

Impressment during the War of 1812

Impressment, the practice of coercing men into the service of a navy by force, had been part of English maritime culture since before the Magna Charta and lasted for more than six centuries for the simple reason that it was cheaper than paying a wage that would have attracted men to the work in the first place. Historians point to impressment as one of the chief causes of the War of 1812. The British Royal Navy resorted to impressment during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in particular because of the chronic state of warfare Britain found itself in and the shortage of sailors that resulted from it.

Impressment became a significant problem for the United States in the Early Republic, the period following the American Revolution. Great Britain's participation in the Napoleonic Wars led British press gangs, groups of men hired and led by a regulating officer of the Royal Navy, to seize men found in seaports and to force them to join naval crews. Rules meant to regulate the press gangs were usually ignored, and men who had spent too much time drinking in port taverns often fell victim to the press gangs. Historians suggest that between 1803 and the eve of the War of 1812, ten thousand men claiming American citizenship were impressed by the Royal Navy.

American ships and sailors were also targeted by the Royal Navy during this period. Naval officers and their crews demanded that merchant ships flying the stars and stripes of the United States come to and be boarded so that they could search for contraband and deserters. The ethnic background that so many Americans shared with their British counterparts in the Royal Navy, both during and after the Revolutionary War, complicated the relationship between captors and captives. The Royal Navy found it difficult to distinguish between British and American sailors.

One of the most infamous incidents of what Americans perceived as British aggression toward American naval ships before the War of 1812 began was the attack on the American frigate *Chesapeake* by the *H.M.S. Leopard* in June 1807. The commander of the *Leopard*, Captain Salusbury Humphreys, was following orders when he attempted to stop the *Chesapeake* to search for four men suspected of deserting from the Royal Navy. When Commodore James Barron of the *Chesapeake* refused to allow the search to take place, the *Leopard* fired on the American ship. The end result was a badly damaged ship, three dead and eighteen wounded American seamen.

The *Chesapeake* affair highlighted the difficulty of differentiating between British subjects and American citizens. The deserters sought by Humphreys had at one time all served on board Royal Navy ships, but three of the men were American citizens. The fourth, Jenkin Ratford, was a British subject guilty of deserting from a Royal Navy ship. He provided the British with just the kind of example they needed to justify their need to search American ships for deserters. Refusing to accept the concept of naturalization on constitutional and sanguinary grounds, the British believed that once you were born a British subject, no act of law could change that status. You could not be naturalized as the citizen or subject of another government. This, they argued, was a simple matter, particularly when it came to those seamen who had been born before the onset of the American Revolution.

In an attempt to protect vulnerable sailors, the federal government passed the “Act for the Relief and Protection of American Seamen,” which provided for the issuance of Seamen’s Protection Certificates. The certificates were issued locally by the customs collectors at ports throughout the country. By the onset of the Napoleonic Wars, the U.S. federal government had begun to provide sailors with protection papers, establishing their status as American citizens. It became clear to the Royal Navy, relatively quickly, that forged documents were being carried by British subjects to avoid press gangs and seizure on board American merchant ships. The burden of proving citizenship rested squarely on the shoulders of the seamen.

There were, in fact, many British sailors “disguising” themselves as Americans by carrying fake protection certificates, including Jenkin Ratford. The British government argued that the existence of these falsified documents justified the search and seizures conducted by the Royal Navy. It simply had no choice. In order to conduct successfully its war against Napoleon, the Royal Navy had to resort to impressment to man its ships.

The federal government had also sought diplomatic channels to solve the problem of impressment even before the attack on the *Chesapeake*. As U.S. minister to Britain, James Monroe, was increasingly frustrated by the treatment American vessels received at the hands of the Royal Navy. His requests for relief from the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Mulgrave, went unsatisfied. Monroe advised Secretary of State James Madison that the time was ripe for the U.S. to resist the British and their policies. In early 1806, President Thomas Jefferson forwarded to the Senate a set of documents from Madison pertaining to American relations with Great Britain. In his report, Madison argued that the measures taken by the British against American ships were unjustifiable, particularly noting the seizure of vessels, the method of search and finally, the practice of impressing American seamen. That summer, Congress passed the Non-Importation Act of 1806, which banned the importation of British goods also produced by Americans. In an attempt to end the practice of impressment, Jefferson delayed the implementation of the embargo against British goods while negotiations continued in London, but by late 1807, Congress had passed the Embargo Act.

Members of Congress invoked impressment as a leading cause of the War of 1812, as did newspaper editors of all political persuasions. The public, too, took a stand against impressment, urging the federal government to protect American seamen through the enforcement of the Non-Importation and Embargo Acts. But the American and British governments failed to come to a resolution over impressment before the War of 1812 began on June 18, 1812.

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