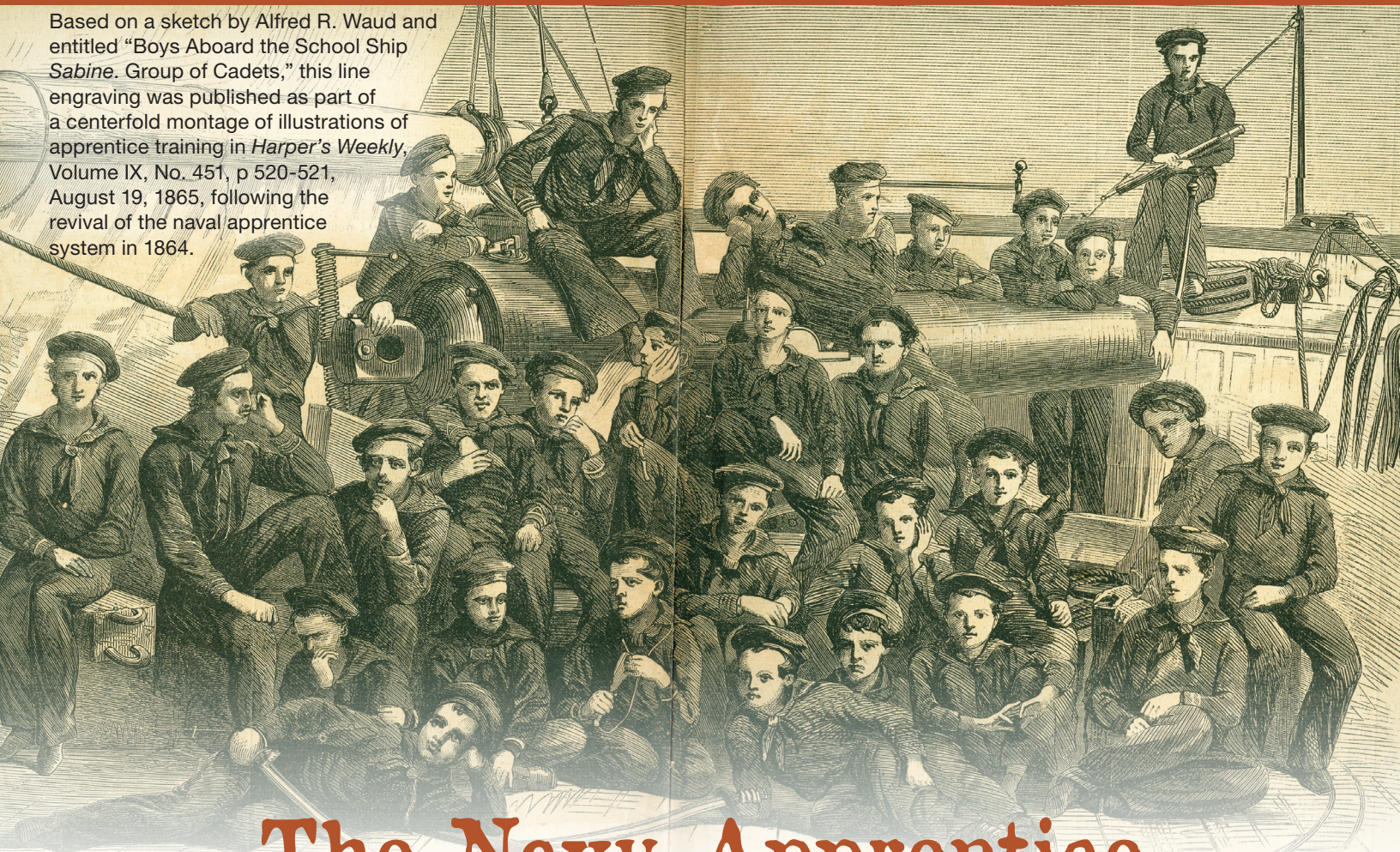


Based on a sketch by Alfred R. Waud and entitled "Boys Aboard the School Ship *Sabine*. Group of Cadets," this line engraving was published as part of a centerfold montage of illustrations of apprentice training in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 451, p 520-521, August 19, 1865, following the revival of the naval apprentice system in 1864.



