The popular historical image of the antebellum U.S. Revenue Cutter Service is one of a fast cutter chasing smugglers, slavers, and other scoundrels. Speed remained an important quality for the cutters. “It is indispensably necessary that the Revenue Cutters in the Service of the United States should be fast sailers, so as to enable them to overhaul any vessels they may fall in with,” Treasury Secretary Samuel Ingham noted in an 1830 letter to Boston Collector of Customs David Henshaw about the construction of a 107-ton new cutter.
However, the cutters were very small and wet in the sense of taking on water from above and below. Because of tight fiscal concerns within the Treasury Department, the cutters received little maintenance other than what the crew could do.

Congressional funding for them did not exist, and any monies expended on them came out of the duties or tariffs assessed at the individual ports. Minimal expenditures were the rule, and most individual collectors of customs overlooked maintenance of habitability for the comfort and health of those serving in them.

The U.S. Revenue Cutter Service (USRCS) was formed in 1790 at the direction of the first treasury secretary, Alexander Hamilton. The service’s job was to enforce the laws and protect U.S. maritime assets, such as merchant ships that became targets for pirates, privateers, and home-grown shipwreckers. During the War of 1812, the cutters went to war to fight the British.

In 1915, Congress established the U.S. Coast Guard within the Treasury Department and included the Revenue Cutter Service and the Life-Saving Service. The two bureaus remained as separate in culture and tasks as they had been before passage of the law. No complete merger occurred until after World War II.

**EARLY CUTTERSPOSED**

**TIGHT SQUEEZE FOR CREW**

Cutters built in the antebellum period were 75 feet long, 20 feet wide, and an average of 7 to 8 feet deep—an external, not an internal measurement. The internal depth of the hold was measured from the spar deck to the top of the keel, and few measured more than 6½ feet. The lowest deck—the “berth deck,” or orlop deck—sat 2 feet above the keel, making space below deck sparse, dark, cold, or hot depending upon the season.

A few cutter captains understood the great discomfort of the narrow confines for officers and men alike. The poor living conditions aboard the cutters became one cause of complaint in an 1889 petition submitted by a fed-up revenue cutter officer corps asking for wholesale transfer to the Navy Department.

House of Representatives Report Number 76 of February 15, 1890, reflects this concern:

> On the other hand, the officer of the Revenue Marine has no settled home or habitation; he is, by force of circumstances, a nomad; he has two separate and distinct establishments to maintain—his temporary resting place on shipboard and the equally transitory lodgings of his wife and family on shore; he is confined to cramped and inconvenient quarters, in which, for the most part, decent privacy is denied him; he inhabits, with a half dozen others, a room 10 feet by 18 feet—here he must eat, sleep, perform his ablutions, receive and entertain friends, and break his daily bread with the congenial and uncongenial alike; his sleeping berth is barely big enough to contain his person; his comforts are such as he can catch as his life wears on.

Other captains raised the issue of their crew’s welfare to the local collectors. In 1828, Capt. Samuel Trevett, commanding the cutter *Search* at Boston, recommended the installation of an iron water tank to replace the traditional water kgs. Trevett claimed a tank 70 inches tall with sides of 52 and 40 inches could hold as much water as 6½ standard 30-gallon kgs. The United States and British navies used these water tanks and reported that the water “keeps sweeter and is more salubrious.” The tank cost $400, held a 30-day supply of water, and at one ton, also served as a substitute for the iron ballast.

Henry A. S. Dearborn, collector at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to have the cutter *Portsmouth* “furnished without delay, with such quantities of provisions, water, wood, and other necessary supplies as can be conveniently stowed in the vessel and to cruise between Cape Ann and Cape Elizabeth” to assist vessels as well as fulfill normal duties. McLane ordered Capt. Thomas Shaw not to return to “port until forced to do so from stress of weather and want of supplies.” This arduous and uncomfortable duty severely tasked the crew and the 11-year-old cutter, which had been built as a pilot-boat and purchased by Treasury in 1829.

