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Thesis

**DON'T GIVE UP THE SHIP:  
UNIFORMS OF THE BRITISH AND AMERICAN NAVY  
OFF THE COAST OF BOSTON IN 1813**

by

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## Preface: The Forgotten War, or How We Got Here

The War of 1812 is generally seen to have begun over two intertwined reasons. As the 19<sup>th</sup> century began, America, attempting to recover from the Revolution and not yet economically stable, was trading with both Great Britain and France, the two main rivals in the Napoleonic Wars. Because of this, Britain began attempting to stop the American trade with France by issuing decrees that forced neutral ships to stop in England and pay a duty before continuing on the France.<sup>1</sup> If ships refused, they would be treated as enemies.

In addition, the British Royal Navy was still impressing American merchant sailors. By 1812, the British Royal Navy had been at war for 19 years against Napoleon's troops. They had 120,000 men in service, and lost an estimated 10,000 to 15,000 men a year.<sup>2</sup> Because of this, they were constantly looking to add skilled sailors to their ships, knowing that if they lost the naval battle against Napoleon, it was likely they would lose the land battle as well. It has been estimated that by 1811 over 6,000 American citizens had been forced into service onboard the Royal Navy's ships. The United States Congress voted to declare war on Great Britain on June 18.

Although not as famous as her sister ship the USS *Constitution*, in 1807 the USS *Chesapeake* was involved off the coast of Virginia with the HMS *Leopard* in a skirmish over the return of deserting British sailors that eventually led to the Embargo Act of 1807. In turn, the Embargo Act (imposed as a reaction to violations of US ship neutrality by the British), was a direct cause of the eventual War of 1812. The *Shannon* was part of the fleet blockading Boston Harbor in 1813 and her captain, Philip Bowes Vere Broke (knowing that the *Chesapeake* was ready to sail,) sent a challenge to the American captain, James Lawrence. Although the letter never reached Lawrence, the two ships did meet as the *Chesapeake* attempted to leave Boston

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<sup>1</sup> PBS *War of 1812* first aired October 10, 2011, accessed at <http://video.pbs.org/video/2089393539/>

<sup>2</sup> PBS *War of 1812*.

Harbor. In the ensuing battle, Captain Broke's well-trained crew managed to disable the *Chesapeake*, board, and capture her in merely 15 minutes after the first shot was fired, much to mortally wounded Captain Lawrence's dismay. His last words to the *Chesapeake's* crew were the now infamous "Don't give up the ship, fight her till she sinks!"

I decided to look at the battle between the USS *Chesapeake* and the HMS *Shannon* for a number of different reasons. Not only is June 1, 2013 the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the engagement, but this is also one of the only battles of 1812 that started close enough to land that people could see it (in this case from Boston itself.) The obvious disparity of the status of the two ships also interested me: the *Shannon* had been away from port in Halifax for upwards of two months, while the *Chesapeake* was coming out of the Boston Navy Yard where she had been refitting for almost the same length of time.

Because of the proximity of the battle to Boston proper, as well as the number of people watching from onshore, there are numerous period accounts that detail the battle. While Captain Lawrence of the *Chesapeake* wore his full dress captain's jacket into battle, covered in shiny buttons and gold Orris lace, Captain Broke of the *Shannon* wore his undress uniform, and a tall hat to disguise his bright red hair. By adding in Mr. William Stevens, the bo's'un of the *Shannon* who led the boarding effort, and an as-yet-to-be determined sailor from onboard the *Chesapeake*, not only is there a chance to compare British and American uniforms during the War of 1812, but also to look at the different classes onboard the ships.

The uniforms at this point were also evolving just as fashion was, making it an interesting time period to look at. Leading into 1812, men's fashion was taking a turn towards the "undress" style, veering away from lace and periwigs and towards functionality and hygiene (and the rise of the dandy.) The year 1813 is also at the very beginning of the Regency period, (usually thought to start in 1811). Between 1787 and 1812, the British Royal Navy issued at least three sets of

uniform regulations.

Although “uniform,” in reality dress in the navy was anything but. Both the American and British naval uniforms were made by an officer's personal tailor to the standards contained within the regulations. Because of this, uniforms often showed the age differences between the officers even onboard a single ship. The 1812 Royal Navy regulation for an Admiral in Full Dress simply says,

*Coat of blue cloth, blue cloth collar, white cloth lappels, and cuffs...with only four laces on the cuffs...laced as at present. Epaulettes as at present; buttons the same as at present, with the addition of a crown over the anchor.*<sup>3</sup> While it specifies the colors, the fact that there are white lapels and white cuffs, it never designates the cut of the coat OR the cut of the pants. Because of this, a (relatively) young, fashionable admiral might have a coat with a very fashionable square cut front and the tight trousers popularized by Beau Brummel, where an older admiral might still be wearing a coat with a more rounded front and the breeches he felt comfortable in. Because of the potential differences in uniform between the ships, the classes of men onboard the ships, and the ways in which they wore the uniform, I saw the opportunity to explore not just naval uniform, but the minutia that made naval uniform during this period so interesting.

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3 Royal Navy Uniform Regulations, Admiralty Office. Released March 23, 1812.

