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More than “Rum, Buggery, and the Lash”: Social History in American Naval Documents

By Michael J. Crawford

U.S. Naval Historical Center

[**From the Editor:** If you choose to view the Power Point Photo Gallery, invoke the gallery, right click to go to "full screen," view the gallery, and at the conclusion just press the refresh button on your browser to return to the article.]

The story goes that when his fellow Lords of the Admiralty objected to a naval reform that he advocated, Winston Churchill replied, “You say that I am ignoring the time-honored traditions of the Royal Navy? And what might they be? I shall tell you in three words. Rum, buggery, and the lash! Good morning, Sirs!” This apocryphal story highlights the stereotypical image of sailors: intoxicated, sexually promiscuous, and mutinous, kept in line only by draconian discipline. The U.S. Navy drew many of *its* traditions from the Royal Navy, the subject of the apocryphal quotation; even so, the U.S. Navy in the age of sail has a social history unique to itself.

Alcohol, sex, and discipline in the sailing Navy of the United States are worthy topics of inquiry, and historians have frequently revisited these subjects. Other aspects of the social history of the sailing navy that have received more than cursory study include recruiting, patronage in officer appointments, race relations, promotion, dueling, medical care, and education. [\[1\]](#)

This essay, however, charts a course to some neglected aspects of the social history of the American sailing navy and urges social historians to cruise in less frequented seas. These aspects include: women; hygiene; patronage of officers toward warrant and petty officers and ratings; and the life-course of warrant and petty officers.

Several years ago, I received a telephone inquiry in my capacity as a historian at the Naval Historical Center about the women who were in HMS *Guerriere* during the War of 1812. Knowing then less than I do now, I told the caller that I had never read any account mentioning the existence of such women. The caller then explained that she was asking on behalf of her female employer who believed that in a previous life she had been in *Guerriere* during its engagement with USS *Constitution*.

Although women lived among the men in Royal Navy ships, they are often invisible to the historian, since they do not appear in official records, such as muster lists

and payrolls. When women do appear, it can be quite vividly, as in Daniel Maclise's painting "The Death of Nelson," which portrays two women on the spar deck tending to wounded men. Before beginning the canvas in 1859, Maclise interviewed surviving participants on board *Victory* during the 1805 Battle of Trafalgar.^[21] And women can appear quite tragically. During the Battle of Lake Champlain in 1813, for instance, the wife of HMS *Confiance*'s steward was below decks binding up the wounded when a cannonball fired by USS *Saratoga* tore through the side of the ship, carried her across the vessel, and killed her. We know of her death only through a letter published in Niles's *Weekly Register*, and the circumstances only through an interview with a participant by the oral historian Benson Lossing.^[31]

In the U.S. Navy, too, petty officers' wives sometimes accompanied their husbands to sea. An extract from the journal of Midshipman Henry Wadsworth in USS *Chesapeake* in the Mediterranean during the war with Tripoli in 1803 provides a picture of such women.

On the 22d. Febr'y. it being the day after we left Algiers: Mrs. Low (wife to James Low Captain of the Forecastle) bore a Son, in the Boatswain's Store Room: on the 31st. inst. [March].--the babe was baptiz'd in the Midshipmen's apartment: The Contriver of this business was Melancthon Taylor Woolsey a Mid: who stood Godfather on the occasion & provided a handsome collation of Wine & Fruit: Mrs. Low being unwell Mrs. Hays the Gunner's Lady officiated: Divine Service by Rev. Alex McFarlan. The Child's name Melancthon Woolsey Low:--All was conducted with due decorum & decency no doubt to the great satisfaction of the parents, as Mr. Woolsey's attention to them must in some measure have ameliorated the unhappy situation of the Lady who was so unfortunate as to conceive & bare, on the Salt Sea. NB. The other Ladies of the Bay--The Forward Most part of the Birth Deck--viz. Mrs. Watson: the Boatswain's Wife, Mrs. Myres the Carpenter's Lady--with Mrs. Crosby the corporal's Lady: got drunk in their own Quarters out of pure spite--not being invited to celebrate the Christening of Melancthon Woolsey Low.^[41]

This account reveals that *Chesapeake* had at least five petty officers' wives on board. *Chesapeake* may have been something of an exception during the war with Tripoli, for, when USS *Philadelphia* ran aground on an uncharted shoal and its 309 officers and men fell prisoner to the Pasha of Tripoli, no women were taken prisoner with them. *Chesapeake* served as flagship for Richard V. Morris, commodore of the Mediterranean squadron, and he, too, brought his wife along. She, likewise, was pregnant and gave birth while in the Mediterranean. It may have been that, knowing Mrs. Morris would find comfort having other women on board ship, Commodore Morris encouraged his petty officers to bring their wives.

