

# It Is George Washington's Coast Guard

*(and It's George Washington's Coast Guard Academy, Too!)*

By Bob Pokress, Class of 1969

**L**in-Manuel Miranda's blockbuster Broadway musical "Hamilton" has done more than all biographies of Alexander Hamilton combined to increase the public's awareness of who Alexander Hamilton was, the key role he played in the drafting and subsequent advocating for the Constitutional form of government we have, and his serving as our first Secretary of the Treasury. The show even included in one of the musical's showstoppers a reference to Hamilton creating the Coast Guard. Before it opened to sellout crowds, who would have ever imagined a shout out to the Coast Guard in a rap musical on Broadway.

The men and women of the Coast Guard, especially Coast Guard Academy cadets, have been taught, for decades, that Hamilton was responsible for the establishment of the Revenue Cutter Service. That piece of history is indisputable – he began making the case in Federalist Number 12, published on November 27, 1787, for a federal enforcement arm for the collections of the customs duties that would be needed to fund the operations of our new federal government ("A few armed vessels, judiciously stationed at the entrances of our ports, might at a small expense be made useful sentinels of the [customs] laws.") and then lobbied again, in 1789, for this revenues collections enforcement arm from his position as our first Secretary of the Treasury.

The fact that the Administration Building at the Academy is named Hamilton Hall hardwires into the minds of every cadet that Hamilton must deserve all the credit for the establishment of what has evolved into the modern U.S. Coast Guard.

But the establishment of the Revenue Cutter Service, well-documented in Volume 1 of Professor Irving King's

comprehensive three-volume history of the Coast Guard, *George Washington's Coast Guard – Origins of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, 1789 – 1801* (Naval Institute Press, 1978), is merely one part of the multi-part history of the founding of what has become the U.S. Coast Guard, and not even the first part.

Because prior to the establishment of the Revenue Cutter Service, Washington lobbied for the establishment of the federal agency whose mission was maritime safety, one of the Coast Guard's biggest and most recognized missions and sets of responsibilities. In fact, the Coast Guard's enforcement of the collection of customs duties has faded from the national memory, while everyone recognizes the service's long-standing maritime safety and protection of life and property at sea missions. While Washington may not have ever had the words "coast guard" in his mind when he took office, the need for federal involvement in the missions that define today's Coast Guard were very much *on* his mind.

## *Washington Sees The Need for A Coast Guard*

Events that bear on the founding of the Coast Guard unfolded very rapidly the moment George Washington took office. His actions as President show his insight in recognizing a need for maritime safety responsibilities to be taken on at the federal level by a federal agency even before he signed off on creating a customs collections enforcement arm of the Treasury Department. He defined the maritime safety missions to be performed at the federal level which would get merged, over time, into becoming core missions of the Coast Guard. Those missions had an immediate impact on national life that extended well beyond



A review of the Corps of Cadets on the Washington Parade Field. The author debunks rumors surrounding the origin of the field's name.

the customs collections enforcement role Hamilton saw for having a Revenue Cutter Service as part of the Treasury Department.

Because on that chilly April 30, 1789 when Washington took the oath of office as our first President, his greatest fear in making our experiment in democracy work and in protecting the liberty of our nation's first citizens was not anxiety over imminent invasion by foreign powers, but extreme anxiety over the country's financial situation.

Washington knew, having presided over the Constitutional Convention that was convened two years earlier, how precarious the sovereignty of the loosely confederated thirteen states had become due to financial reasons. The Articles of Confederation as a form of government had failed and the states were almost at war with each other over issues of commerce. The independence of the new nation hung in the balance.

Now on that blustery last day of April 1789, Washington was chief executive of a new, untested, form of government that had no working administrative branches, a treasury that was empty, and no money coming in to the treasury! And with all thirteen states under this new form of government still reeling from debts from the Revolution that exceeded \$74,000,000 (equivalent to over 2 billion dollars in 2018 for a country with only 3.8 million citizens at the time of Washington's inauguration).

What Washington realized on his first day in office was that this new experiment in democracy would die stillborn just as the Articles of Confederation had failed if he did not address the country's dire financial condition first. This was a financial crisis of existential proportions.

Washington recognized that maritime commerce, then the lifeblood

of almost ALL economic activity across the thirteen states, was the key and that it was central to what made the young American economy tick. Protecting seaborne commerce, and protecting American shipping in addition to collecting customs duties to pay down the debt accumulated during the Revolution, would be vital to protecting *all* aspects of the American economy. The young nation's shipbuilding industry, agriculture, the shipping of our agricultural products by American flagged vessels, and the exporting and importing by maritime means of all agricultural and manufactured goods were *all* at risk.