*Now the Chesapeake so bold  
Sailed from Boston we've been told,  
For to take the British frigate  
neat and handy, O!  
The people in the port  
All came out to see the sport,  
And the bands were playing  
"Yankee Doodle Dandy," O!*

## **Part 1: The *Chesapeake* and Her Men**

Captain James Lawrence of the USS *Chesapeake* was born to a third generation American family in Burlington, New Jersey in 1781. Anecdotally, the house he lived in as a child (which still stands in Burlington) was often hit by cannon shot from British ships in the Delaware river.<sup>4</sup> On September 4, 1798, after a short attempt to follow his father's wishes and study law, James Lawrence enlisted in the US Navy as a midshipman aboard the blockading frigate *Ganges*, a converted East Indiaman remembered as “the first vessel of the United States Navy to put to sea.”<sup>5</sup>

In the early 1800s, when the fledgling US Navy was trying to prove its worth against efforts in Congress to dismantle or very least, downsize it, then Acting Lieutenant Lawrence avoided dismissal from the Navy with a letter that now resides in the Naval Archives<sup>6</sup>:

SIR:- We take the Liberty of adding what we can to recommendations heretofore presented in favour of M<sup>r</sup>. James Lawrence of New Jersey-he has been a Midshipman for some time past, is at present at Cape Francois, onboard the Ship “Adams,” Cap<sup>n</sup> Robinson. His Captain has so far distinguished his Merit, as to appoint him third Lieutenant of the Ship. His connexions are respectable, and his patriotism and firmness irreproachable. We have the Honour to be,

Y<sup>r</sup> M<sup>t</sup> Ob<sup>t</sup> Ser<sup>t</sup>  
F<sup>'</sup>kl<sup>'</sup>n Davenport,  
I.H. Imlay.  
Washington, 5<sup>th</sup> March, 1801.

Franklin Davenport, a former Senator from New Jersey, and I. H. Imlay, then a House

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<sup>4</sup> Albert Gleaves, *James Lawrence, captain, United States navy, commander of the “Chesapeake.”* (New York: G.P. Putnam's sons, 1904.) 13

<sup>5</sup> Cooper's Naval History quoted in Gleaves, *James Lawrence*, 22

<sup>6</sup> Miscellaneous Letters, Vol.2, No. 36, Navy Dept MSS Archives, as quoted in Gleaves, *James Lawrence*, 25

representative from New Jersey, had, through their “influence,” ensured that Lawrence would continue on in his naval career. However, because of the reduction in naval forces, Lawrence was forced to remain a midshipman a while longer before being commissioned as a Lieutenant on April 6, 1802.<sup>7</sup>

After this, Lawrence's naval career continues on in a reasonably typical fashion. He served onboard the *Enterprise* as Second Lieutenant under Issac Hull (of later *Constitution v. Guerriere* fame) and then as First Lieutenant under Stephen Decatur on the *Intrepid*, then Issac Chauncey aboard the *John Adams*. His first command was the blandly named gunboat “No. 6.” in 1805, in which he was stopped and boarded by the British, who proceeded to take three of his men who claimed to be British subjects.<sup>8</sup> In 1808, Lawrence married Julia Mountaudevert and was then ordered to the *Constitution* as first lieutenant for 6 months before being given the command of the brig *Vixen*. From *Vixen*, he moved on quickly to command *Wasp* and then *Argus*, a command he actually argued against having to take in a letter to the secretary of the Navy. Regardless, he stayed with the *Argus*, and was promoted to Master Commandant on November 3, 1810.<sup>9</sup> On October 25, 1811, he assumed command of the *Hornet* in Norfolk, a ship that would also introduce him to Lieutenants Ludlow and Budd, who later transferred to the *Chesapeake* with him.<sup>10</sup> It was during this command of *Hornet* that the War of 1812 was officially declared in Congress.

The *Hornet* was the ship that first brought Lawrence to the attention of the American public with his action against Captain William Peake's HMS *Peacock* off the coast of Guyana. With the wind to his advantage, Lawrence spent only eleven minutes firing at the *Peacock* and managed to damage her to the point of sinking. This was considered the “first sloop duel of the war, and it

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<sup>7</sup> Gleaves, *James Lawrence*, 28

<sup>8</sup> *ibid*, 62

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*, 76

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*, 79

was hailed with great joy and enthusiasm throughout the United States as a glorious harbinger of the coming year. Lawrence's name was on every lip, and from that time he became dear to the hearts of every American.”<sup>11</sup> The New York Herald went so far as to credit “Our naval heroes, at whose head stands Hull, followed by Jones, Decatur, Bainbridge and Lawrence, all however equally covered with glory and merit, have secured the admiration of the country.”<sup>12</sup> Lawrence was promoted to Captain after returning to the United States.

In May of 1813, Lawrence was relieved from his duty on the *Hornet* by Master Commandant James Biddle, and with his promotion, was eligible for the command of a larger ship. On May 4<sup>th</sup>, he was ordered to take command of the New York Navy Yard, but then, less than a week later on May 6<sup>th</sup>, he was ordered to the *Chesapeake*, currently in the Navy yard at Boston, to relieve Captain Samuel Evans who was in poor health.<sup>13</sup> His orders were to cruise the coast of Nova Scotia with a hope to “the capture and destruction of the enemy's store ships with military and naval stores destined for the supply of his armies in Canada and fleets on this station, and the capture of transports with troops, intended to reinforce Canada, or invade our own shores.”<sup>14</sup> By May 20<sup>th</sup>, he had reported to duty in Boston and was fully in command of the *Chesapeake*.

