

US Coast Guard Duties Evolve:

‘When the Revenue Cutters Started Providing Aid to Ships at Sea’

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On January 9, 1837, during a cold winter on the east coast, the US Secretary of the Treasury, Levi Woodbury,¹ issued an order for ships of the US Revenue Cutter Service (predecessor to the US Coast Guard) to stock up with food and other supplies, then sail missions along the coast of the United States, north of Norfolk. He ordered that captains have their ships ready, willing, and able to relieve vessels which may be in distress, without any stipulation that they must only be under US flag. In accordance to these instructions, the New York City area cutters ‘Alert,’ and ‘Rush,’ were supplied with necessary stores and sailed forthwith. Secretary Levi Woodbury sent instructions to commanding officers: “In the present inclement season, it is thought proper to combine, with the ordinary duties of the cutters, that of assisting vessels found on the coast in distress, and of administering to the wants of their crews....” He continued:

I request that you will direct the commanding officer of the Revenue Cutter to prepare for an immediate cruise. To enable him to fulfill the duties expected of him, you will cause him to be furnished, without delay, with an addition to his crew, if necessary, and such quantities of provision, water, wood, and all necessary supplies, as can be conveniently stowed in the vessel... keeping as close to the main land as may be consistent with the safety of the vessel. You will direct him not to return to port, unless forced to do so from stress of weather or want of supplies.²

Less than two weeks later, the US Revenue Cutter ‘Alert,’ stationed outside of New York Harbor near ‘The Hook’ (Sandy Hook, New Jersey), offered lifesaving aid to a sailor in distress.³

It was January 21, 1837 when George Fry, a native of Hanover, fell from the top of his tallest cross mast, injuring himself, including sustaining a broken arm with protrusion of bones.⁴ He was picked up by the USRC Alert and rushed inbound toward New York City for help from the Quarantine Station on Staten Island. The Quarantine Station offices of the Port of New York were situated on the waterfront,

¹ Woodbury (1789-1851) was a Justice of the US Supreme Court of the United States, a U.S. Senator, Governor of New Hampshire and cabinet member in three administrations. He was the first Justice to have attended law school. In 1837 he had a Revenue Cutter named after him.

² *Army and Navy Chronicle* - Volumes 4-5, 1837. 55

³ Alert was a schooner built in 1829 to replace a ship with the same name built in 1818. The 1829 Alert had a 120 ton displacement. (Canney, Donald L. *U.S. Coast Guard and Revenue Cutters, 1970-1935*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1995.)

⁴ *Army and Navy Chronicle* - Volumes 4-5, 1837. 55

near the Narrows—the current location of USCG Station New York,⁵ which is today, one of America’s busiest Coast Guard stations. The cutter was seeking medical assistance for the injured man; and while the cutter was a large sailing ship, that day there were light winds. Because of the serious nature of the injuries, the cutter put up a signal in the event a passing steamboat could come and help hurry the man to the Quarantine Station, but none responded. There was an offer to bring the man to shore in a smaller boat which would be rowed, but this was rejected for fear the man would have gotten increasingly sick from the cold.

The cutter had been cruising for some time with about half a complement of men.⁶ Most men were ill, and only two officers on the *Alert* were feeling well, Commander Nicholas Bicker and Second Lieutenant Charles A. Newton. At the time, it was “impossible to get good able-bodied seamen in the port of New York,” the *New York Express* newspaper wrote. The paper said, higher wages should be given, thereby encouraging Americans to try the “deep, deep sea.” While history has lost the ending to this story, it certainly can be conjectured that the *Alert* eventually made it to Staten Island where the man would have received medical care.⁷

It's not know what caused the New England-born Secretary of the Treasury in 1837, to issue orders which would put his cutters on patrol to officially assist ships in need—this was never done previously—but it could be conjectured that it was the sinking just a few months earlier, in Maine, of the ‘Royal Tar,’ a large traveling circus boat which exploded killing dozens of people and nearly all the animals including among them, camels, zebras, lions, tigers and an elephant.⁸ During that sea disaster, the US Revenue Cutter Service vessel ‘Veto’ just happened to see the flames, and after arriving, was able to facilitate saving several dozen men, women and children.

Today, some 177 years later, the U.S. Coast Guard, Reserve, and Auxiliary, continue this mission as part of their daily operations, to be *Semper Paratus, always ready*, to provide assistance to all ships in the waterways and ports, in and around the shores of the United States.

⁵ The Quarantine Station was the location where vessels from transatlantic ports were boarded and examined by uniformed men of the U.S. Public Health Service. The examinations, conducted between sunrise and sunset, were generally a matter of form. The captain would take an oath that no contagious disease has appeared on board his ship during the voyage, and a permit admitting him to the city was granted.

⁶ USRC *Alert* had a colorful history. She was one of the primary boats in New York harbor and she took part in the grand celebration of the opening of the Erie Canal down to New York City in 1825. (Shaw, Ronald E. Shaw. *Erie Water West: A History of the Erie Canal, 1792-1854*. Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1966. 188); she was grounded on Sandy Hook after a violent storm on May 27, 1835, but recovered. (*Army and Navy Chronicle*. May 7, 1835)

⁷ To this nascent period of marine safety was also born ‘The Steamboat Act,’ a law Congress passed which required all passenger ships to carry one life preserver for each person on board. This was in direct result of the October 1837 tragedy of the steamship ‘Home’ which sank during a hurricane off North Carolina. Over 100 people, including many prominent men from New York City, were lost primarily to a lack of life preservers, as there were only two on board.

⁸ Mason, John. “The Wreck of the Royal Tar.” *Yankee*. October 1965. 85, 110-113