

## This Day in History... August 4, 1790

# Creation of the U.S. Coast Guard

On August 4, 1790, President George Washington passed a new tariff act that created the United States Revenue Cutter Service, the forerunner of the US Coast Guard.

Both before and after the American Revolutionary War, smuggling, shipping control, pirating, and revenue imbalance were issues along the American coast. The young nation needed income, which it could get from tariffs on imports. However, it first had to deal with the issues at sea to be able to enforce these new tariff laws.

To combat this issue, Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton suggested the creation of a naval police force to patrol American waters. President George Washington and Congress agreed with his proposal and signed it into law on August 4, 1790, officially creating the US Revenue Cutter Service.



*Issued to honor the Coast Guard's role in World War II.*



*Issued for the 225th anniversary of the Coast Guard.*

The initial "System of Cutters" consisted of 10 ships. Each ship was constructed in the same area where it would patrol. President Washington suggested that each ship be built for \$1,000 or less, though three of them ended up costing more than that.

Going into service that year, the Revenue Cutter Service was America's only armed maritime service until the Navy was formed in 1798. In addition to patrolling the water, the Revenue Cutter Service helped customs seize contraband, control tariffs, and protect merchant marines. In 1794, the service was tasked with ending the slave trade. It's been estimated that over the course of 70 years, they captured about 500 slave ships.

The service also participated in several early American wars, including the Quasi-War with France, the War of 1812, and the Mexican-American War. In 1808, the service began enforcing President Jefferson's embargo, which closed American ports to European trade. Then in 1822, the service began a long history of environmental protection when they were ordered to protect government woods from poachers.

The service's cutter, *Harriet Lane*, fired the first shots of the Civil War in 1861 at Fort Sumter. Recognizing the importance of such a force, the South formed its own Confederate Revenue Marine with men from the Revenue Cutter Service. After the war, the service established its first school, the School of Instruction of the Revenue Cutter Service, in 1876 in Massachusetts.



*Imperforate 2015 Coast Guard stamp*



*The Coast Guard Cross is the second-highest Coast Guard award for military valor in combat.*

In the 1880s and 90s, the service played a major role in the development of Alaska. They brought in reindeer to provide a steady food source, and then joined the Overland Relief Expedition to rescue trapped whalers. The men of the Cutter Service also helped bring unlucky miners home from Alaska when they failed to find gold along the Snake River.

Then, on January 28, 1915, Congress and President Woodrow Wilson passed an act creating the US Coast Guard (USCG). The USCG combined the Revenue Cutter Service with the US Life-Saving Service, a network of over 270 coastal rescue stations founded in 1848.

Part of the legislation included that the Coast Guard would form part of the US military. In time of war, the Coast Guard became part of the US Navy. The new service first saw conflict only two years later, during World War I, and has participated in every US war since. They also absorbed the US Lighthouse Service in 1939, extending their protective reach of our coasts.

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