received \$6.50 for "printing 200 Large posting Bill, Rendezvous for Argus S.W. [Sloop of War]...To posting 150 of D[itt]o."<sup>34</sup> Broadsides of this period were commonly glued to vacant walls or posted in inns, taverns, and other gathering spots.

Recruiters also employed musicians to draw people to the rendezvous. In May 1814, one man received "seven dollars for p[l]aying on the Tamborene from the 20<sup>th</sup> of

<sup>27</sup> February 18, 1812, Fourth Auditor Alphabetical Series, John Nicholson, RG 217, Roll 2, NARA.

<sup>28</sup> March 3, 1813, Fourth Auditor Numerical Series, RG 217, Roll 9, NARA.

<sup>29</sup> March 7, 1815, Fourth Auditor Numerical Series, RG 217, No. 1663, Roll 7, NARA.

<sup>30</sup> March 5, 1815, Fourth Auditor Alphabetical Series, John Sloat, RG 217, Box Number 2404, NARA.

<sup>31</sup> March 8, 1815, Fourth Auditor Numerical Series, RG 217, No. 1141, Roll 7, NARA.

<sup>32</sup> August 23, 1814, Fourth Auditor Numerical Series, RG 217, No. 1126, Roll 7, NARA. In two advertisements for USS *Constitution's* Rendezvous, the reader is told to go to the "sign of the eagle" and "sign of the federal eagle." Such a sign obviously showed some form of the image of the United States' eagle motto. No similar mention of this exists for the War of 1812 era.

<sup>33</sup> When the commanding officer had a good reputation, including the name of the ship on the sign could have also served as a positive enticement to potential recruits.

<sup>34</sup> August 22, [no year], Fourth Auditor Numerical Series, RG 217, No. 1126, Roll 7, NARA.

April to the 3 of May Inclusive Say 14 days at 50 cents per day for Rendezvous for Frigate Constellation.”<sup>35</sup> At a rendezvous in 1807, the navy paid a total of \$7.50 for “Beating the Drum,” “playing the fife,” “playing the fiddle,” and “for Music” generally.<sup>36</sup> The fiddle was perhaps the most popular instrument at rendezvous. In the Fourth Auditor’s accounts from 1810 to 1815, there are at least four instances of the use of fiddlers. However, the receipts often do not specify the instruments, only the presence of music.

<sup>35</sup> May 3, 1814, Fourth Auditor Numerical Series, RG 217, No. 3285, Roll 7, NARA.

<sup>36</sup> August 11, 1807, Fourth Auditor Numerical Series, RG 217, No. 602, Roll 6, NARA.

# Deserters

---

“Once you get a sufficient number of men, send them down with one of the midshipmen.”<sup>37</sup> When Captain David Porter in Gosport, Virginia sent these instructions with his recruiting officers to Boston in September 1811, he knew full well that successfully delivering recruits to the ship would be just as difficult, if not more so, than recruiting them in the first place. Desertion by recruits on the road was commonplace. Some men, having received an advance or bounty for signing on, had no intention of actually serving on a ship. Some escaped to sign aboard another ship, receive more money, desert, and start the process over again. Some may have regretted their decision to enlist and leave home, while others might have heard some unfavorable rumor about their commanding officer that led them to rethink their new berth. Whatever the case, recruiting officers expected desertions and took pains to guard against them. As Alexander Murray warned, “be careful and vigilant over them night & day that none of them escape from you, as you will know that little confidence is to be place in sailor[s] who are ever prone to take all advantages.”<sup>38</sup>

In his letter of instruction dated August 19, 1814, James Biddle of USS *Hornet* told his recruiting officer to “direct Mr. Forrest [a midshipman] to be particularly and constantly attentive to guard against desertion on the road.”<sup>39</sup> Desertion was so prevalent that, if one of the recruiting officers could not be spared to accompany recruits to the ship, the landlord of the house of rendezvous could be “sent with men as a guard.”<sup>40</sup> The guards, whether landlord’s heavies or naval officers, followed strict guidelines, like these set out by Nelson Webster in July 1814:

*You will be particular not to suffer the men to commit depredations on private property on the road. At night, when you stop, you will purchase provisions, and have them cooked for the next day’s journey. A regular watch must be kept by the officers. In the event of any of the men deserting, you will immediately write me, at this place.*<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> September 6, 1811, Fourth Auditor Numerical Series, RG 217, No. 386, NARA.

<sup>38</sup> August 20, 1811 or 1814, Fourth Auditor Numerical Series, RG 217, No. 3445, Roll 8, NARA.

<sup>39</sup> August 19, 1814, Fourth Auditor Numerical Series, RG 217, No. 2649, Roll 8, NARA.

<sup>40</sup> March 7, 1815, Fourth Auditor Numerical Series, RG 217, No. 1663, Roll 7, NARA.

<sup>41</sup> July 9, 1814, Fourth Auditor Numerical Series, RG 217, No. 280, Roll 6, NARA.