So Washington immediately lobbied for the enactment of *three* crucial pieces of legislation that each led to the formation of the various federal agencies that over time would be combined to create the modern U.S. Coast Guard:

- the *Tariff Act of 1789*, the second act by the First U.S. Congress, that provided for duties on shipping tonnage and on imported goods;
- the *Act for the establishment and support of Lighthouses, Beacons, Buoys, and Public Piers*, the ninth act of the First Congress, signed into law by Washington on August 7, 1789, to *protect* maritime commerce by establishing Federal responsibility for the *safety* of American maritime commerce; and
- the *Funding Act of 1790*, signed into law by Washington on August 4, 1790 that, in addition to making provisions to pay off the debt incurred by the Colonies during the Revolution, also included, at Hamilton's strong urging, the creation of the Revenue Cutter

Service so as to deter smuggling and insure collection of duties on imported goods that were going to be essential to the financial health of the new Federal government.

A large component of the mission that most people recognize as a primary responsibility, if not the most important responsibility, of the Coast Guard – maritime safety and the protection of life and property at sea – emerged and evolved from the act of the First Congress that established the U.S. Lighthouse Establishment (subsequently called the U.S. Lighthouse Service) in 1789, an act passed at Washington's urging a year before Congress enacted the legislation that established the Revenue Cutter Service. A case can be made that the genealogy of the modern Coast Guard actually dates back to the establishment of the U.S. Lighthouse Establishment in 1789, the first federal agency to have responsibility for maritime safety.

Washington then played a pivotal yet underappreciated and historically buried role in what eventually led to the establishment of the School of Instruction of the Revenue Cutter Service in 1876, the ancestor institution of today's U.S. Coast Guard Academy.

After Congress enacted the legislation to establish the Revenue Cutter Service, Washington personally defined the professional qualifications and standards of character he wanted each commissioned officer of the Revenue Cutter Service to have, personally interviewed the first group of applicants for commissions in the Revenue Cutter Service, and personally selected, from among the applicants for commissions that he interviewed, the people he was going to offer those first commissions.

On October 6, 1790, Washington prepared a list where he rank-ordered the people he had evaluated to receive commissions to command the cutters to be built for the Revenue Cutter Service. At the top of the list, Washington wrote Hopley Yeaton's name. And on March

31, 1791, Washington signed Yeaton's commission to command the Revenue Cutter Scammell. The U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, to become the United States Coast Guard in 1915 upon the merging of the U.S.R.C.S. with the U.S. Lifesaving Service, had its first commissioned officer.

## *Mysterious History of Honoring Washington at the Coast Guard Academy*

Given the dearth of recognition by historians of Washington's pivotal role in championing and establishing *all* the key pieces that evolved into today's Coast Guard, it is not surprising that there has never been an Academy building named after Washington at any of its locations, nor even any markers, monuments or memorial items to commemorate him. Those antecedent agencies and federal responsibilities that were forged by Washington and merged, over time, to become today's Coast Guard never came with history books describing Washington's seminal role in establishing them. By giving a top priority to the protection of life and property at sea and the protection of our nation's maritime interests at the federal level during his first term in office, Washington put himself right at the center of the origins of the Coast Guard, as its heart and soul, not at the margin as people have believed. His personal involvement in writing up the specific qualifications and standards he expected of each of the Revenue Cutter Service's officers puts him at the center of the Academy's origins, as well.

There has been a rumor that the drill field at Fort Trumbull had been named after Washington at some point during the years 1910 to 1932 when the Academy was located at Fort Trumbull and then had the name "moved" to the field in front of Hamilton Hall when the Academy moved "up town" in 1932.

But all available documentation and maps of Fort Trumbull from when the Academy was located there indicate that the first half of the rumor was not true,



that the drill field at Fort Trumbull was never named after Washington, it was just named “the drill field” throughout the Academy’s 22 years at that location.

The second half of that rumor regarding drill field naming suggesting that the drill field in front of Hamilton Hall had been named the Washington Drill Field when the Academy moved to its current location in 1932 has turned out to be no more than a rumor as well. In researching the history of the early years of the Academy at its current location, all available Academy documents, official and unofficial - including copies of all Tide Rips and Running Lights from 1932 through to the 1970’s - show the field in front of Hamilton Hall was named just “the Drill Field” from when the Academy made its move to the current location in 1932 until the summer of 1976.

During the winter of 1976, it was very quietly announced in the January 1976 issue of the Alumni Association *Bulletin* that the drill field would get the name “Washington Parade” later on in 1976. No explanation was given. Even officers on staff at the Academy in 1976 whom this author has had the opportunity to get oral history from were unaware of any reasons being given back in 1975-76 for Washington’s name being appended to the field’s name.