Lawrence is described by the former Commander in Chief of the American squadron in the Mediterranean as “Tall, a little under six feet, with a handsome manly face and dark hair with side whiskers combed up and shaved under his ears as was then the style. His proportions were good and his movements graceful, and he carried himself as one born to command, and in fact he was such a man made up and finished such as we like to look upon.”<sup>15</sup> Commodore Richard Dale then continued on to say that Lawrence was a bit of a dandy in dress, and before action attired himself

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11 Gleaves, *James Lawrence*, 134

12 *ibid*, 137

13 *ibid*, 144

14 Private Correspondence, Navy Department MSS Archives page 19 between the Navy Department and Captain Samuel Evens in Gleaves, *James Lawrence*, 144

15 Peter Padfield, *Broke and the Shannon*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1968) 126/127

in full uniform.<sup>16</sup>

By contrast, not much at all is known about the early life and career of Seaman Robert Bates. The first record of him is posthumous, in the form of a pension request filed by his wife Sally Bates in 1813. It was approved, beginning on the first of June 1813, for her to receive 6 dollars a month in Boston, implying that Sally and Robert had lived somewhere within or around the town of Boston itself. In the records of marriages and births in Beverly Massachusetts, there is record of a Robert Bates marrying Sally Rea or Ray on August 11, 1807,<sup>17</sup> as well as the dates of birth for their three children, Sally Ann born January 8, 1808, Robert Jr. born Sept 11, 1809 and William, born Nov 26, 1811.<sup>18</sup>

Sally's pension request reads:

Sally Bates of Beverly, in the Country of Essex and Commonwealth of Massachusetts, Widow, respectfully requests that her late husband Robert Bates, of said Beverly, sailed from Boston, in the Capacity of a Seaman, on board the United States Frigate *Chesapeake*, commanded by Capt. James Lawrence, Esqr., that in the unfortunate battle which ensued between the said frigate and the *Shannon*, her said husband, Robert Bates, was slain whereby she is bereft of her greatest earthly support and comfort, and left with three small children, destitute of any means of support other than Charity or the labour of her hands, that it is not in her power to procure a certificate of the death of her husband from the surviving Lieutenant of the *Chesapeake*, but as his name is contained in the list of slain which has been officially forwarded to the Navy Department, she trusts that any further evidence of that fact will be dispensed with, and therefore prays that she may be allowed a pension from the Government of the United States as s provided for by law; as in duty bound will ever pray.<sup>19</sup>

The document is signed by Sally, witnessed by Isaac P. Anderson, and a note from Justice of the Peace Robert Rantoul indicates that Sally and Robert “lived together as man and wife in said town of Beverly, during all which time they have been well known to me.”<sup>20</sup> Robert appears on the lists of *Chesapeake* dead as “seaman,” as opposed to “ordinary seaman,” implying that he likely had at least one year of previous experience onboard a ship of some sort.

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16 Padfield, *Broke and the Shannon* 127

17 Beverly Marriages, p 261 accessed at [http://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Beverly/Images/Beverly\\_M261.shtml](http://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Beverly/Images/Beverly_M261.shtml)

18 Beverly Births, p 40 [http://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Beverly/Images/Beverly\\_B040.shtml](http://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Essex/Beverly/Images/Beverly_B040.shtml)

19 Pension Records, War of 1812, accessed at [fold3.com](http://fold3.com)

20 Pension Records, War of 1812. accessed at [fold3.com](http://fold3.com)



Now the British frigate's name,  
O that for the purpose came  
To cool the Yankees' courage  
Neat and handy, O,  
Was the Shannon, Captain Broke,  
With his men all hearts of oak,  
Who for fighting was allowed to be  
The dandy, O.

## Part 2: The *Shannon* and Her Men

Philip Bowes Vere Broke was born September 9<sup>th</sup>, 1776 at Broke Hall in the County of Suffolk, the oldest son of Philip Bowes Broke and Elizabeth Beaumont Broke.<sup>21</sup> Educated at the Royal Academy at Portsmouth, he “displayed much diligence and ability in prosecuting his naval studies“ He entered the Royal Navy on June 25, 1792 as a fifteen year old midshipman on the *Bulldog* sloop of war, and remained at sea for fourteen months. By 1797 he was a lieutenant onboard the *Southampton* and in 1797 at the end of his five year cruise, took part in the Battle of Cape St. Vincent.<sup>22</sup> He then moved to the *Amelia* for a year before being promoted to commander of the *Shark* sloop of war in 1799.