U.S. Naval commanders continued the practice of taking their own wives along on extended cruises, at least in times of peace. Captain Charles Stewart took his wife, Delia Tudor Stewart, with him during his cruise along the west coast of South America in 1821, apparently because she spent money extravagantly when he left her at home. Late in the cruise he found out that for three weeks during an earlier part of the cruise she had compromised the United States' neutrality in the South American Wars of Independence by, unknown to him, giving sanctuary on board to a royalist army officer. Thereafter,

Stewart refused to speak to his wife, although he insisted that she share meals with him in the captain's cabin. Shortly after the end of the cruise, the marriage ended in separation.^[5]

Isaac Hull's marriage to Ann Hart appears to have been a true love match; even so, his taking his wife to sea caused a different kind of trouble. When he was given command of the Mediterranean Squadron in the 1830s, Ann and her sister Augusta accompanied him. Because the two women shared the main cabin of the squadron's flagship, USS *Ohio*, with Commodore Hull, his flag captain could not share the cabin as well. The flag captain thus displaced *Ohio*'s lieutenants from the captain's cabin, who had to berth, according to a long-standing decision of the Board of Navy Commissioners, on the ship's lowest deck, the dark, dank, and odiferous orlop deck. The lieutenants protested publicly against the preference the commodore gave to his female relatives on board. Damage to Isaac Hull's eardrums from the firing of ships' cannons caused him to go deaf by the 1830s. Given the commodore's deafness, Mrs. Hull often served as an intermediary in conveying information to and orders from him. From the perspective of the discontented lieutenants, the commodore's wife had assumed command of the ship. Relations between Hull and the lieutenants deteriorated to the point that Hull felt justified in sending a half dozen of his lieutenants back to the United States.^[6]

These accounts of women aboard U.S. Navy ships in the age of sail make for amusing tales, but I suspect that there is a greater significance here to uncover. There is an extensive literature about the lives of army wives on the frontier.^[7] Similarly, the lives of the wives of career navy men, not just those of commissioned officers, but also those of warrant and petty officers, deserve to be told. How did these women manage during their husband's long absences at sea? How did they handle familial, financial, and business affairs? On what support systems did they rely? Did the wives of naval officers constitute a community among themselves? How did the wives of commissioned officers relate with one another? Did they divide into cliques along the lines that their highly competitive husbands did? How did they advance or hinder their husbands' careers?

The world of the wooden warship has a special place in the history of popular attitudes toward cleanliness and hygiene. Readers of Patrick O'Brian's novels about the Royal Navy in the age of Nelson will recall that the fictional surgeon, Dr. Stephen Maturin, with his pre-germ-theory understanding of the etiology of disease, frequently ridicules the navy for what he views as an excess of devotion to cleanliness. We find the same devotion to cleanliness in the U.S. Navy, for the sake of order and discipline as much as for health. In his 1849 novel *White-Jacket*, which drew on his fourteen-months experience as a seaman in the United States frigate *United States*, Herman Melville observes that "of all men-of-war, the American ships are the most excessively neat, and have the greatest reputation for it."^[8] U.S. Navy regulations issued in 1802 included the following rules:

1. All men on board are to keep themselves in every respect as clean as possible.
2. That the ship be aired between decks as much as may be, and that she be always kept thoroughly clean.
3. That all necessary precautions be used by placing sentinels or otherwise, to prevent people easing themselves in the hold, or throwing any thing there that may occasion nastiness.

4. That no fruit or strong liquors be sold on board the ship; *except in the judgment of the commander of the squadron, a limited quantity of fruit be necessary for the health of the crew, in which case he will issue an order.*^[9]

Among the regulations that Master Commandant William M. Crane issued for USS *Madison*, stationed in the frozen waters of Lake Ontario in December 1813, several related to cleanliness. Crane admonished all officers to keep themselves clean and to impress the need for cleanliness on the men of their divisions. Beds and blankets were to be frequently aired, and clothes washed when weather permitted. Every morning, boys were to be mustered and those who had dirty clothes, faces, hands, or feet were to be punished. All filth and rubbish was to be removed from the ship and dumped into the lake through holes cut in the ice. Crane directed that “The Birth Deck is not to be washed in Winter without an order from the first Lieut. who will consult the Surgeon before he directs it.” But, in any case, the deck was “to be white washed once a fortnight and fumigated morning and evening.”^[10]