# The Navy Apprentice System, 1837-1875

By Ron Field

**THE UNITED STATES NAVY OF THE ANTEBELLUM DAYS** was notorious for its ill treatment of enlisted sailors. As a result of the 1800 regulations, flogging with a cat-o'-nine-tails was still a common and regular practice. Such was the reputation of cruelty aboard ship that the rate of recruitment fell rapidly during the first half of the 19th century, and those who did enlist were often not American.<sup>1</sup> A growing concern in the 1820s that an insufficient number of American-born sailors were enlisting led to a concerted campaign for an apprentice system which would ensure that American youths would provide the Navy of the future.

## Establishing An Apprentice System

One of the leading champions of the apprentice system

was Thomas Goin, a notary and shipping broker with the firm Goin, Poole & Pentz, of New York City, who had long been engaged in the hiring of sailors for the merchant marine. From late 1829 through 1837 Goin promoted a "plan of Naval Education" to establish naval schools to teach young boys every aspect of life in the sea service.<sup>2</sup>

As a result of continued campaigning on the part of Goin and his supporters, a naval apprentice scheme was finally instituted by an Act of Congress on March 2, 1837.<sup>3</sup> Due to concerns that the youngsters should be separate from regular, hardened ships' crews, the Navy established school ships at the principal naval yards: the frigate *Hudson* and ship-of-the-line *North Carolina* at New York; the ship-of-the-line *Columbus* at Boston; and the frigate *Java* at Norfolk.

## Early Years of the Apprentices System

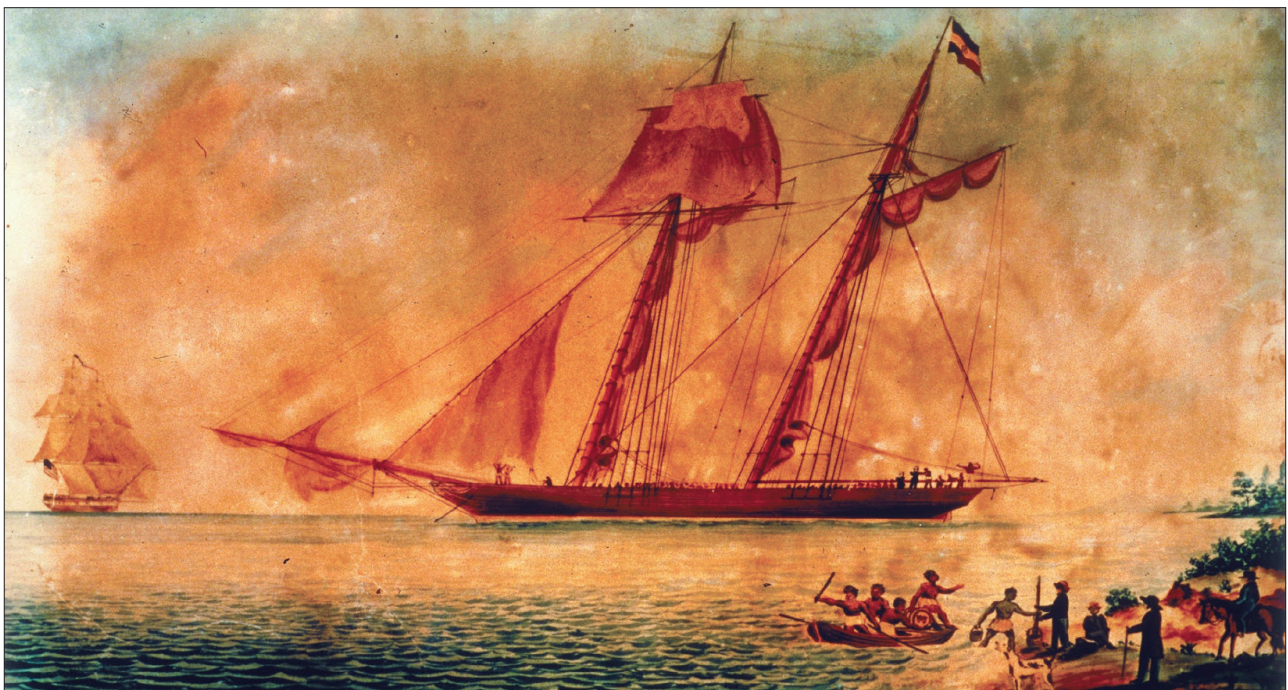
By July 1839, the *Hudson* had “some 200 or 300 boys generally aboard.” When President Martin Van Buren toured that vessel on July 8, 86 boys were ranged in line on the gun deck wearing “white shirts and trousers, trimmed with blue nankeen; blue jackets, with a white anchor on the right sleeve; and black tarpaulin hats, with broad flowing ribbands.”<sup>4</sup> Later that year the boys aboard *Hudson* were transferred to the *North Carolina*, which was anchored in Buttermilk Channel in Upper New York Harbor and was fitted out to receive upwards of 2,000 boys, under the direction of Captain John Gallagher, with Lieutenant John Marshall as executive officer.<sup>5</sup>

