



Impressed American Seamen, 1789–1815

From the end of the Revolutionary War to the War of 1812, the British Royal Navy forcibly boarded American merchant ships to seize English-speaking seamen and press them into service on British vessels. To a lesser extent, the French and Spanish navies also impressed American sailors. Congress passed acts in 1796 (1 Stat. 477) and 1799 (1 Stat. 731) to track and repatriate impressed seamen. These acts provided for the appointment of agents at foreign ports to report on impressment activities and undertake applications for the release of seamen thus seized. They also required masters of U.S. merchant ships to file reports on impressment to U.S. customs collectors (if such acts occurred on the high seas) or to the nearest U.S. consular office (if impressments took place in a foreign port). Abstracts of these reports were forwarded to the Secretary of State, who then submitted an annual statement on impressments to Congress.

Microfilmed Records

___M2025, *Registers of Applications for the Release of Impressed Seamen, 1793–1802, and Related Indexes*. 1 roll. DP. This publication reproduces four volumes of registers of applications for the release of impressed seamen, arranged chronologically by date of application for release. Information may include the name of the seaman, name of the American ship from which he was taken, name of the American ship captain, the state he was from, date of impressment, name of the British ship on which he was carried off, name of the British ship captain, evidence of U.S. citizenship, and the result of the application.

___M1839, *Miscellaneous Lists and Papers Regarding Impressed Seamen, 1796–1814*. 1 roll. DP. This microfilm series comprises miscellaneous lists and papers from Department of State records regarding impressed seamen, including lists derived from masters' protests to American consuls, and reports of U.S. collectors of customs, as well as abstracts of reports on impressment submitted to Congress by the Secretary of State. Included are lists of impressments, lists of American seamen forced to serve on British vessels, and lists of seamen released, arranged alphabetically by surname of seaman.

___M588, *“War of 1812 Papers” of the Department of State, 1789–1815*. 7 rolls. DP. **Roll 6** of this microfilm series contains miscellaneous letters regarding the release of seamen who were impressed and later confined as prisoners of war during the hostilities with Great Britain, 1812–1815. Included among this correspondence are letters received by the President and the Secretary of State, as well as letters from the British Admiralty, private citizens, and impressed seamen, all regarding the release of seamen through the exchange of prisoners of war. This publication is available online on Ancestry.com.

Textual Records

The following textual records, part of the General Records of the Department of State (Record Group 59), are at the National Archives at College Park, Maryland. There are no indexes to any of the records.

RR #402

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___ **Letters Received Regarding Impressed Seamen, 1794–1815** (Entry 928). Arranged alphabetically by name of seaman, this entry contains letters and related enclosures received by the Department of State from collectors of customs, impressed seamen and their relatives and friends, and U.S. agents in London, Liverpool, and elsewhere. The letters report cases of impressment or transmit requests for release of seamen, for seamen’s certificates, and for affidavits of U.S. citizenship. Also included are copies of replies to some of the letters received.

___ **Correspondence with Collectors of Customs Regarding Impressed Seamen, 1796–1814** (Entry 929). Arranged alphabetically by the name of the port at which the collector served, and then chronologically. This entry includes press copies of letters sent by the Department of State to collectors of customs notifying them of the impressment of seamen and requesting “proofs of citizenship” on file in the collectors’ offices so that application could be made for the seaman’s release. Replies from the collectors enclose the requested documents and transmit quarterly returns of impressed seamen registers in their districts.

___ **Quarterly Returns of Impressed Seamen, Oct. 1806–Dec. 1809** (Entry 932). Arranged chronologically, this entry contains quarterly returns of impressed seamen sent to the Department of State by London agent David Lenox. The returns provide such vital information as the seaman’s name, the date of application for his release, the date and place of his impressment, the British ship of war to which he was assigned, documents submitted as evidence of his citizenship, and the result of the application.

The following series, part of the Records of the Foreign Service Posts of the Department of State (Record Group 84), is at the National Archives at College Park.

___ **Registers of Impressed Seamen, 1804–17** (Entry UD 521). The records of the U.S. Consulate in London contain 11 register volumes of Impressed Seamen.

Published Sources

___ United States Congress. *American State Papers: Foreign Relations*. 6 vols. Washington: Gales & Seaton, 1832–59. This publication reproduces several lists of impressed seamen, dating from 1804 to 1816. The lists appear according to the following volume citations: Vol. 2, doc. 197; Vol. 3, doc. 212; and Vol. 4, doc. 282 (the latter contains three separate lists labeled A, B, and C).

For more information, see the following reference reports:

- *Citizenship and the American Merchant Marine: Seamen’s Protection Certificates, 1792–1869*
- *Citizenship and the American Merchant Marine: Vessel Crew Lists, 1803–1954*

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