Because, as all evidence points, the naming of the drill field as “Washington Parade” in 1976 was not done in recognition of Washington’s role in the origins of the Coast Guard nor from his personal involvement in establishing the standards expected of officers in the Revenue Cutter Service and his selection of the first group of USRCS officers, but as part of the 1976 Bicentennial hoopla, where buildings, streets and parks across the country were getting Washington added to their names as part of the lead up to and celebration of the country’s 200<sup>th</sup> birthday. An official dedication of the field as Washington Parade was briefly advertised in May of 1976 to take place at Homecoming in October 1976, in conjunction with the celebration of the Academy’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday at that year’s Homecoming as well as part of



## *Class of 1969 to Honor Washington at CGA*

To honor Washington’s instrumental role in the origins of the Coast Guard and the Coast Guard Academy, the Class of 1969 is gifting a bronze replica of the marble Houdon statue of George Washington (similar to the one pictured here) to the Academy at their 50<sup>th</sup> reunion during Homecoming 2019. While its location is in the process of being finalized, it will sit on an expanded marble base that will incorporate bronze replicas of the key pieces of correspondence between Washington and Hamilton and Hopley Yeaton that led up to Washington awarding the first commission in the newly-created Revenue Cutter Service to Hopley Yeaton.

national Bicentennial-related activities, but oral histories from numerous alums at that particular Homecoming indicate that the previously advertised dedication did not take place. Just a road sign with Washington's name on it, unceremoniously installed at some point during 1976 at the corner of the road in front of Satterlee Hall by the South Gate, piggybacking on Bicentennial celebrations that year.

It is not surprising, therefore, given that Washington has not been recognized for the very significant role that he played in the origins of the Coast Guard, that Washington has also been overlooked in the history of the Academy even though the Academy exists, ultimately, as a result of Washington having set the bar high for the Revenue Cutter Service's officers by personally detailing the qualifications and standards he wanted *every* person awarded a commission in the USRCS to have and by his personally interviewing every candidate for a commission.

During the decades after Washington served as President, those standards that Washington had set so high, unfortunately, were eroded as the Revenue Cutter Service saw the extensive awarding of politically-based rather than merit-based commissions, especially during Reconstruction, resulting in numerous unqualified people and political hacks receiving commissions in the Revenue Cutter Service.

Sumner Kimball, upon his appointment as Superintendent of the Revenue Cutter Service in 1871 and inheriting this growing problem of politically-based commissions being given to unqualified individuals, realized that the only way to insure that commissioned officers had the qualifications and met the standards of professionalism comparable to those set by Washington was to establish an institution that would apply very high standards in the selection, training, education and commissioning of officers for the Revenue Cutter Service. On July 31, 1876, Congress enacted the legislation requested by Kimball to establish The School of Instruction of The Revenue Cutter Service.

Today's Academy is the direct legacy of Washington's personal involvement in setting a very high standard for being awarded a commission in the Revenue Cutter Service and his personal involvement in the screening of the applicants and selection of the people to be awarded commissions while he was President. He insured that every officer of the Revenue Cutter Service would be exceptionally qualified and would meet the very high standards he established. Washington wrote the script of what the Academy was ultimately established to do. His fingerprints, 139 years after he personally selected and commissioned that first group of Revenue Cutter Service officers, can be seen in the Academy's Mission Statement penned by former Superintendent VADM Harry Hamlet in 1929. It's as if Washington had been whispering in the ear of VADM Hamlet as he wrote those stirring words all cadets know by heart, by taps, on Day One of Swab Summer:

*"To graduate young men and women with sound bodies, stout hearts and alert minds, with a liking for the sea and its lore, and with that high sense of honor, loyalty and obedience which goes with trained initiative and leadership; well grounded in seamanship, the sciences, and the amenities, and strong in the resolve to be worthy of the traditions of commissioned officers of the United States Coast Guard in the service of their country and humanity."*

While Professor King may not have intended to impart a double meaning to the title he gave to that first volume of his history of the Coast Guard covering the service's history under George Washington, it really *is* George Washington's Coast Guard even though there are no Broadway musicals to popularize Washington's central role in the establishment of those very first federal maritime agencies and federal activities that evolved over 229 years into becoming today's U.S. Coast Guard.

And every commissioned Revenue Cutter Service and Coast Guard officer, since those first nine cadets of the Revenue Cutter Service's

School of Instruction graduated and were commissioned in 1879, has had to meet the rigorous seagoing qualifications and personal standards for becoming commissioned officers that are descendants of that first set of qualifications and standards set down on paper by Washington in 1790. The legacy of that piece of paper, under Washington's hand, can rightfully be considered the charter for the establishment of the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.

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