Despite earlier concerns for their welfare, naval apprentice boys were periodically transferred to seagoing vessels. In August 1839, some of the boys aboard the *Java*, at Norfolk, were transferred to the frigate *Brandywine* and schooner *Shark*, which were preparing for sea. Both vessels were destined for the Mediterranean.<sup>6</sup>

A letter regarding those who had been transferred to the ship-of-the-line *Ohio* which was at Port Mahon (modern day Menorca, one of the Spanish Balearic islands), states that by March 30, 1839, “The pupil apprentices, 54 in number, are said to be well-behaved, intelligent lads, who

give every promise of becoming good seamen, perhaps officers.” The writer added, “They are under the exclusive charge of Lieutenant [Guert] Gansevoort, who takes great interest in them, as indeed do all the officers in the ship. The boys are divided into two watches, one attending school, while the other is employed in the ordinary duties of the ship. They thus attend school, every other day. Their schoolmaster, who by the way is very capable, having been a public teacher in the United States, reports favourably of their attention and improvement...They are taught reading, writing, arithmetic, navigation and composition...They are allowed to go on shore on liberty, as a reward for good conduct, and thus far, but one or two have required punishment. They have the free use of the ship’s library, and most of them are very devoted readers.”<sup>7</sup>

According to the *New York Morning Herald*, the “apprentice boys” manned the yards of the brig *Washington*, commanded by Lieutenant Thomas R. Gedney, when President Van Buren visited the Navy Yard on July 8, 1839.<sup>8</sup> While on coastal-surveying duties off the coast of Long Island, the same vessel captured the slave ship *L’Amistad* on August 26, 1839. In the wake of this milestone in the struggle against slavery, a Baltimore newspaper claimed, “This is an interesting exploit for the boys of the *Washington*, for she is manned with thirty or



Contemporary oil painting of the sailing vessel *L’Amistad* off Culloden Point, Long Island, New York, on August 26, 1839. The US brig *Washington*, partially crewed by apprentice boys, approaches at left. Courtesy of the New Haven Colony Historical Society and Adams National Historic Site.

