

M2107

MASTER ABSTRACTS OF
CERTIFICATES OF ENROLLMENT
ISSUED FOR MERCHANT VESSELS AT
SELECTED GREAT LAKES PORTS,
1815–1911

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INTRODUCTION

On the five rolls of this microfilm publication, M2107, are reproduced the master abstracts of certificates of enrollment issued for merchant vessels at selected Great Lakes ports, 1815–1911. The certificates were issued by collectors of customs, with one copy collected and maintained by the Treasury Department’s Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation and its predecessors. These records are part of Records of the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation, Record Group (RG) 41.

BACKGROUND

Laws Regarding Vessel Documentation

Systems for registering and measuring vessels date back to the English Navigation Laws of Charles II in 1660. These laws required vessels to be measured and registered to determine their national character, provide a basis for taxation, and protect against foreign shipping and shipbuilding. After the American Revolution, several states adopted the English laws regarding navigation, but there was no uniformity until adoption of the U.S. Constitution, in which Article I, section 8, clause 3, vested in the Federal Government the exclusive power “[t]o regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States. . . .”

The importance of maritime matters to the new republic is shown by the attention given to them by the First Congress. Its third act on July 20, 1789 (1 Stat. 27), imposed a duty on the tonnage of vessels. An act of September 1, 1789 (1 Stat. 55), provided for the registering and clearing of vessels and regulation of coastwise trade. Under this law, only American-built vessels were permitted to be registered. This had the effect of encouraging the nascent U.S. shipbuilding industry by reducing foreign competition.

The September 1, 1789, act, as amended by acts of December 31, 1792 (1 Stat. 287), February 18, 1793 (1 Stat. 305), and March 1, 1817 (3 Stat. 35), was the foundation of the navigation laws and marine policy of the United States until 1912, when foreign-built ships were admitted to American registry. An act of June 7, 1918 (40 Stat. 602), extended the registration system by requiring the numbering and recording of every undocumented vessel propelled in whole or in part by machinery, except for vessels under 16 feet using outboard motors.

Administration of Laws Regarding Vessel Documentation and Statistics

The early administration of navigation laws was placed under the control of the Secretary of the Treasury, who delegated their enforcement to customs officials. On January 22, 1793, supervision of the issuance and filing of marine documents and the preparation of navigation and tonnage statistics was turned over to the Office of the Register of the Treasury, which retained these functions until 1866, except for the short period between March 29 and April 27, 1793.

The preparation of statistics by the Office of the Register of the Treasury was modified and improved by an act of February 10, 1820 (3 Stat. 541), which also provided for the

publication of an annual volume on statistics and navigation. An act of July 28, 1866 (14 Stat. 31), created a Bureau of Statistics in the Treasury Department, to which was transferred responsibility for the collection and publication of statistics and the publication of an annual list of American merchant vessels. The act also transferred to the Bureau the duty of assigning official numbers to all documented merchant vessels of American registry and signal letters to such of these vessels as were seagoing. The Office of the Register of the Treasury, however, still retained custody of the surrendered marine documents and supervised the issuance by collectors of customs of replacement documents.

The Bureau of Navigation was created by an act of July 5, 1884 (23 Stat. 118), and placed within the Department of the Treasury. The reason for the Bureau's creation was to consolidate responsibility for administration of the navigation laws into a distinct service. (Administration of laws relating to lighthouses, lifesaving, collection of revenue, and inspection of steam vessels remained outside the Bureau's jurisdiction.) The Bureau was under the immediate charge of a Commissioner of Navigation, appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate. It was composed of the Register and Tonnage Division of the Office of the Register of the Treasury, the Internal Revenue and Navigation Division of the Office of the Secretary of the Treasury, all of the shipping commissioners' offices, and employees from the Bureau of Statistics concerned with the numbering of merchant vessels. The Bureau itself and all jurisdiction over enforcement of the navigation laws was transferred to the Department of Commerce and Labor by an act of February 14, 1903 (32 Stat. 826), and later to the Department of Commerce by an act of March 4, 1913 (37 Stat. 736). The Secretaries of the new departments succeeded to the powers of the Secretary of the Treasury with regard to the administration of navigation laws; these powers they continued to assign to the Bureau.