At the age of 25 in 1801, Broke achieved the rank of post-captain, but was forced for four years to exist on half-pay, waiting for a ship. In this time, he married Sara Louisa Middleton, who he remained married to for 39 years.<sup>23</sup> During this four year wait, Broke was writing to the Admiralty on a regular basis and asking for a ship, while simultaneously training a group of townsfolk in the art of gunnery and small arms. Finally, in 1805, Broke was commissioned to command the H.M.S. *Druid*, a small, old, undermanned 38 gun sloop from 1783, and the ship Broke refers to as his “Point of honor ship,” because it was too small to fight, but too large to run

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21 John George Brighton, *Admiral Sir P.V.B. Broke, Bart, KCB, etc. A Memoir...chiefly from Journals and Letter in the possession of rear-Admiral Sir Feorge Broke-Middleton, Bart, C.B, etc.* (London: Sampson Low, Son and Marston) xxiv

22 Brighton, *Admiral Sir P.V.B. Broke*, 38.

23 Brighton, *Admiral Sir P.V.B. Broke*, 44

away.<sup>24</sup> Although old and not very maneuverable, Broke managed to chase a French privateer through the Channel fleet in the dark of night, and for these heroics (as well as others) in 1807 he was promoted to command the HMS *Shannon*. Upon hearing of his promotion, an officer friend wrote to him, “We hear your new ship is a very fine craft; and I hope you will enjoy better health than in the damp, old Druid.”<sup>25</sup>

As a captain, Broke was one of the few who drilled his crew on sailing performance and gunnery on a regular basis, insisting that the “role of the ship was to carry guns within the range of the enemy.”<sup>26</sup> He believed (against the beliefs of even Lord Admiral Nelson,) that guns should be aimed, rather than used simply as brute force weapons at short range, and added sights, gunners levels, and arcs of fire scribed into the *Shannon's* decks. He believed in target practice, throwing casks overboard and rewarding the gun crew first to hit it, and is said to have paid for practice gunpowder out of his own pocket. According to Peter Padfield, “Broke kept a taut ship, but there were no frills. His frigate, like his person, was never artificially adorned.”<sup>27</sup>

As a man, “in appearance Broke was of powerful athletic proportions and was over six feet in height. In this respect he resembled Lawrence, but his mental characteristics were entirely opposite to those of his dashing foeman. Lawrence... was of the temperament of a highly bred race horse, sensitive, quick and impulsive. Broke, on the other hand, was distinguished by a sober suited, half melancholy common sense, which he applied to the working of his ship, till he made the vessel, perhaps, the most formidable fighting machine afloat.”<sup>28</sup>

Boatswain William Stevens, much like Seaman Robert Bates, is a fleeting character on the edge of the battle. As Boatswain (or bo's'un,) he was a former sailor elevated to his rank as a

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24 Padfield, *Broke and the Shannon*, 13

25 Brighton, *Admiral Sir P.V.B. Broke*, 60

26 Brighton, *Admiral Sir P.V.B. Broke*, 60

27 Padfield, *Broke and the Shannon*, 74

28 Gleaves, *James Lawrence*, 157

warrant officer, and was in a “standing” position, meaning that he would likely stay with the ship even when her captain changed. Boatswains were required to be literate, and in charge of the work of the sailors themselves. From his memorial in St. Paul's Church, Halifax, Nova Scotia, we know that when he died on June 19, 1813, in the Naval Hospital he was 36 years old, putting his date of birth in 1777. Numerous authors have him present at the Battle of the Saintes in 1782, referring to “the Boatswain, Stevens, who fought with [Admiral George Brydges] Rodney,”<sup>29</sup> but this seems unlikely, as he would only have been five years old. Accounts of the *Chesapeake* and *Shannon* battle itself agree that William Stevens was the one to lash the two ships together during the course of the battle, tying the *Shannon's* spanker boom to the *Chesapeake's* rail and finishing just prior to having his left arm “literally hacked off by a cutlass.”<sup>30</sup> Some also have him being mortally wounded by musket fire, while others claim that he followed Broke over the rail to assist in boarding the *Chesapeake*.

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<sup>29</sup> Padfield, *Broke and the Shannon*, 80

<sup>30</sup> Gleaves, *James Lawrence*, 188

*Just before the fight began,  
Said the Yankees with much fun:  
We'll tow her into Boston  
Neat and handy, O;  
And then afterwards we'll dine  
With our sweethearts and our wives,  
And we'll dance the jig called  
Yankee doodle dandy, O.*

### **Part 3: The Battle**

After standing off the coast of Boston for the better part of a month and sending numerous verbal challenges in to the Boston Harbor, on June 1, 1803, Philip Bowes Vere Broke wrote a letter to James Lawrence that read in part as follows:

“ As the Chesapeake appears now ready for sea, I request you will do me the favour to meet the Shannon with her, ship to ship, to try the fortune of our respective flags."The Shannon's force is thus described: "The Shannon mounts 24 guns upon her broadside, and one light boat-gun, 18-pounders upon her main deck, and 32-pound carronades on her quarter-deck and forecastle, and is manned with a complement of 300 men and boys (a large proportion of the latter), besides 30 seamen, boys, and passengers, who were taken out of recaptured vessels lately... I entreat you, sir, not to imagine that I am urged by mere personal vanity to the wish of meeting the Chesapeake; or that I depend only upon your personal ambition for your acceding to this invitation. We have both nobler motives. You will feel it as a compliment if I say, that the result of our meeting may be the most grateful; service I can render to my country; and I doubt not that you, equally confident of success, will feel convinced, that it is only by repeated triumphs in even combats that your little navy can now hope to console your country for the loss of that trade it can no longer protect. Favour me with a speedy reply. We are short of provision and water, and cannot stay long here.“ <sup>31</sup>

This letter was sent under the care of Captain Eben Slocum of Marblehead, who had been captured while fishing a few days prior, but never actually made it into the hands of the *Chesapeake's* captain, as they lifted anchor and prepared to sail out of the harbor at noon the same day.