It is not clear whether Crane’s reasonableness in not insisting on a daily scrubbing of the berth deck extended to the weather deck as well. In any event, barefooted sailors holystoning the decks in cold weather seems to have been a regular event in the U.S. Navy. In his novel *White-Jacket*, Melville protests the inflexibility of the practice of cleaning the spar deck every morning, whatever the weather: “Is a ship a wooden platter, that it is to be scrubbed out every morning before breakfast, even if the thermometer be at zero and every sailor goes barefooted through the flood with the chilblains?”^[11] Echoing Melville, in a 1854 treatise on naval medicine, Dr. Gustavus Horner, one of the most notable American naval surgeons of his era, condemned the deluging of the decks in cold weather: “In doing this the men generally go barefooted, and suffer proportionally from the conjoined ill effects of cold and moisture, inducing rheumatic and pulmonic complaints.”^[12]

The disagreement over the scrubbing of the decks in cold weather seems to have been a clash between two cultures, naval and medical. The case of the verminous naval surgeon may have been an extreme instance of a similar cultural clash. Commander John Orde Creighton wrote to his commanding officer, Captain Isaac Hull, from on board U.S. brig *Rattlesnake*, December 10, 1813:

sir

I am under the necessity of reporting to You one of the most Extraordinary cases of uncleanliness that I ever heard of in an office during fourteen Years that I have served in the navy--

It has been reported to me, and has become public, that the acting surgeon (D. Yeates) of the *Rattle Snake* is covered with Vermin, and by sending his clothes on shore to wash, has nearly fill’d a whole Neighbourhood with the same--I am Mortified beyond expression and have to request that the said D: Yeates may be removed from under my Command, as I cannot consent to his Messing with the other officers of the Brig or of myself serving with a man of his discretion.^[13]

In fairness to Dr. Yeates, it appears that it was ill health that led him to neglect his person to such an extent. Following his abject apology, his fellow officers were willing to readmit him to their mess. Illness, however, prevented his return. He was eventually furloughed home to Maryland, where he died on October 28, 1815.^[14]

As the washstand with its porcelain pitcher and basin is a symbol of middleclass respectability on land, so the holystone is a symbol of good order aboard a man-o-war. Sanitation on shipboard and ashore merit comparison and their relationships merit examination.

An anecdote from the War with Tripoli illustrates why the patron and follower relationship between line officers and their men bears greater scrutiny. On August 3, 1804, the U.S. Mediterranean Squadron under Commodore Edward Preble entered Tripoli Harbor to bombard the city and to attack the city's shipping. In command of a division of the attacking squadron's gunboats, Lieutenant Stephen Decatur led his men in boarding an enemy gunboat. When he fell to the deck while grappling with a gigantic opponent, another Tripolitan raised his scimitar to kill him. One of Decatur's men, wounded in both arms, interposed his head and received a nasty scalp wound. In the sailing navy it often happened that a seaman would develop an attachment to a particular officer and follow his favorite commander from ship to ship. This was the case with Boatswain's Mate Reuben James, who served with Decatur from the Tripolitan War through the War of 1812 and remained in the Navy until his retirement in 1836. Because of his known connection with Decatur, for many years it was assumed that Reuben James was the loyal sailor who endangered himself to save Decatur. Historians now agree, however, that the evidence suggests it was not Reuben James who took the blow intended for Decatur, but Seaman Daniel Fraser.^[15]

A letter from Purser's Steward John S. Meginnes to Lieutenant Commandant William McBlair, dated U.S. Ship *Decatur*, Porto Praya, in the Cape Verde Islands, November 22, 1848, suggests some of the dimensions of patronage between officers and men. Meginnes wrote the letter because he felt compelled to explain to McBlair his reasons for leaving his position in the *Allegheny*, an iron-hulled steam gunboat. Apparently, Meginnes had joined the ship when McBlair was executive officer, and McBlair had made certain promises regarding Meginnes's duties. "On Mr. Reynolds taking charge of the Executive Dept of the ship," however, Meginnes wrote, "Every thing went the opposite of right." For instance, "The desk you gave me to do my writing on he ordered broken up, and said I should write in the Masters Room[.] you know the locality, but you were never in it when the ship was under a full head of steam[.] Sperm candles would melt in the horn lanterns[.]" Unable to bear his new working conditions, Meginnes asked leave to go ashore at New Orleans. He remained ashore for two weeks, and then, unable to pay his room and board bill, arranged that his landlord turn him in as a deserter and pocket the reward. Returning to *Allegheny* Meginnes found, much to his surprise, that Lieutenant William Reynolds was no longer *Allegheny*'s executive but had become the commanding officer. Reynolds ordered that Meginnes be given twelve lashes and be discharged. At the time he wrote the letter, Meginnes was serving in some capacity in U.S. sloop of war *Decatur*. On arriving in Porto Praya he found in the harbor there the U.S. store ship *Erie*, with McBlair in command. Meginnes sent this narrative to McBlair, for, "You haveing always acted towards me as a gentleman, and placed confidence in me while you were on board of the Alleghany, I do not wish to loose your good opinion."^[16]