Customs officials were directed by law to act as the Bureau's field service in the enforcement of navigation and inspection laws. Beginning in 1911, appropriation acts authorized the Secretary of Commerce and Labor (the Secretary of Labor after 1913) to employ small vessels and inspectors to enforce motorboat laws and assure that appropriate motorboat numbers had been assigned. Supervision of these vessels and inspectors was assigned to the Bureau.

In accord with the Appropriation Act of June 30, 1932 (47 Stat. 415), the Bureau of Navigation was consolidated in August 1932 with the Steamboat Inspection Service under the title of Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection, but the records of the two agencies were not integrated until 1935. The Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection was later renamed the Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation by an act of May 27, 1936 (49 Stat. 1380).

VESSEL DOCUMENTS

Certificates of enrollment, registration, or license were known collectively as vessel documents. They were issued to managing owners or masters after proper measurement and proof of place and date of construction were provided as evidence that vessels of

5-ton or greater capacity were entitled to rights and privileges of American-documented vessels. Until 1912, with few exceptions, American-documented vessels were required to be built in the United States; even as of 2007, only American-built vessels can be documented to engage in coastwise trade.

Vessels engaged in foreign trade were required to obtain a certificate of registration. Vessels of 20-ton and greater capacity working in the coastal or fishing trades were required to get enrollments and licenses, while those of 5- to less than 20-ton capacity needed only licenses. Copies of licenses, none of which are reproduced in this publication, were renewed yearly and filed in customhouses until 1906, when a single form for enrollment and license was issued.

Both certificates of enrollment and registration were permanent or temporary depending on whether they were issued at home ports or elsewhere. A new certificate was issued and the old certificate was surrendered to the collector of customs at the nearest port if there was a change in the type of trade, ownership, rig, tonnage, dimensions, name, or home port of a vessel. Certificates of registration and enrollment were made in triplicate. The master kept one copy aboard the vessel. The issuing collector of customs kept the second copy. The third (“reference”) copy was sent to Washington, DC, to the Office of the Register of the Treasury (or his successors, the Commissioner of Navigation, 1884–1932; Director of the Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection, 1932–42; Commissioner of Customs, 1942–67; and Commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, 1967–). When a master surrendered his copy to the collector of customs at the nearest port, the collector endorsed this copy and his own with the date, place, and reason for surrender and the number of the new document, if any, that was issued. The collector then cancelled the master’s copy and sent the surrendered copy to Washington. If the port of surrender was different from the port of issuance, the other collector was informed of the surrender.

Surrendered and reference copies issued before 1815 are presumed to have been among the records lost in the burning of Washington in 1814. In 1913 the Bureau of Navigation destroyed reference copies for the period 1815–1913. Reference copies for the period since 1913 have not been retained.

Surrendered copies were bound chronologically in volumes until 1867. Subsequently, documents were folded and filed by year and port until 1919. At that time the filing system was changed again so that documents issued to a vessel were filed together by official vessel number, and then chronologically. In 1921 some of the bound volumes were damaged by fire and water. In 1933 the remnants were removed from many volumes and were arranged by port, and then chronologically. If a vessel was lost at sea or the certificate was lost before it was surrendered, a copy was not always made for the Washington files.

An act of March 2, 1831, “An act to regulate the foreign and coasting trade on the northern, north-eastern, and north-western frontiers of the United States. . . .” (4 Stat. 487) for the first time permitted U.S. vessels “navigating the waters on our northern,

north-eastern and north-western frontiers, otherwise than by sea,” to be enrolled and licensed on a special form prescribed by the Secretary of the Treasury, which authorized them “to be employed either in the coasting or foreign trade” without being required to have a certificate of registry. After the introduction of these “Frontier Enrollments,” the number of certificates of registration issued on the Great Lakes declined markedly. No certificates of registration appear to have been issued at several ports after 1831, and the vast majority of those issued between 1831 and 1872 were for vessels whose licenses had expired at ports other than the home port.

