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**The Last Full Measure – Founding of  
the Coast Guard**

**Lead: For 400 years service men and women have fought to carve out and defend freedom and the civilization we know as America. This series on *A Moment in Time* is devoted to the memory of those warriors, whose sacrifice gave, in the words of Lincoln at Gettysburg, *the last full measure*.**

**Content: The United States Coast Guard was founded in 1915, but its roots go far back into American history. Other agencies preceded it or became a part of this consolidation: The Revenue Cutter Service, often**

**called the Revenue-Marine, the Lighthouse Service, the Steamboat Inspection Service, the Bureau of Navigation, and the Lifesaving Service.**

**The first of these siblings was The Lighthouse Service which was established by Congress in 1789. The father of the seaborne Coast Guard was the first Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, who thought it useful for the government to protect shipping so as to increase tariff revenues. At a time when there was no Navy, the Revenue Service, its officers known as "officers of the customs," was instrumental in strengthening the national government because tariff income**

**was a substantial portion of the Federal budget. Hamilton's goal was to secure international respect by paying off the Continental Congress's Revolutionary War debt and keeping up with current obligations. For that, regular revenue was crucial and until the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, the Coast Guard remained a division of the Department of the Treasury.**

**Congress's original legislation provided for the commissioning of 10 cutters, probably based in design on that of the Virginia schooner: fast, shallow, small, and agile, about 40 feet long at the beam. At 70 tons, with two masts and light armament, these cutters were manned by 10 men. This design allowed them to navigate the**

**shoals, bays, and shallows up and down the North American coast.**

**With the coming of conflict with France in the 1790s, the administration re-activated the Navy and over the years consideration has been given to merging the two services. Each time, however, the Guard's champions have made a persuasive case that its mission is unique and effective and that it should remain independent.**

**Research assistance by Erin Morgan, at the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.**

## Resources

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