The people of Boston had been watching the British frigate as well had Lawrence, and

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31 Joseph Allen *Battles of the British Navy, Volume 2.* (London, Henry G Bohn. 1851) 425

when they saw the *Chesapeake* prepare to weigh anchor, “the day’s work was forgotten as they rushed to the waterfront or the roofs of nearby buildings to view this latest British ship offering herself as a prize to their Naval heroes. Fishermen filled their boats with sightseers to follow the *Chesapeake* into action; the coffee houses were abuzz with organizations for great celebration suppers to which it was proposed to invite the surviving officers of the *Shannon* together with Lawrence and the rest of her conquerors. And at the Navy yard, they cleared a wharf to accommodate her riven remains when she was brought in.”<sup>32</sup>

At 1:30 pm, the *Chesapeake* passed Boston Light and headed towards the *Shannon*, flying her battle flags, the national ensign, and on the foremast, a large white flag reading “Sailor’s Rights and Free Trade.”<sup>33</sup> By 5:30, the two ships were within firing range, and the battle began in earnest. Initially, Broke gave Lawrence the upper hand, many think as a matter of chivalry, having called her out to fight. Lawrence, for his turn, realized this, and decided not to fire a crippling blow as he passed by the stern of the *Shannon*, aiming instead to come side-by-side and fight a “fair” battle. The first shots were fired at 5:55, (Lawrence being hit in the knee with a pistol ball almost immediately) and eventually the *Chesapeake* was crippled enough to lose steering, falling off the wind and letting the cut rigging from her head booms trail across the deck of the *Shannon* to get caught in an anchor. This then, was where William Stevens attempted to lash the two ships together.

After 11 minutes, the cannon fire had stopped, and the action turned to a boarding effort, with about sixty or seventy British sailors climbing onto the *Chesapeake’s* quarterdeck. As the American crew began to organize their own boarding effort, Lawrence was hit in the groin by a musket ball fired by Lieutenant Low of the Royal Marines, and fell to the deck, still calling for the Americans to board.<sup>34</sup> Almost immediately, Lawrence was carried belowdecks by one of his

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32 Padfield, *Broke and the Shannon*, 152

33 Gleaves, *James Lawrence*, 178

34 Ibid, 193

lieutenants and part of the crew, and was heard to call out “Don't give up the ship, fight her 'till she sinks!” Only a few minutes later, Lawrence's first officer, Lieutenant Ludlow was brought belowdecks with a head injury, and informed the captain “They have carried her.”<sup>35</sup> The entire battle took less than fifteen minutes from the first shot fired to the British flag being raised over the Chesapeake. Twenty four of the British crew had been killed, and fifty nine wounded, including Broke, who took a cutlass to the head “laying his skull bare...exposing his brain for two or three inches.”<sup>36</sup> In contrast, forty seven of the *Chesapeakes* had been killed (including Robert Bates), with 106 wounded (14 mortally.)<sup>37</sup>

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35 Gleaves, *James Lawrence*, 195

36 Ibid, 200

37 Allen, *Battles of the British Navy*, 430

*Now the fight had scarce begun  
When they flinch-ed from the guns,  
Which they thought that they would fight  
So neat and handy, O;  
Then brave Broke he drew his sword, crying:  
Now my lads we'll board  
And we'll stop them playing  
Yankee doodle dandy, O.*

## **Part 4: Uniforms and Research**

While records of the British Admiralty Board preserve the Royal Navy's uniform history quite a ways back, the first American regulations were set into place in 1802. However, even with regulations at this period uniforms were rarely truly uniform, owing to interpretation, different choices made by individual tailors (as this was a bespoke period) and the influence of prevailing fashions of the day. Even more frighteningly, the regulations are only explicit in describing officers such as P.V.B. Broke and James Lawrence, showing that Steven's uniform hadn't changed in years and leaving common sailors like Robert Bates to wear more or less whatever they wanted. Needless to say, researching a boat-full of people was quite the task.

### James Lawrence:

Lawrence is described in more than one place wearing almost the same thing. In his biography of Lawrence, Albert Gleaves says "Lawrence had dressed himself for the battle with particular care, in full uniform. He wore a cocked hat, heavy gold epaulettes and blue laced-coat buttoned across his chest, white trousers, and as was the naval fashion of that day, top boots... Large and imposing... he was



*Master Commandant James*

unfortunately, a conspicuous mark for the enemy's sharpshooters.”<sup>38</sup> Later, Peter Padfield says “Captain Lawrence himself had a musket ball in his leg from one of the topmen, his snowy white breeches were spreading with red.”<sup>39</sup> Although accounts differ as to whether he wore white breeches or white trousers, they clearly describe him in a cocked hat, white vest, white shirt, and blue coat with gold lace. The emphasis on the gold lace makes it clear that this is Lawrence's more formal dress uniform, as opposed to the working or “undress” one.