# The Navy Apprentice System, 1837-1875

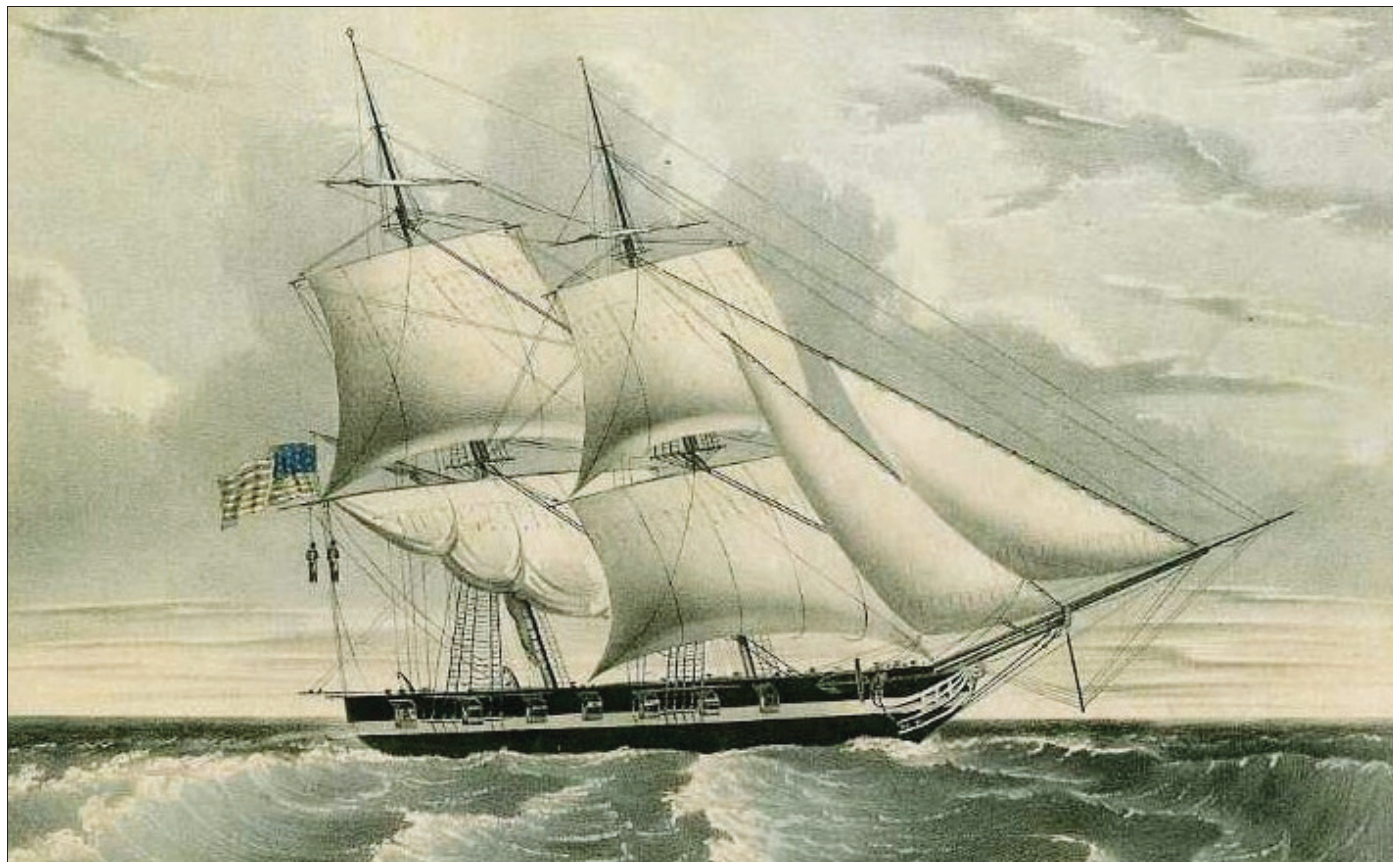
forty Navy apprentice boys, and only three or four men.”<sup>9</sup>

Little is known of individual apprentices of this earlier period. Training aboard the *North Carolina*, John K. Mills received a midshipman’s warrant on January 15, 1841, as “a reward of merit, he having been reported to the Secretary of the Navy, as the most meritorious apprentice in the ship.” He resigned for unknown reasons about six months later. Less fortunate was 13-year-old Edward Gargan from the District of Columbia, who fell to his death from the spar deck into the lower hold of the ship-of-the-line *Delaware* at the Norfolk Navy Yard in October 1840.<sup>10</sup>

The inclusion of apprentices in regular ships’ crews, and subsequent cruelty inflicted on them, led to the demise of the pre-Civil War naval apprentice system by 1847. The worst cases occurred aboard the brig *Somers*, under Commander Alexander S. Mackenzie. Several months

prior to the attempted mutiny, and subsequent hangings, that took place on this vessel during a passage to the West Indies, several unidentified boys of “a highly respectable family” of Buffalo, New York, wrote letters home describing their conditions and treatment. The first letter stated, “Instead of having school, we have a screen put up and call it the school-room, there we have to pick oakum and lay up nettles. Sometimes they do pretend to have school, and then the school-master (we have to call him school-master, but he is an illiterate seaman, and then any of the boys can teach him) gets out a few spelling books, and slates and pencils and makes pictures.”