Despite these precautions, desertion was so problematic that receipts are often littered with line items like those recorded by Lieutenant Nathaniel Stoodly:

*...search for deserters-[\$]6.75*

*...expenses in apprehending deserters-20.”*

*...expenses in search of deserters-30.”....<sup>42</sup>*

Desertion expenses comprised an extremely high percentage of any recruiter’s budget, which was meant to pay for renting a house, food, travel, entertainment, printing handbills, and other recruiting expenses. In fact, out of a total budget of \$453.32 for 115 recruits, Stoodly paid out \$154.50 for finding deserters as he traveled with them from York to Portsmouth and Washington to Portsmouth. In other words, Stoodly spent a third of his entire recruiting budget just looking for deserters.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> N.d., Fourth Auditor Numerical Series, RG 217, No. 326, NARA.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

# Recruiting for USS *Constitution* in 1798 and during the War of 1812

---

Unfortunately, little evidence remains to document recruiting for USS *Constitution* during the War of 1812. There are no known recruiting advertisements for *Constitution* from the war period, nor do any Fourth Auditor accounts specifically deal with recruiting for *Constitution's* sailors or Marines. Documentation does exist, however, for 1798, the year after *Constitution* was first launched. In that year, Samuel Nicholson, captain of the year-old frigate, received orders to “employ the most *vigorous exertions* to put said ship, as speedily as possible, in a situation to sail at the shortest command.”<sup>44</sup> In two newspaper advertisements appearing in May and November 1798, Nicholson invited sailors to join the ship at a waterfront house of rendezvous. These advertisements provide a great deal of information about the recruiting practices in Boston during *Constitution's* first years.

According to these advertisements, enlisted sailors signed on for one year but could be discharged sooner if their services were no longer needed. In May 1798, Nicholson sought 150 able seamen and 95 ordinary seamen, while Lieutenant Clark of the Marines used the opportunity to enlist three sergeants, three corporals, one armor-bearer, one drummer, one fifer, and 50 privates for the ship's company.<sup>45</sup> Nicholson advertised his pay at \$17 a month and \$10 a month, respectively, for able and ordinary seamen.<sup>46</sup> As an incentive, Nicholson also advertised the distribution of two months' advance to all new recruits.

For “those brave New England Seamen who are disposed to serve their country,” an officer from the ship was waiting to “encourage” them at the local rendezvous.<sup>47</sup> In May 1798, Nicholson's officers opened the rendezvous “at the sign of the *Federal Eagle*, kept by Mrs. Broaders, in Fore-street.”<sup>48</sup> As noted above, the recruiters probably brought the recruiting sign with them or had it made by a local painter. This men-

---

<sup>44</sup> *Columbian Centinel* (Boston, MA), May 12, 1798.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Pay for able seamen was especially high during this period to allow the navy to compete with the merchant marine.

<sup>47</sup> *Columbian Centinel*, November 21, 1798.

<sup>48</sup> *Columbian Centinel*, May 12, 1798.

tion of a sign does not refer to a tavern sign.<sup>49</sup> Nothing is known of Mrs. Broaders, except that her husband, Bartholomew, ran a slop shop on Ann Street in 1798 and still in 1800.<sup>50</sup> The rendezvous was probably held in the slop shop.<sup>51</sup> In November 1798, recruiters held a rendezvous at “the sign of the Eagle, kept by Mr. Thomas Sheridan, in Fore-street.”<sup>52</sup>

Unfortunately, no probate inventories exist for either Broaders or Sheridan to help paint a picture of the contents and configurations of their homes and shops. However, both names do appear on the Direct Tax of 1798. Sheridan rented his home, which was north on Fish Street, east on Thomas Lewis’ property, and south on Thomas’s sail loft. His brick house was two stories high, with 1,462 square feet of living space and 18 windows, which totaled 133 square feet of glass.<sup>53</sup> Broaders also rented his house, which was north on Ann Street, east on the property of Benjamin K. Hagger, and west on the property of Sarah Tyler. Broaders’ brick-and-wood two-story house was much smaller than Sheridan’s, covering only 944 square feet. The house contained 10 windows with 105 square feet of glass.

According to the newspaper advertisements, both Broaders and Sheridan displayed a sign containing an eagle, probably a reference to the “federal eagle.” An emblem at the top of the newspaper advertisement for Broaders’ rendezvous contains an eagle, stars, and the Great Seal of the United States. This printed emblem may be the same as that depicted on the signs. Though the actual form of the sign is unknown, mention of its existence at both houses of rendezvous implies that it was the normal practice to display some manner of sign to mark a naval rendezvous.

Clearly, then, the process of recruiting and retaining all the recruits until the ship sailed was an arduous and drawn-out process. Sailors had rough reputations and were known to take advantage of a situation, if able. The navy used a variety of enticements to get them into the service and to keep them in the service for their full period of enlistment, but desertions continued to plague the navy in the Early Republic.

<sup>49</sup> There is no evidence that Mr. or Mrs. Broaders ever kept a licensed tavern, nor is the “Federal Eagle” a known name for a tavern in Boston during this period.

<sup>50</sup> 1798 and 1800, Boston Directories, *US & UK Directories, 1680-1830*.

<sup>51</sup> Ann, Fish, and Ship Streets all ran along the waterfront and were probably all referred to by the title, Fore Street, since no actual Fore Street existed in Boston during this period.

<sup>52</sup> *Columbian Centinel*, November 21, 1798.

<sup>53</sup> Direct Tax of 1798, volume 7, (Boston, MA: New England Genealogical Society, 2012): 528-590, [www.americanancestors.org](http://www.americanancestors.org).



# Citing this publication

---

## APA

McCormack, L. (2018). Food and Drink in the U.S. Navy, 1794 to 1820. Retrieved from <https://www.usscm.org/publications/us-naval-recruiting-during-the-war-of-1812.pdf>

## MLA

McCormack, Lauren. "Food and Drink in the U.S. Navy, 1794 to 1820" USS Constitution Museum, 2018, <https://www.usscm.org/publications/us-naval-recruiting-during-the-war-of-1812.pdf>.

## Chicago

McCormack, Lauren. "Food and Drink in the U.S. Navy, 1794 to 1820." (2018): <https://www.usscm.org/publications/us-naval-recruiting-during-the-war-of-1812.pdf>.