The officers straightaway complained that the *Portsmouth* was too small. There was no wardroom, and with a 10-foot draft, it sat low in the water, making it a “very wet vessel” in heavy weather and uncomfortable to
In July 1833, Capt. Andrew Mather complained of the cabin, wardroom, staterooms, and the inadequacy for the physical needs of the officers and crews aboard the Wolcott. Mather requested to alter the captain's cabin and wardroom while at New Haven. The Wolcott's cabin, he wrote, was smaller than those of other cutters of the same type, built at the same place and at about the same time. One had a cabin two feet wider and "somewhat longer," and another had been lengthened "from three to four feet."

Added to this were the 30 tons of ballast and the additional winter cruising supplies, which included 6 barrels of beef, 400 pounds of bread, 6 barrels of water, 50 pounds of candles, 10 pounds of tea, and 1 cord of dry hardwood. These materials provided convenient hiding and breeding places for rats, mice, and insects. At least once a year, the captain of the cutter ordered the holds cleaned out and the hatches and openings sealed. All officers and men moved ashore to temporary quarters and then for two days used smoke to remove the vermin.

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unknown how Shaw was able to rearrange the old ballast, but cuttermen had learned to make do with less or what was given.

Officers’ quarters often contained more luxurious articles. In 1840, New Haven Collector William H. Ellis purchased for Wolcott a “hair mattress,” one three-pound feather pillow, one “hair” pillow, four sheets, four pillow cases, one “Double Comfortable [comforter],” a pair of Rose Blankets, and 20 yards of “3 ply” carpet and binding to make four carpets. The purchase also included 10 yards of damask-style fabric with 26 yards of silk binding to make bunk curtains hung on three brass rods and eyes.

The cutter crews made the hammocks, mess cloths, and bags from cotton canvas. In 1844, Van Buren’s crew made these new items and then blackened the hammocks and mess clothes with a mixture of black paint. The paint sealed the canvas and made for easier cleaning and longer wear.

**Solving Problems Aboard the Wolcott**

Mather said that other alterations solved another problem. During the winter, the cutter officers placed a heating stove in the wardroom (the crew forward had no heating stove). When the stove was in place, the forward gangway into the wardroom had to be closed. This meant the officers had to use the gangway in the cabin to access the wardroom. Mather suggested adding two feet to the wardroom forward into the trunk. That way, the wardroom gangway could be used when the winter stove was in place and relieve Mather of the annoying tramping of officers through his cabin. Stoves were not allowed in the crew’s quarters because of the potential of fires.

In 1836 living space became a concern for the cutter Madison at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Captain Shaw, now commanding the Madison, wished to put right the “very great inconvenience” suffered by the cutter’s crewmen: 16 men and 4 boys who lived in a berth deck just three feet, seven inches high.

As a comparison, Shaw measured the height of the cutter Hamilton’s berth deck and found a comfortable five feet, seven inches at maximum height. The Madison ship’s carpenter estimated it would cost $275 to lower the deck and add bulkheads and lockers for the crew.

However, replacing the ballast to accommodate a lowered deck might require additional costs. In a remarkable seven days, Treasury Secretary Levi Woodbury responded with approval to lower the berth deck but did not approve the new ballast. It is

**“Corporeal Punishment” to Discipline the Crew**

Although crew comfort was a concern for some cutter captains, others inflicted punishments that guaranteed discomfort. Flogging did not become an official form of punishment by regulation on the revenue cutters until the 1843 Rules and Regulations of the U.S. Revenue Marine (taken from U.S. Navy Regulations of the same year). Even then, the term flogging or “lashes” saw no use, but the ubiquitous “corporeal punishment” was administered, and only then by the authority of the cutter captain.

A scan of cutter logs indicates that the personal experiences of the individual captains played a large part in the choice of
punishment type. Those officers with U.S. Navy experience were more prone to use flogging, but those coming from the merchant service tended to use lesser means of physical discipline.