Another account says of the Chesapeake, “Her commander, Lawrence, glowing with recent



triumph, anticipated an easy victory. Colossal in figure, and with muscular power superior to most men, he was on this day fatally conspicuous by the white vest and other habiliments he had assumed.”<sup>40</sup> A white vest of Lawrence's exists in the collection of the Connecticut Historical Society, and is made out of white twill woven cotton, with a 2 ½ inch standing collar, nine self-covered buttons, and two 5 ¾ inch wide pockets on either side of the front. The backing

and lining of the vest are linen, and there are four linen tapes sewn to the back to adjust the fit. At center back, it is embroidered in light blue backstitch “James Lawrence/4.”<sup>41</sup>

Although the above facial portrait of Lawrence is the only trustworthy period representation of him specifically, many full-length portraits of his longer-lived compatriots exist in the collection of New York City's City Hall. In particular, I chose to use Stephen Decatur and

38 Gleaves, *James Lawrence*, 179

39 Padfield, *Broke and the Shannon* 166

40 Brighton, *Admiral Sir P.V.B. Broke*, 170

41 CHS.Emuseum.org, first accessed 6/2012

Thomas MacDonough as the models for Lawrence's uniform because of their similar ages-Decatur was born in 1779, MacDonough in 1783, and Lawrence in 1781.



One of Lawrence's jackets exists in the collection of the Newark Historical Society, and although the museum doesn't make it readily available to the public, I was able to see it by special arrangement. It is made out of blue wool, unlined except for the sleeves, and very similar to that worn by Decatur and MacDonough. Interestingly, instead of the solid gold Orris lace that outlines the 18 buttonholes on the fronts of many American captains' jackets, Lawrence's were surrounded in gold bullion goldwork rectangles, while the gold Orris lace is saved to outline the

edges of the jacket as seen above on MacDonough.

Philip Bowes Vere Broke:

According to onlookers, PVB Broke went into battle wearing a significantly less flashy outfit than Lawrence. At right is the best existing portrait of Broke wearing his full dress uniform. However, Peter Padfield recounts the *Shannon's* entrance into battle by saying "When they were all at quarters watched by their officers who had donned worn old uniforms and their fighting swords for the fray, Broke, who had adorned himself with a top hat as better protection for his head than the uniform cocked hat, went to the break of the quarterdeck and summoned them around him."<sup>42</sup> Although not explicitly said, this suggests that Broke was also wearing a "worn



*Philip Bowes Vere Broke by Samuel Lane*

old uniform," likely of the undress style. There is also a theory that because he was infamous for being a redhead, Broke knew that his hair would give him away as the *Shannon's* captain and therefore a target, and chose to wear the tall hat as camouflage.

On March 23, 1812, the Admiralty office had released new standards for naval uniforms, which essentially pointed the wearer to the same rules as were used in 1807:

**FULL DRESS:** Blue Cloth Coat, with blue Lappels, Cuffs and Collar, Collar to stand up. Three Buttons on Pockets and Cuffs, white lining, white cloth Waistcoat and Breeches; plain Hat.

**UNDRESS:** Blue Cloth Coat, blue Lappels and round Cuffs, fall down blue Collar; Waistcoat

<sup>42</sup> Padfield, *Broke and the Shannon* , 160

and Breeches of white or blue cloth as may be convenient.”

The main exception in 1812 was for “the full dress to be similar to that now in use, excepting that the lappells and cuffs are in future to be white, laced as at present, with a crown over an anchor on the button. Captains and Commanders are both to wear two epaulettes, of the same pattern as present with only the following distinctions: the epaulettes of captains three years post, to have an addition of a silver crown over a silver anchor.”<sup>43</sup> Below, Charles Paget and an unnamed officer show the look of an undress coat. Both have M notch collars with a roll, and very little gold on them aside from the epaulettes and buttons.



*Charles Paget by Thomas Lawrence*



*Unknown British Officer 1812-1820*

Examples of the undress uniform also exist in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England, and show similar construction.

There is also mention of a sort of jewelry worn by Broke as well: “When, eleven years after his marriage, he fell, fainting and deluged with blood, and when, on being borne aboard the *Shannon*,

<sup>43</sup> Royal Navy Uniform Regulations, 1812

the tender hands of his brother officers gently removed his clothes and bared his chest, they found, suspended around his neck, a small blue silk case. It was found to contain a lock of his wife's hair.”<sup>44</sup>

### Bo's'un William Stevens:

As a warrant officer, Stevens was in an interesting position. He had been raised from the ranks of common sailors, but wasn't a commissioned officer, like Broke and Lawrence. The Admiralty rules of 1807 say “And the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty do hereby further give Notice, that the Uniform directed, in pursuance of His Majesty's Order on the 17<sup>th</sup> November 1787, to be worn by the Warrant Officers of His Majesty's Fleet, viz. Blue Cloth Coat, with Blue Lappels and round Cuffs, fall down Collar, Three Buttons to the Pocket and Cuff, white lining, but not edged with white; Button with an Anchor, same as the Captain's former one; white Cloth Waistcoat and Breeches. Shall be worn only by Gunners, Boatswains and Carpenters; and the subordinate classes of Warrant Officers shall not be allowed to wear Lappels.”<sup>45</sup> As the 1812 regulations say nothing about the dress of the warrant officers, essentially, nothing in their uniform had been changed since 1787. Because of this, and because the few images that show a bo's'un in his uniform are wildly varied, (likely because fashion was changing) there wasn't a firm image of exactly what a bo's'un wore.



