

National Patriotic Instruction
Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War
July 2025

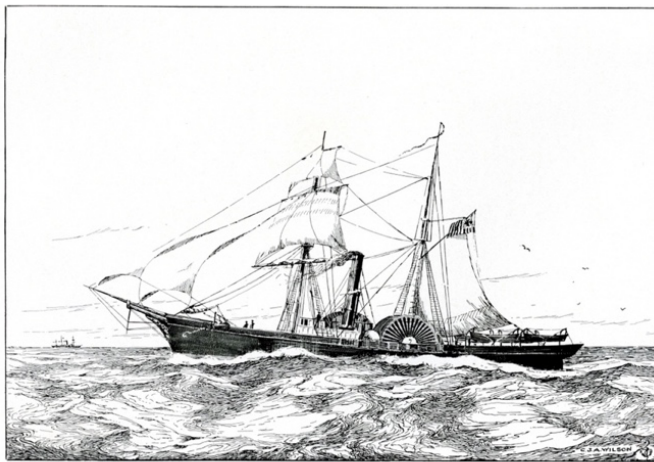


REVENUE CUTTER SERVICE

Among the ancestors that qualify one for hereditary membership in the SUVCW, are those that served in the Revenue Cutter Service. This oft-forgotten branch of the military served an important role during the Civil War. The following information comes from articles by William H. Thiesen, PhD, Atlantic Area Historian, United States Coast Guard:

The Revenue Cutter Service was established by Congress on August 4, 1790 as the Revenue-Marine. It was initially created to serve as an armed customs enforcement service. Over time, however, the service gradually gained missions either voluntarily or by legislation, including those of a military nature. It was generally referred to as the Revenue-Marine until July 31, 1894, when it was officially renamed the Revenue Cutter Service. On January 28, 1915, the service was merged with the U.S. Life-Saving Service to form the U.S. Coast Guard.

Similar to the Navy, the Revenue Cutter Service's fleet greatly expanded during the war and changed from sailing ships to primarily steam-powered vessels. In 1865, the fleet included 35 ships stationed in ports throughout the Great Lakes and along the Eastern Seaboard and the Gulf Coast and two cutters in the Pacific. In that year, two-thirds of the cutters were powered by steam, compared to the 1861 wartime low of 18 cutters, only one of which had steam power.



"HARRIET LANE"

On April 12th, 1861, the Revenue Cutter Service made history in what turned out to be the Civil War's first naval combat mission. The Service's finest revenue cutter was paired with the Service's most distinguished captain. Named for the niece of unmarried President James Buchanan, Harriet Lane, who served as First Lady, cutter *Harriet Lane* represented one of the most technologically advanced steamships in Federal service. The cutter's captain, John Faunce, had served as an officer since 1841 and served as a captain since 1855.

Faunce had won national acclaim serving as a member of the U.S. Navy's 1858 South American expedition against the military regime in Paraguay.

In April 1861 President Abraham Lincoln authorized a Federal expedition to relieve Fort Sumter at Charleston, South Carolina. The expedition consisted of transports with 500 troops and an armed escort including *Harriet Lane*. During the voyage south, a severe storm separated the cutter from the convoy, so she arrived on April 11th, before the other ships. News of the cutter's arrival spread quickly in Charleston. In the early morning of April 12th, Confederate cannons at Fort Moultrie opened fire on Fort Sumter to prevent the fortress' reinforcement with Federal troops. These were the first artillery shots fired in the Civil War.

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Later that morning, elements of the expedition found *Harriet Lane* at a pre-arranged rendezvous point and the revenue cutter tried to escort them to beleaguered Fort Sumter. As the ships neared the fort, artillery fire grew so heavy that the expedition had to turn back. *Harriet Lane* returned to her station guarding the harbor entrance and, later that morning, the cutter observed the approach of a steamer flying no colors. The cutter ordered the vessel to heave to and show her colors. The unidentified vessel ignored these signals and steamed on toward Charleston. Faunce ordered a 32-pound cannon shot fired across the ship's bow, which turned out to be the South Carolina steamship *Nashville*. Historians consider the shot across *Nashville's* bow the first naval shot of the Civil War. *Nashville* finally raised an American flag and Faunce allowed her to pass into Charleston Harbor; however, the *Nashville* later served as an infamous blockade-runner and Confederate cruiser.



Capt. John Faunce

With a fusillade of cannon fire raining down on Fort Sumter, and no protection for the Federal ships, further relief efforts appeared futile. Federal forces within the fort finally raised a flag of truce and the relief expedition evacuated the garrison from the fort. *Harriet Lane* escorted the ships back to New York and continued to serve a vital role in Union naval operations until her capture in 1863 by an overwhelming Confederate force at Galveston, Texas.

After she served under the Confederate Marine Department of Texas, she was converted into a blockade runner and renamed *Lavinia*. She departed Galveston on April 30th, 1864 and sailed to Havana, where Cuban authorities interned her. In 1867, the cutter and former captain were reunited when Captain Faunce and a crew traveled to Havana to return *Lavinia* (ex-*Harriet Lane*) to the United States. The cutter was then converted to a bark rig, sold off to private owners and renamed *Elliott Richie*. In May 1884, after nearly thirty-five years of government and commercial service, she was finally abandoned in the waters off Pernambuco, Brazil.



The current U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Harriet Lane* (WMEC-903) has been commissioned since 1984. Among other duties, she was involved in the search and recovery of TWA Flight 800 off Long Island and responded to the *Deepwater Horizon* offshore drilling rig disaster in the Gulf of Mexico. She is currently based in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Remember the Revenue Cutter Service — *Semper Paratus!*

In Fraternity, Charity, and Loyalty,
Tad D. Campbell, PCinC
National Patriotic Instructor