

The Coast Guard Heritage Museum  
Barnstable, Cape Cod, Massachusetts

*“A History of How, When and Why we began:  
Who our founders were and What we are about”*

By

Francis I. Broadhurst, Secretary

*“Our mission is to preserve the history of the Coast Guard from its beginnings in 1790 through the modern era. We are seeking funds to assist us in our efforts to teach the heroic legacy of the Coast Guard to new generations before this history is lost.”*

**In the Beginning: 1790**

President George Washington selected General Joseph Otis of West Barnstable--his Revolutionary War comrade-in-arms—to be the first Customs Collector for District VII--the Port of Barnstable, Massachusetts.

By naming General Otis to head up Revenue Marine for the Port of Barnstable, our first President created the first Coast Guard installation on Cape Cod --a discovery confirmed by the official Historian for the U.S. Coast Guard, Dr. Robert Browning, PhD, when he visited the Coast Guard Heritage Museum in 2007.

In 1790 the forerunner of the U.S. Coast Guard was the Revenue Marine Service, later named the Revenue Cutter Service, under the jurisdiction of Alexander Hamilton’s U.S. Treasury Department. Other commands like the Huts of Refuge run by the Humane Society of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the Lighthouse Service, Life Saving Service, Lightships and Aids to Navigation were independent entities, not under the umbrella of the Coast Guard until later. .

While President Woodrow Wilson officially created the U.S. Coast Guard in 1915, the service has always considered August 4, 1790 to be its “Birthday”.

The Port of Barnstable was one of the busiest ports in Massachusetts before the Cape Cod Canal was opened nearly two Centuries later in 1913. In 1776 the Revolutionary Massachusetts Legislature placed armed privateers under the command of “Naval Officers” here after General Washington drove the British out of Boston. Their mission was to harass British shipping, interdict slave ships, seize crews, ships and cargoes and collect import fees. These privateers knew the sea lanes well since virtually all 18<sup>th</sup> Century New England seamen were veteran smugglers and blockade runners.

They were given a financial incentive. They could keep the lion’s share of their take as long as some of what they seized went to support the American Revolutionary Army in the field. If caught by British warships, the crews would either be impressed into the Royal Navy or hanged as pirates.

**New nation needed revenue**

With the Birth of the Nation in 1789 under the new United States Constitution, the important work of the Coast Guard grew and prospered under President Washington who signed the National Tariff Act on September 2, 1789. He did so at the behest of Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton. The need for revenues into the national treasury was desperate. The primary sources of federal income were taxes on whiskey and what little could be collected from tariffs.

The new national government, having assumed the individual states’ debts to win approval of the Constitution, was in critical financial shape. Once The Tariff Act was signed into law, Revenue Cutters-- including the “*Massachusetts*”-- were ordered built; customs districts were set up and Revenue Marine began collecting money. Within 10 years the national debt was retired.

This is part of the history we tell to visitors through exhibits and trained interpreters.

Our mission is to teach them the legacy of the U.S. Coast Guard and its 18th Century predecessors who have protected our shores and harbors and rescued thousands of stranded seamen who might otherwise have perished in the dangerous waters of New England and salvaged cargoes worth millions of dollars. These Customs Officers registered foreign trade vessels and enrolled vessels in the coastal trade and fisheries. The Coast Guard has been under many Departments but their mission is the same with many additional duties added on. If a job needs to be done: “Give it to the Coast Guard.”

### **Our Founders**

It is ironic that the Coast Guard Heritage Museum at the Trayser was the brainstorm of two former Navy men—our founder and first president, Cape Cod historian and lawman Lou Cataldo and CDR Maurice Gibbs (USN Ret) of Nantucket who continues as one of our principal advisors.

CDR Gibbs is a founding member of the U.S. Life-Saving Heritage Association (USL-SHA) and President Emeritus of the Nantucket Life-Saving Museum. It was he who suggested we re-name the Donald G. Trayser Memorial Museum noting that local history buffs might know about historian Trayser but: “Everybody knows the Coast Guard!”

Three former Coasties—Jim Walker (USCG) of the American Lighthouse Foundation, Albert L. “John” Manning (USCG) and CPO Dan Davidson (USCG)—both of them charter members of the Eastwind Association--came on board during the planning stages. So did Barnstable businessman Joseph Dugas who loaned us money to restore the interior of the old Custom House built in 1856.

CAPT Robert L. O’Brien (USCG Ret.)--former Comptroller for the U.S. Coast Guard and former Chief of Staff to the Commander of the old First Coast Guard District-- was a charter member. Others instrumental in our founding include the late Cape Cod philanthropist L. Paul Lorusso--a former WWII Army Air Corps Veteran; Francis I. Broadhurst, ex-Navy Petty Officer (SO1) and retired journalist; RADM John Aylmer (CDR USN-Ret)--former president of Massachusetts Maritime Academy; Ralph L. Jones (USCG-Ret) a decorated Coast Guard veteran; Village Blacksmith Jim Ellis who works his forge in the old Carriage House on the museum grounds; and Hyannis businessman Stuart Bornstein. There are others instrumental in the start up of the CGHM who are no longer active, but their contributions are still appreciated.