Bo's'un. HMS Venerable. 1799

As you can see, above, the Bo's'un of the HMS *Venerable* in 1799 is drawn in a coat that

<sup>44</sup> Brighton, *Admiral Sir P.V.B. Broke*, 44

<sup>45</sup> Royal Navy Uniform Regulations, Admiralty Office. Released 1807.

seems to follow the 1787 regulations by having a fall down collar and his blue lapels. In the two images below, one is an undated image of a bo'sun, showing a man in a blue coat with tails wearing a tall hat and holding a speaking trumpet, and the other is an image of a bo's'un's mate from the HMS *Gloucester* in a red vest and short coat.



undated image of boatswain



boatswain's Mate of the HMS Gloucester, Edward Mangin. 1812

At this time, the bo's'un's mate would have been essentially a sailor with a slight promotion, so the fact that the bo's'un's mate of the *Gloucester* is wearing normal sailor garb isn't surprising. The bo's'un in blue pants is the more interesting one, as his jacket doesn't seem to have the stand and fall collar at all, and what little of his tails you can see behind his legs seem to be unlined in white, defying the regulation for a white lining. Because Stevens was among the *Shannon* crew said to be wearing "old uniform," the red vest I chose to put on him was a conscious choice to

suggest that he wasn't wearing a complete, up to date bo's'un's uniform.

The other artwork from around this period that shows a bo's'un is "Sailors Carousing," painted by Julius Caesar Ibbetson in 1802. In the upper left corner of the image (enlarged to left) a figure is seated on a chair being hoisted above the crowd, and is indicated to be a bo's'un by the silver chain that can be seen around his neck. This would be the chain holding his whistle. Although



*Sailors Carousing". Julius Caesar Ibbetson. 1802*



*Surgeon Joshua Horwood's dress coat, 1805*

small and hard to make out, he seems to be wearing a pair of brown trousers and a tan waistcoat with a blue coat, white shirt, black stock, and a black tall hat. His coat looks to be dark on the inside as well as the outside, again suggesting that it was likely unlined. Because a bo's'un didn't make the money of a commissioned officer, they likely had only one coat and would wear it constantly, meaning that there's no distinction to be had between "dress" and "undress" for Stevens. The only existing coat similar to that of a warrant officer's is the one belonging to

Surgeon Joshua Horwood at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. This is his full dress uniform, but said to be of "not very high quality, completely unlined, except for the sleeves, which

are lined in cotton, and the buttons are those of a warrant officer.”<sup>46</sup> While a surgeon was still a step up from a bo's'un, the lack of quality means that Stevens may have looked similar.

### Seaman Robert Bates:

In 1813, there was no standard uniform issued to sailors of either the British or American navy, and as such, many men came onboard in nothing more than clothes they were wearing. When this happened, the men would be required to buy a workable set of clothes from the “slops room” or “slops chest” run by the purser, and have the money spent deducted from future wages. If someone was large, small, or no garments were suitable, “men were issued light canvas or dungaree material along with needle and thread, and were ordered to fashion a wardrobe of shirts, coats, trousers, hats and other such items. Alternately, they might barter for the services of someone with sewing skills to help make their clothing.”<sup>47</sup> Peter Padfield describes the *Shannon's* crew specifically by saying “They had scarves tied loosely about their shoulders ready to be tied around their ears to protect them from the shattering blast in action; some were bare chested with another scarf holding their blue or white duck trousers around their waists, others had striped shirts tucked in or hanging outside like smocks, everything clean in case a ball ploughed the material into their flesh.”<sup>48</sup> Although Bates was one of the *Chesapeake's* men, there was a significant crossover between British and American sailors and the clothes that they wore at this time. (remember, after all, that impressment of American sailors by British crews was one of the factors leading up to the War of 1812.)

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46 National Maritime Museum Collections <http://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/71290.html>

47 James P. McGuane *Heart of Oak: A Sailor's Life in Nelson's Navy*. (New York: W.W. Putnam and Company, 2002), 79

48 Padfield, *Broke and the Shannon*, 160

The blue wool “round jacket” worn by American sailors was cut double-breasted to accommodate a 40 inch chest, and “lined round the body with flannel sufficiently good for purpose and sleeves with suitable Cotton.”<sup>49</sup> A pattern for “Sailor Trowsers” that appears in an 1825 book of patterns shows the system of cutting with only an inseam but no outseam, and grades it according to waist size.<sup>50</sup> Although this pattern book didn't call for an opening at the back waist, the image at right shows an adjustable waistband that would be laced to fit. These pants needed suspenders to keep them up, and a sailor in the John Wesley Jarvis portrait of Oliver Hazard Perry can be seen wearing what looks like black



*Sailors" dated 1807*

leather or grosgrain suspenders. Also common across many images of sailors is the blue and white checked shirt/red neck cloth combination. Originally, the sailor's neckcloth (later what became the middie collar) was to keep the tar of his pigtail off of his shirt, as well as various other uses, but by this period, pigtails were falling out of fashion. It seems likely that the checked shirt was also popular because it might hide dirt slightly better and need fewer washings than the bright white linens preferred by most officers. Sailors were also commonly barefoot, as “Many chores both aloft and alow could be carried out with bare feet. As a new man became accustomed to shipboard life, he would soon begin to dress the part.”<sup>51</sup>

49 Matt Brenckle, quoting Seth Moulton to Board of Navy Commissioners, 22 March 1816, in Proposals, Reports, and Estimates for Supplies and Equipment, 1814-1833, RG 45, E 328, vol.4. NARA.