Causes for flogging consisted of insolence, disobedience to orders, threats toward officers and warrant officers, and drunkenness, and the first three served to be most often caused by the latter. The number of lashes with the cat o’ nine tails numbered no more than 12. Unlike the U.S. Navy, the Revenue Cutter Service had no courts-martial system that allowed more lashes.

There were other forms of punishments, however, not specified in the regulations.

The use of the “colt” (sometimes called the “starter”) was common for minor offenses and for boys. The colt was a piece of manila rope spliced backwards to form a club that was one inch or less in diameter and two to three feet long.

A description of the colt is given in the testimony of Alexander Slidell Mackenzie during his 1844 court-martial. “A colt is a piece of rope larger than a quill, and not so large as your little finger. . . . [T]hey were punished over the clothes they happened to have on, with the exception of the jacket,” he said.

Boys in common practice received 6–12 strokes and, in general, not laid heavy. Use of the “rattan,” a cane, was more common in the U.S. Navy, where it was used, as was the colt, for informal punishment. However, cutter service captains formalized the use of the colt. A common practice was to secure a boy or midshipman to the length of a cannon barrel, known as “kissing the Gunner’s daughter,” and deliver strokes across the back.

Use of “irons” during short periods of confinement was frequently mentioned in the cutter logs. The irons consisted of single irons, hand restraints (later known as Lilly-irons), and double irons consisting of leg restraints with a sliding bar with ankle loops attached to the deck.

Despite the cruel nature of such punishments, they did not normally prevent the men on the cutters from working. Those flogged received basic treatment, but they...
New with is attached the acquisition of Capt. J. A. Hardy, dated June 21st, 1868, and is approved with the exception of the following articles which are disallowed and must be paid for by the Commander.


I have to express surprise that the Commander of the Mollyott should think proper to approve a disquisition of this unprecedented and extravagant character. The usual medicines prescribed for medicine chests are all that are required or allowed on board of revenue vessels, and the before mentioned articles are not enumerated, nor in sea going vessels medicine chest books, and if they were, would not be allowed in those of the revenue service.

Very respectfully,
Your Obl. Servant,
J. T. Mather
Sessy of the Treasury
Collector of the Customs
Mobile
Ala.
were able to return to regular duties the next
day or the same day. The small crew size of 16
men made losing one man a burden to the
other crew members. Crewman in irons could
be physically away from work for several days.

In May 1855, Treasury Secretary James
Guthrie issued revised regulations for the
USRCS. He ceased publishing the regula-
tions as a separate volume and included
them within the general regulations of the
Treasury Department. Guthrie removed
most of naval-like rules and reverted to the
regulations of 1841. In addition, the new
regulations removed all mention of “corpo-
real punishment.”

Prescribed punishment returned to the
1862 USRCS regulations in unspecific and
vague terms, referring to punishment “ac-
cording to the laws and usages of the sea
service.” Confinement in single irons was
codified in the USRCS regulations in 1894
and made a last appearance as an authorized
punishment in 1907. The Navy abolished
the use of “confinement in irons,” single or
double, in 1909.

RATIONS FOR CREWS IMPROVED
But “SPIRITS” ONLY WEEKLY

One improvement in attention to the
crew’s health was the 1834 removal of the
“spirits” portion from the daily ration,
but the daily diet of high fat and salt re-
mained unchanged from the Revolutionary
War. Because there was no national navy

Opposite: A rejection of Capt. Levy C. Harby’s July 1848
requisition for medicines identifies those products not
allowed in the Revenue Service’s medicine chests. They
included one bottle Sands Sarsaparilla, one galvanic
bracelet, six bottles magnesia, twelve boxes Seidlitz
Powders, and more. Left: A Revenue Cutter Service
rations chart for the period, adopted from the U.S.
Navy. A diet high in fat and salt, this ration, with few
modifications, became the constant for the revenue
cutters for decades.
Friday, one pound of bread, one pound of salt fish, two ounces of butter or one gill of oil, and one pound of potatoes.

Saturday, one pound of bread, one pound of pork, half pint of peas or beans, and four ounces of cheese.