If Purser's Steward Meginnes was in any way representative, his case suggests that men who held lesser posts in the ante-bellum navy relied largely for their well being on good relations with line officers. An unsympathetic officer could make existence as hot as hell, as Reynolds literally did for Meginnes. If Meginnes was going to continue his

naval career, he had to cultivate good relations with his patrons. A study of the ramifications of these kinds of relationships, the mechanisms by which they were maintained, and how they changed over time could yield interesting results.

The life-course of lesser naval officers, the skilled sailors who executed the daily operations of the sailing navy, has yet to be explored. Studies of naval personnel have focused on line officers and on common seamen. Apart from the history of naval rank itself,^[17] the story of the warrant, petty, and other lesser officers remains untold. Yet, it could be plausibly argued that men filling those positions constituted the backbone of the American sailing navy. Nicholas A. M. Rodger pleads a similar case for the lesser officers of the Royal Navy in the eighteenth century. Armorers, boatswains, carpenters, coopers, gunners, masters at arms, pursers, sail makers, and their various mates and assistants possessed the skills and the experience required to keep a warship in operating condition, properly supplied, stowed, organized, and in repair. Because in the Royal Navy these professionals tended to make naval service a career, the Royal Navy enjoyed advantages enabling it to remain strong and effective over the duration of a long conflict.^[18] Commodore Charles Morris, reflecting back on the War of 1812 from the perspective of several decades, isolated a different factor contributing to the U.S. Navy's notable victories during that war: "the greater resources of our seamen than is usual with those of other nations."

Many of our seamen have acquired trades before they begin their maritime pursuits, and, in the case of necessity, carpenters, smiths, and others, who are to be found in numbers among our crews, who can render most valuable aid in repairing damages; which could only be done in other services by the few who are usually specially provided for such purposes.^[19]

Morris recognized American egalitarianism, resulting in the spread of specialized skills through the crew of an American warship, as a factor that improved the speed with which such a ship could manage emergencies.

We do not know if U.S. Navy petty and warrant officers in the ante-bellum era tended to make the Navy a career, what the median length of service of such officers was, what path their typical careers took, and what they did in civilian life before or after their naval service. We do not know, not because the answers cannot be found, but because no one has yet bothered to ask the questions. A small collection of letters of a U.S. Navy carpenter, written to his wife, suggests some potentially valuable avenues of inquiry along these lines.

The author of these letters was Daniel Jones, of Kittery, Maine. Jones began his career as an acting carpenter, USN, in 1847, and coincidentally was a crewmate of John S. Meginnes's in U.S. sloop of war *Decatur* when he was warranted a carpenter in November 1848, his commanding officer recommending him as "a first rate mechanic." Jones served in USS *Macedonian* during Matthew C. Perry's expedition to Japan, and during the Civil War in U.S. sloop of war *St. Louis* on the African coast and on blockade duty. He was placed on the retired list in 1869 and died in 1877.^[20]

The Jones collection consists of fifteen letters he wrote, dated 1850-1852 and 1855, twelve of which are to his wife. Those letters reveal facets of a warrant officer's conditions of service and how service in the navy affected a warrant officer's family. Jones was a landowner and left his wife in charge of his financial affairs, renting out his land and buildings and collecting his debts. The letters also discuss arrangements for his

wife and children to live in Philadelphia while Jones was assigned to duty at the Navy Asylum. Would Mrs. Jones be able to make the journey without her husband's assistance? How good were Philadelphia schools? What furnishings would they need? If materials accompanying the collection are correct, Jones was a friend of Vice President Hannibal Hamlin's and served in the Maine state legislature.^[21] Landowner, friend of the vice president, state legislator: how typical was this Navy carpenter? What attracted such a solid citizen to naval service? We shall be unable to answer these questions until someone makes close studies of Jones and his fellow warrant officers.

The social history of the sailing U.S. Navy should and can be more than rum, buggery, and the lash. The story resides in the documents, waiting for creative and original scholars to ask and to answer questions yet unasked.