Another letter advised, “I am whipped about every day for nothing, and now my body is all covered with bruises from head to foot, and I am now sure it will kill me, if I stay here much longer.—If you could come here and see when ‘all hands witness punishment,’ is piped, to see about a dozen a piece given them over the bare back,



Published circa 1843, this lithograph depicts the US brig *Somers* bound home from the African coast on December 1, 1842, after the hanging of three alleged mutineers. The men executed were Midshipman Philip Spencer, Boatswain’s Mate Samuel Cromwell, and Seaman Elisha Small. The print shows two of them hanging from the yardarm. Naval apprentices aboard this vessel were repeatedly whipped and maltreated. Courtesy of Rear-Admiral Elliot Snow, USN, 1925. NH 51922 courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command.

bringing flesh and blood at every stroke, and sometimes two or three dozen instead of one dozen; but I wont talk about such things any more.”<sup>11</sup> As a result of this, and further complaints about youths of lesser means being promoted to master’s mate before “higher classes of boys,” the naval apprentice system was abandoned soon after, although hundreds of apprentices remained aboard vessels at various stations.<sup>12</sup>

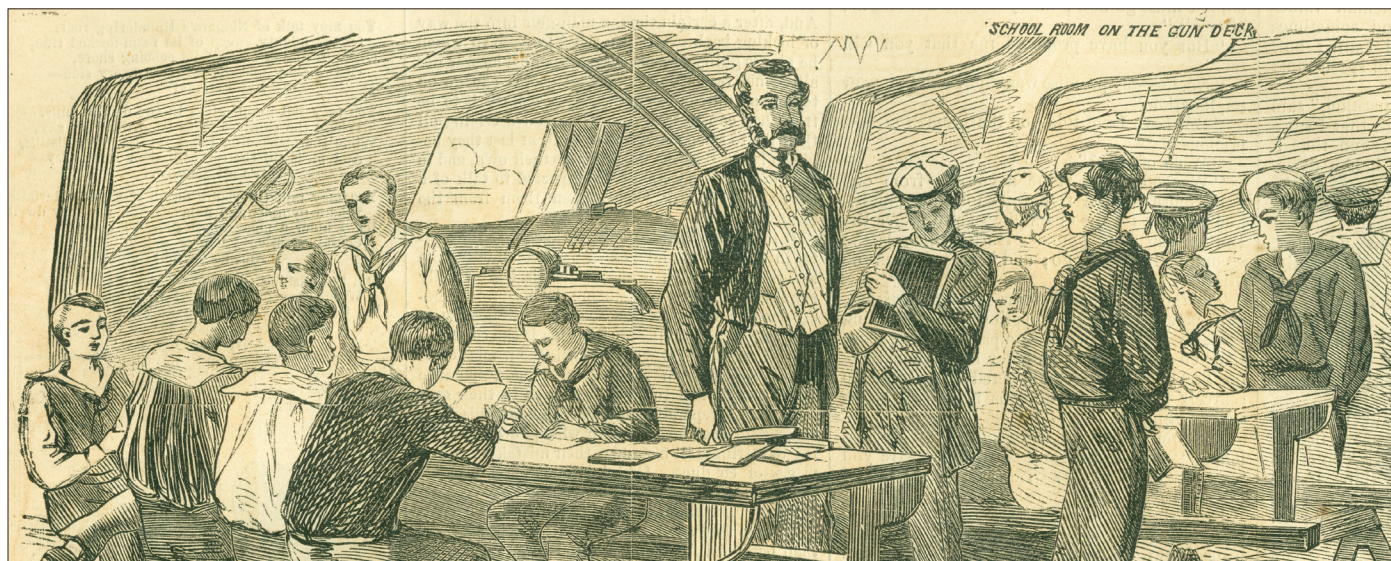
Throughout the remaining antebellum years and Civil War period, youths aged 12 to 18 years old enlisting in the US Navy as Boys First, Second, and Third Class received little formal education and/or training, but were generally expected to “learn the ropes,” and performed servant-like tasks aboard ship for officers, such as laundry and cleaning. In battle, they carried black powder from the ship’s magazine to the guns, thereby earning the nickname “powder monkeys.”<sup>13</sup>

## Apprentice System During the Civil War

During 1863, Lieutenant-Commander Stephen B. Luce, commanding the US Naval Academy practice ship *Macedonian*, returned from a cruise to Britain, where he had made a thorough examination of the English Naval Apprentice System at Plymouth and Portsmouth.<sup>14</sup> Based on his favorable reports to Secretary Gideon Welles, the