The content of vessel documents varies, but a certificate usually contains the following information:

1. Certificate number.
2. After 1866, the vessel’s official number and call letters.
3. Names and addresses of owners (usually by city and state). After 1850, each owner’s fraction of ownership is included.
4. Name of vessel and home port.
5. Name of master of vessel on the date of issue.
6. Date and place of construction.
7. Name of builder, often on the first certificate issued for a vessel.
8. Number, place, and date of issue of the previous certificate.
9. Number of decks and masts.
10. Dimensions and tonnage (capacity). The capacity formula was changed in 1864. By an act of 1882, deductions were allowed for fuel space, machinery space, etc., with a stated difference between gross and net tonnage.
11. Type of stern, gallery (seldom after 1865), and figurehead.
12. Type of rig.
13. Place and date of issue of certificate.
14. An endorsement on the reverse side of the certificate giving the place, date, and reason for surrender of certificate. Sometimes, endorsements of changes of master, renewal of license, or other information are included.

It is frequently possible to trace a vessel’s history through the entire chain of the vessel documents with the aid of citations and endorsements on the documents themselves and from the information contained in abstracts and official number books. The first certificate for a particular vessel often cites a builder’s, carpenter’s, surveyor’s, or admeasurer’s certificate rather than a certificate of enrollment or registration. The reverse side of many certificates contains endorsements of surrender that either indicate where and when the succeeding certificate was issued or state the fate of the vessel. The master abstracts, mentioned below, are also useful in tracing the chain of documentation. It is not always possible, however, to determine with certainty the names of all the masters of a given vessel or the tenure of a particular master’s service, even though the certificate indicates the master’s name at the time of issuance and endorsements may indicate changes of masters.

Some of the certificates were lost by fire, accident at sea, or other hazards. Additional certificates for the years after 1871 may have been withdrawn from the “port” file and might now be found among those documents arranged by official numbers assigned to individual vessels. The names of the vessels, their tonnages, and the names of the managing owners and masters shown on those certificates can often be found in the master abstracts, described below.

FINDING AIDS FOR LOCATING VESSEL INFORMATION

There are four major additional sources of information that may assist researchers in locating records relating to a specific vessel. The first three are available at the National Archives and Records Administration:

- (1) Master abstracts of registers, enrollments, and licenses kept in the office of the Register of the Treasury (Commissioner of Navigation after 1884). These abstracts, dated 1815–1911, are arranged chronologically and then by port of issue, and contain the following information: Number and date of document; rig and name of the vessel; name of the managing owner or ship’s husband (the agent appointed to handle transactions regarding the freight); name of the master at the time the document was issued; reason the previous document was surrendered (or “new” if it was a new vessel); date, type, number, and place the previous document was issued; vessel’s measured tonnage; date and place that the current document was surrendered; and reason for the surrender. **This microfilm publication contains master abstracts of the certificates of enrollment issued at selected Great Lakes ports, 1815–1911.**
- (2) Official number books kept in the same office. These books were used to update the *List of Merchant Vessels of the United States*, published annually since 1868. After 1925, it was entitled *Merchant Vessels of the United States*. These books are often available at U.S. Government Depository Libraries or large university or maritime libraries.
- (3) Abstracts and indexes prepared in the offices of the local collectors of customs. These records contain the same information as the master abstracts.
- (4) The *Record of American and Foreign Shipping* (“American Lloyds”) (New York: American Bureau of Shipping) is available at maritime libraries or the Library of Congress.

There are also other series, such as listings of losses and changes in vessel name, that either aid in the use of vessel documents or supplement information contained therein.