^[1] Important social histories of the U.S. Navy in the age of sail include Henry L. Burr, *Education in the Early Navy* (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, Philadelphia, 1939), Harold D. Langley, *Social Reform in the United States Navy 1798-1862* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1967), James E. Valle, *Rocks and Shoals: Naval Discipline in the Age of Fighting Sail* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1980), Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794-1815* (Annapolis, Md., Naval Institute Press, 1991), Harold D. Langley, *A History of Medicine in the Early U.S. Navy* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), and Gerald T. Altoff, *Amongst My Best Men: African-Americans and the War of 1812* (Put-in-Bay, Oh.: Perry Group, 1996). The classic work on the Royal Navy is Michael Lewis, *A Social History of the Navy 1793-1815* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960).

^[2] The Walker Museum, Liverpool, England. "Further Reading: 'The Death of Nelson, 1859-64' by Daniel Maclise (1806-70)," <http://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/picture-of-month/furtherReading.asp?id=37&venue=2>, 15 Oct. 2004.

^[3] Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field Book of the War of 1812* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1868; reprint ed., Gretna, La.: Firebird Press, 2003), p. 872.

^[4] Journal of Midshipman Henry Wadsworth, on board USS *Chesapeake*, entry for 2 Apr. 1803, in Office of Naval Records and Library, Navy Department, *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars With the Barbary Powers*, Vol. 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1940), p. 387.

^[5] *American State Papers, Class VI, Naval Affairs*, Vol. 2 (Washington: Gales & Seaton, 1860), pp. 565-66, 608-10. The details given here regarding Stewart's marriage are drawn

from a draft manuscript of the forthcoming book, Claude Berube and John Rodgaard, *A Call to the Sea: Captain Charles Stewart of the USS Constitution* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2005).

^[6] Linda M. Maloney, *The Captain from Connecticut: The Life and Naval Times of Isaac Hull* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), pp. 446-74.

^[7] Examples include: Anne Brunner Eales, *Army Wives on the American Frontier: Living by the Bugles* (Bolder: Johnson Books, 1996); Eveline M. Alexander, *Cavalry Wife: The Diary of Eveline M. Alexander, 1866-1867* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1977); and Michele J. Nacy, *Members of the Regiment: Army Officers' Wives on the Western Frontier, 1865-1890* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000).

^[8] Herman Melville, *White Jacket: or, The World in a Man-of-War* (1850; reprint ed., edited by William L. Heflin, Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988), p. 107.

^[9] U.S. Navy Regulations issued by command of President Thomas Jefferson, 22 January 1802, in Office of Naval Records and Library, Navy Department, *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars With the Barbary Powers*, Vol. 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1940), p. 33.

^[10] Master Commandant William M. Crane's Rules for the Regulation of Shipboard Life, 19 Dec. 1813, in *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*, Vol. 2, edited by William S. Dudley et al. (Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1992), p. 617-18.

^[11] Melville, *White Jacket*, p. 106.

^[12] Gustavus R. B. Horner, *Diseases and Injuries of Seamen: With Remarks on their Enlistment, Naval Hygiene, and the Duties of Naval Officers* (Philadelphia, 1854), pp. 51-52.

^[13] Commander John Orde Creighton to Captain Isaac Hull, 10 Dec. 1813, in Dudley, et al., eds., *The Naval War of 1812*, Vol. 2, p. 298.

[14] Dudley, et al., eds., *The Naval War of 1812*, Vol. 2, pp. 297-300.

[15] Gardner W. Allen, *Our Navy and the Barbary Corsairs* (1905; reprint ed., Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1965), pp. 191-92; Edgar Stanton Maclay, *A History of the United States Navy from 1775 to 1894*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton, 1897), 1: 576-77; “Frazier, Daniel,” and “James, Reuben,” ZB Files, Navy Library, Washington, D.C.

[16] John S. Meginnis to Lieutenant Commandant William McBlair, 22 Nov. 1848, Papers of Commander William McBlair, Personal Records Collection, Operational Archives Branch, Naval Historical Center, Washington, D.C.

[17] Lawrence Fasano, *Naval Rank, Its Inception and Development: A Short History of the Evolution and Genealogy of the Naval Officer* (New York: Horizon House, 1936).

[18] N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1986).

[19] Charles Morris, *The Autobiography of Commodore Charles Morris, U.S. Navy* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1880; reprint ed., Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2002), p. 65.

[20] “Jones, Daniel,” ZB Files, Navy Library, Washington, D.C.

[21] Papers of Carpenter Daniel Jones, Historical Manuscripts Collection, Navy Library, Washington, D.C.



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