There will also be allowed, one half-pint of distilled spirits per day, or, in lieu thereof, one quart of beer per day, to each ration.

The revenue cutters began cooperating with the U.S. Navy in 1798 and adopted the naval ration in 1799. With few modifications, this ration became the constant for the revenue cutters for decades. The 1834 USRCS regulations allowed the navy ration without the “spirits.”

This ration allowance continued into the 1894 Revenue Cutter Service regulations. Although additional food items, pickles, dried raisins, and cranberries are included during

Congress authorized the Treasury Department to contract for rations for the revenue cutters for the first time on March 2, 1793. The individual cutter captains purchased rations locally without standard amounts. Although Congress did not authorize a federal navy in the 1794 “Act to Provide a Naval Armament,” section 8 of the act contained a provision for rations:

Sunday, one pound of bread, one pound and a half of beef, and half a pint of rice.

Monday, one pound of bread, one pound of pork, half pint of peas or beans, and four ounces of cheese.

Tuesday, one pound of bread, one pound and a half of beef, and one pound of potatoes or turnips, and pudding.

Wednesday, one pound of bread, two ounces of butter, or, in lieu thereof, six ounces of molasses, four ounces of cheese, and a half pint of rice.

Thursday, one pound of bread, one pound of pork, half pint of peas or beans.

The U.S. Revenue Cutter Gallatin, shown here in the oldest-known photograph of a cutter, was a 78-foot topsail schooner commissioned in 1830. She served off Charleston, South Carolina, starting in November 1832, to enforce federal tariff law during the Nullification Crisis.
the 1840s, the basic weekly menu did not vary much from that of the late 18th century.

**A HEALTH CARE PLAN MANDATORY FOR CREW**

The health of the crew was important, and crews spent many hours a week cleaning the “berth deck.” A ship’s requisitions record the purchase of 12 to 18 hickory or corn brooms. However, the living conditions, inadequate diet, and hard labor for both officers and seamen often produced long-lasting illness and disease.

By law, each man paid a tax, or fee, of 20 cents a month for individual health care at the marine hospitals, but these hospitals were few and distant from the cutter’s locations. The cutters carried neither surgeon nor surgeon’s mate, and whatever treatments and remedies used came from the cutter’s allowed medicine chest.

If a man became too incapacitated to serve, the captain discharged him. Such was the case in 1844 with the cook, James Murphy, aboard the cutter Crawford at Savannah, Georgia. Murphy’s rheumatism could not be treated with patent medicines. Hired slave Linus Olmstead took his place as cook. Some illnesses proved incurable. In 1841 four men aboard Crawford died from unspecified fevers, and another died from yellow fever. Van Buren had one seaman die in 1845, and 1st Lt. William Norris died in 1846.

Medicine chests mirrored those of the merchant marine and contained patent medicines, many of which were alcohol-based or opiate-based, or both; others were benign and useless, while still others such as the “Mercurial Ointment” were poisonous. The cutter’s officers were as susceptible to fads in medicines as in any generation then or since. Capt. Levy C. Harby, commanding the Wolcott and stationed in Mobile, Alabama, submitted bills for replenishing the medicine chest. Treasury Secretary Robert J. Walker questioned the expenses for items not allowed in the chest and disallowed the payment. This made Harby personally responsible for payment. The doubtful items enumerated by Walker included:

- One bottle Sands Sarsaparilla, six bottles Townsend’s Sarsaparilla, One Galvanic Bracelet $1.50, One Galvanic Bracelet $3, six bottles magnesia at $1 per bottle, 2 prescriptions at 40¢.
- Coleman’s bitters 8, Two bottles Tonic mixture $2, Twelve boxes Seidlitz Powders $6, Six boxes Capsules 8,
and men was far superior to that of the Treasury Department.
Nonetheless, the Coast Guard remained in the Treasury Department until 1967, except for temporary transfer to the Navy during World Wars I and II. In 1967, it became part of the new Department of Transportation, and in 2003 was merged into the new Department of Homeland Security.