A variety of other records were created by the collectors of customs in the performance of the vessel documentation function, such as master carpenter certificates, certificates of tonnage admeasurement, bonds and oaths of owners and masters of vessels, and bills of sale, mortgage, and certificates of conveyance.

CLOSELY RELATED MICROFILM PUBLICATIONS

The master abstracts reproduced in this microfilm serve as finding aids to certificates of enrollment in several other National Archives microfilm publications:

M1861, *Certificates of Enrollment Issued for Merchant Vessels at Buffalo, New York, May 1816–November 1896* (13 rolls).

M1862, *Certificates of Enrollment Issued for Merchant Vessels at Cleveland, Ohio, April 1829–May 1915* (14 rolls).

M1864, *Certificates of Enrollment Issued for Merchant Vessels at Oswego, New York, 1815–1911* (6 rolls).

M2100, *Certificates of Enrollment Issued for Merchant Vessels at Green Bay, Manitowoc, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1851–1868* (1 roll).

M2101, *Certificates of Enrollment Issued for Merchant Vessels at Detroit, Michilimackinac, and Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan, 1818–1898, and Certificates of Registration Issued for Merchant Vessels at Detroit, Michigan, 1818–1831* (8 rolls).

M2105, *Certificates of Enrollment Issued for Merchant Vessels at Cape Vincent, Dunkirk, French Creek, Genesee, Lewiston, Ogdensburg, Pultneyville, Rochester, Sackets Harbor, and Suspension Bridge (Niagara Falls), New York, 1816–1867* (3 rolls).

OTHER RECORDS

The Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation and its predecessors had responsibility for the enforcement of various other laws relating to marine safety, welfare of seamen and passengers, and related matters. For more information about records created in the performance of these functions, see *Guide to Federal Records in the National Archives of the United States* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1995), or Douglas Stein, *American Maritime Documents, 1776–1860* (Mystic, CT: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1992).

Official number files for vessels issued such numbers after February 1942 and removed from documentation by June 1958 are in the National Archives' holdings in Records of the U.S. Customs Service, Record Group 36. Official number files for vessels issued such numbers, July 1958 to the mid-1970s, are in Records of the U.S. Coast Guard, RG 26. Official number files for vessels issued such numbers after the mid-1970s are currently (in 2007) in the custody of the U.S. Coast Guard. Access to these records may be obtained by contacting the U.S. Coast Guard, National Vessel Documentation Center, 792 T. J. Jackson Drive, Falling Waters, WV 25419.

ROLL LIST

ROLL	STATE, PORTS OR DISTRICTS, AND YEARS
1	NEW YORK AND PENNSYLVANIA (INTERFILED), 1815–1911 ¹ <i>New York</i> includes the ports and/or districts of Buffalo, Cape Vincent, Dunkirk, French Creek, Genesee, Lewiston, Ogdensburg, Oswego, Plattsburgh, Rochester, Sackets Harbor, Sag Harbor, Suspension Bridge (Niagara Falls), and <i>possibly other locations</i> . Information may not be included for all ports for all years. <i>Pennsylvania</i> includes the ports and/or districts of Erie and Presque Isle (Erie).
2	NEW YORK Buffalo, 1822–1911 OHIO Cleveland (also called Cuyahoga District), 1817–1911
3	MICHIGAN Detroit, 1816–17, 1839–1911 Michilimackinac, 1833–34, 1838–62 Sault Sainte Marie, 1863–68 OHIO Toledo (also called Miami District and Maumee City), 1838–1911
4	MICHIGAN AND MINNESOTA (INTERFILED), 1866–1911 <i>Michigan</i> includes Grand Haven, Marquette, and Port Huron <i>Minnesota</i> includes Duluth
5	WISCONSIN Green Bay, 1856, 1859–60, 1864 Milwaukee, 1851–59, 1860–1911

¹ These records were filmed in 1979; the original title and target pages identify the content only as “Master Abstracts of Enrollments Issued at Lower Great Lakes Ports, 1816–1911,” without specifying which ports were selected.