



U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

Captain-Commandant Alexander V. Fraser (1804-1869)

First Commandant



Alexander V. Fraser was born on 20 April 1804 in New York. He attended the Mathematical, Nautical and Commercial School in New York City and then went to sea first as a mate in the East India trade. By the time he applied for a commission in the Revenue Cutter Service in 1832 he was a master mariner. President Andrew Jackson signed his commission as a Second Lieutenant that same year. His first assignment was aboard the cutter *Alert*, then on patrol in Charleston, South Carolina.

Alert was in Charleston to enforce federal law during the Nullification Crisis. One of the new Second Lieutenant's first duties was serving as a boarding officer. He was charged with boarding incoming sugar ships from Havana and compelling them to discharge their cargo at Castle Pickney until the proper federal duties were paid on the sugar. After taking a leave of absence to command a merchant ship to the Far East from 1836-1838 he returned to the service and was promoted to First Lieutenant in 1838. He returned to duty aboard the cutter *Alert* and in 1842 was promoted to Captain and was given command of the cutter *Ewing*.

Secretary of the Treasury John C. Spencer, in part due to Congressional pressure, instituted more centralized control of the Revenue Cutter Service by creating a Revenue Marine Bureau at the Treasury Department in Washington, D.C. The new Bureau was charged with running the decentralized "Treasury Navy". He promoted Captain Fraser as the Bureau's first "commandant" in 1843. Fraser oversaw a number of changes and improvements, including promotions based on merit, updating the fleet to iron and steam vessels, adding marine engineers to the Service, abolishing the use of slaves aboard the cutters and all alcohol use, and improving the pay and conditions for the enlisted force.

During his tenure the Revenue Cutter Service began regular inspection trips of lighthouses and other aids to navigation as well as the newly established unmanned Lifesaving Stations. Fraser also tried to merge the nascent Life-Saving Service and Lighthouse Service with the Revenue Cutter Service but was ultimately unsuccessful due to the resistance of the local Collectors under whom control of the various stations rested.

After being replaced in 1848 Fraser assumed command of the new cutter *C. W. Lawrence* and commanded the cutter on its epic voyage around Cape Horn to San Francisco, California. Due to the lack of experience of his entire cadre of officers, he instituted a training regimen for them during the voyage, setting the precedent for the formal training of officers at an official "Revenue School of Instruction" that was not created for years in the future.

He was dismissed from the Service in 1856 due to political machinations typical of this period and was unable to get reinstated even during the Civil War.



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Prior to his dismissal, however, he oversaw the development of a new type of cutter--the famous *Harriet Lane*. A visionary seaman well ahead of his contemporaries, Captain-Commandant Alexander Fraser's impact on the "Treasury Navy" is still felt today. Under his watch the control of the cutter fleet was concentrated in Washington, detailed logbooks were kept on all cutter cruises, officers were promoted based on merit and were assigned where the Service needed them, the lot of the enlisted force was improved, and the cutter fleet began its long journey towards iron hulls and steam propulsion.

Captain-Commandant Fraser crossed the bar in 1868.