Past Commodore of a Coast Guard Auxiliary Flotilla Ed Skoler arranged for the Auxiliary to hold meetings and training sessions in our building and brought in volunteers. He, Jim Walker and our current president William Collette (SCPO USCG ret) are working to have Cape Cod as a **region** declared “A Community of the Coast Guard”. That will require a change in federal law.

Those familiar with Cape Cod are well aware that the Coast Guard has been a constant daily presence in our coastal communities from August 4, 1790. It has always been there for us!

### **Opening the Doors**

We opened our doors to the public in May 2005 hard pressed not only for funding but also for exhibits. Maurice Gibbs and Jeremy Slavitz, Curator of the Nantucket Life-Saving Museum, brought dozens of exhibits on loan from the Egan Foundation. Orleans Historical Society donated the Beach Cart last used on Cape Cod for a breeches buoy rescue in 1962.

Ex-Army officer Richard Boonisar, a major collector of Revenue Marine, Lighthouse and Life-Saving Service memorabilia loaned his magnificent collection of historical artifacts, which remain a centerpiece of our exhibits. He’s a co-founder of the US Life-Saving Heritage Assn. and owns a former Life Saving Station on the shores of Plymouth Bay.

RADM David P. Pekoske (USCG), keynote speaker at our “Commissioning Ceremony” August 12, 2005, was joined by a host of past and present Coast Guard dignitaries. He was impressed with our mission and the fact that we were housed in a former U.S. Custom House and Post Office building. “It is most fitting,” he said, “since all Coast Guard officers and Petty Officers to this day are sworn Customs Officers.”

Since then we have hosted many Coast Guard spokesmen including CAPT Dan Abel, Commanding officer of Coast Guard Air Station Cape Cod, CAPT Allan K. Brier (USCG Ret) and CAPT Robertson P. Dinsmore (USCG Ret) who were part of our ongoing lecture series on Coast Guard history. More will give lectures later this year and early next.

### **Volunteer List Expands**

Our list of volunteer directors expanded quickly with more Coasties. We added CWO Richard d’Entremont (USCG Ret), CAPT Roland “Bud” Breault (USCG Ret) and Dr. James L. Baird Jr. PhD (USCG). George Washburn (USCG Ret) edits our newsletter. Army veteran Harris Weston (who was drafted for the Korean War the day he was to join the Coast Guard) is a member of our Museum Committee. He has been a volunteer since 2005 developing a database for our inventory of donations and loans.

### **New Life and New Blood**

Our current President SCPO William E. Collette (USCG Ret.) has brought new life to the Coast Guard Heritage Museum. He brought in ex-Coastie Jack McGrath who manages our gift shop and is working with George Washburn and Bill Collette to develop our website:

(<http://www.coastguardheritagemuseum.org>). Chief Collette has reached out to other Coast Guard groups like the Chatham Legends, the Cape Cod Chapter of the Coast Guard Chief Petty Officers Association and other related groups. Some have signed on as honorary directors and many have donated items for display and gave us much needed cash contributions as individuals or as a group.

One of our most prominent donors is Gold Medal Recipient Bernard Webber (WO, USCG Ret) hero of the Pendleton Rescue with CG36500. Mr. Webber has donated his uniforms, medals and ribbons dating back to service as a teenager in the Merchant Marine in WWII, the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. He is an Honorary Director and advisor to the museum. Senior Chief Bos’n Mate David Considine, former OINC of Chatham Station serves in a similar capacity as does John Galluzzo, executive director of the US Life-Saving Heritage Assn, who has written extensively about the Coast Guard and lectured on his historical research.

President Collette, a member of The Lightship Sailors Association, arranged an agreement with the group to place a major exhibit in the museum. The LSA will be holding its annual meeting here in the Fall.

President Emeritus Al Manning and former VP Dan Davidson (now our Chaplain) brought The East Wind Association to the museum and have scheduled us for their annual meeting in 2008. The work these two men, Jim Walker and others put into creating the CG Heritage Museum in the beginning is beyond value. In true Coast Guard fashion they see something that needs to be done and they do it!

Under our current president, Chief Collette, we have accomplished even more. We continue to develop fresh, new exhibits and continue to reach out to other museums, historical societies and organizations like the Cape Cod Military Spouses Organization, fraternal organizations, libraries, and local elementary and secondary schools, and Coast Guard installations.

Our goal is to attract adequate funding to allow us to continue to tell the story of the Coast Guard, it’s past, present and future. That is our mission and with the help of a great many volunteers we will achieve success.

Contact us at our website, at [CGHM@Verizon.net](mailto:CGHM@Verizon.net), or at 508-362-8521.

*Semper Paratus.*

(Jack McGrath contributed to this essay.)