50 *Sectum*, 38-39

51 James P. McGuane *Heart of Oak*, 79

*They no sooner heard the word  
Than they quickly jumped on board,  
And haul-ed down the ensign  
Neat and handy, O.  
Notwithstanding all their brag,  
Soon the glorious British flag  
At the Yankee's mizen-peak was quite  
The dandy, O.*

## **Part 5: Construction**

**The majority of my construction process is outlined online at**

**<http://freetradesailorsrights.tumblr.com>**

The patterns for my modern interpretations of these uniforms came from as many period sources as I could find. Sectum: Being the Universial Directory in the Art of Cutting: Containing Unerring Principles Upon Which Every Garment May Be Made to Fit the Human Shape with Ease and Elegance, by Robert Byfield dates to 1825 and gave me the pattern for Stevens' and Bates' "Sailor Trowsers" with no side seam, The Taylor's Instructor or a comprehensive analysis of the elements of cutting garments of every kind illustrated with eight appropriate engravings, by James Queen and William Lapsley gave me the 1809 pattern for a Naval Jacket that was used for Lawrence, and the vests that were slightly modified for Lawrence and Broke. Broke's undress jacket is from the 1822 plate from The Tailor's Friendly Instructor by J. Wyatt that appears in the Cut of Men's Clothes by Nora Waugh. Lawrence and Broke's trousers are from The Tailor by Houston and Stoneman, published in 1801 and Bates' jacket is modified from an overcoat found in the non-period Jean Hunisett Period Costume for Stage and Screen book. Each of the four square cut shirts are also from a different pattern. Lawrence's is from Late Georgian Costume by R.L. Shep, Stevens' is from Costume Close Up-Clothing Construction and Patterns 1750-1790 by Linda Baumgarten (with slight modifications to the collar), Bates' is a "working man's shirt" from

Sectum, and Broke's was my own pattern drawing from the others.

While working from historic patterns definitely helped the sense of accuracy, the hardest part of this project for me was accepting the fact that on my budget and with my time and space constraints, nothing was going to be completely period. I had been hoping for a period accurate blue wool kersey, and instead settled for a wool/poly blend from Woolrich. I had been desperately looking for a white wool flannel for Lawrence's pants, and settled for a thicker white wool from Wm. Booth, Draper (only to have the perfect wool flannel appear in a group of swatches three days later.) The linens are all accurate, but the white cotton broadcloth that lines some of the jackets and vests is probably pushing the period a little. Often, even when I thought I had found a good fabric, more research led me to believe that what I had found was the modern interpretation of a fabric, and the period one would have been different in some way. Overall, the sourcing was one of the more frustrating parts, seeking out accurate buttons (at a reasonable price) a bo's'un's whistle, and waiting for gold Orris lace to ship from Canada.

Without a doubt, the most time consuming part of the project has been in Lawrence's buttonholes. Because the extant garment has goldworked buttonholes, I decided (after agonizing over the choice) to replicate this by hand, which involves 80+ yards of 5 mm gold wrapped passing thread being couched over manila card backing. It will have been almost a full academic year in almost daily work on these to be finished. I cannot even IMAGINE the price put on handwork like that in 1813, but I have a new sympathy for the junior tailor who was forced to do it.

By contrast, the easiest part, surprisingly, has been in making accurate-to-period pants. Although I started out in fear of sized-up period leg sleeves (sleeves being my other downfall) from potentially mis-interpreted old patterns, aside from too-big waists (easily fixed) and slightly tight calves, the pants seemed to fit accurately, the fall fronts went in with a minimum of issues,

and they surprised me by looking incredibly accurate to period. Even the models were impressed, and more than one commented that they were surprisingly comfortable for high waisted saggy butted pants.

I made the decision relatively early on in constructing Lawrence's jacket to leave as many raw edges as I could, because that (to me) is one of the quickest way to clue an audience member into "this is not from now," because we often try to hide every edge possible. When I had Lawrence's lapels together the "normal" way, the edges had four layers of the heavy blue wool in them, and just looked bulky and wrong. When I took them apart and flipped them to be trimmed off on the outside, they looked so much more like the extant jackets at the National Maritime Museum that I decided to keep that concept the entire way through. Given more time and/or spare sewing hands, I would likely do a tiny whipstitch around the raw edges like you see in a lot of existing garments, which would help hide the machine stitching, but until I grow a spare set of hands that's low priority. The thickness of the wool throughout the project has helped me out quite a bit. It's incredibly moldable and persuadeable, and hides any manner of hand stitching if done carefully. I think if I had gone with anything thinner a lot of the things I've managed would have taken much more time and structuring.

While I often wandered the shop lamenting the fact that I'd chosen to do four of the same thing and wishing that I could have just made Viking tunics, I think that by holding myself to four very similar uniforms, I learned things in the process of making one piece that I then remembered in the building of the next, and steadily improved and refined my techniques the whole way through. If nothing else, at this point I can make a welt pocket without referring to my written instructions, and I've figured out a whole set of interesting ways to make collars stand up.

*Here's a health, my boys, to you,  
With your courage stout and true.  
Who fought the Chesapeake  
So neat and handy, O;  
And may it ever prove  
That in fighting as in love  
That the British sailor always  
Is the dandy, O.*

Lyrics from "The Chesapeake and Shannon," a broadside ballad printed in 1813 as a British parody/response to

"The Constitution and Guerriere" An existing copy is at the Bodleian Library.

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