Navy Department decided to revive its own apprentice system on May 27, 1864, and the frigate *Sabine* was put in commission at the Boston Navy Yard as a school ship, as well as receiving ship, under command of Lieutenant Commander Reigert B. Lowry. In acknowledgment, the *Army and Navy Journal* of June 11, 1864, stated, “We see no reason why these school-ships should not become popular, and ambitious boys, with a natural taste for the sea, be eager to improve the advantages they offer.”<sup>15</sup>

By mid-August 1864, the *Sabine* was anchored off Portland, Maine, and parents and guardians were invited to bring boys aged between 14 and 18 years aboard for enlistment. The first boy enlisted was E. Conledge Harrington, of Roxbury, Massachusetts. This may have been Eliot C. Harrington who rose to the rank of Mate by February 5, 1868, but resigned from the navy on November 20, 1870.<sup>16</sup> Apprentices who served the entire term of their enlistment received an Honorable Discharge at 21 years of age. A letter inserted in the *Daily Eastern Argus* advised that no “vagabond boys or any guilty of moral delinquency, or any who have been convicted of any crime,” would be accepted.<sup>17</sup> On October 28, 1864, *Sabine* replaced the *Young Rover* as guard ship at Hampton Roads, off Fortress Monroe, Virginia.<sup>18</sup> By December 1864, she was stationed off Norfolk, Virginia, and had 250 boys aboard.<sup>19</sup>



School Room on the Gun Deck. Line engraving published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 451, p 520, August 19, 1865. School was taught for 1 hour, 35 minutes every day on the gun deck. One schoolmaster was authorized for every 50 apprentices and was assisted by Apprentice Petty Officers, Monitors of guns' crews and sections, and the Mates of the vessel. Subjects taught consisted of reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, and English grammar. Any boy who failed to obtain promotion from one class to a higher within six months, or whose progress was considered unsatisfactory, was considered as a backward boy and was given an additional half hour's study daily. The boys also received at least one hour of religious instruction from the Chaplain, assisted by other officers, every Sunday.

# The Navy Apprentice System, 1837-1875

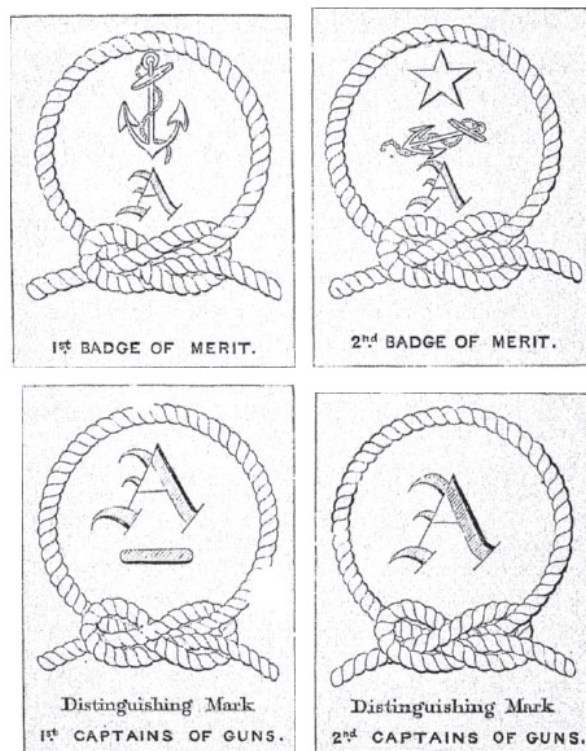
Enlistees were rated as Boys 2nd and 3rd Class, with opportunity of promotion to Boy 1st Class. Occasionally, the latter could be appointed as midshipman to the Naval Academy at Newport, Rhode Island, and later Annapolis, Maryland. At 14 years of age they were to be not less than four feet 10 inches in height and 27 inches around the chest. Pay was \$8 per month. According to

an article published in *Harper's Weekly* on August 19, 1865, each candidate was required to be able to read, write, and spell, be free of physical disabilities, well grown, healthy, active, and exhibit an aptitude for the ocean and the duties of sea-life." The uniform clothing and equipment issued consisted of "One pea-jacket, cloth cap, pair of cloth trousers, flannel over and under shirts, pair of drawers, shoes, neck-tie, socks, white duck pants and frock, comb, knife, pot, pan, and spoon, one bar soap, clothes-bag, and a badge."<sup>20</sup>

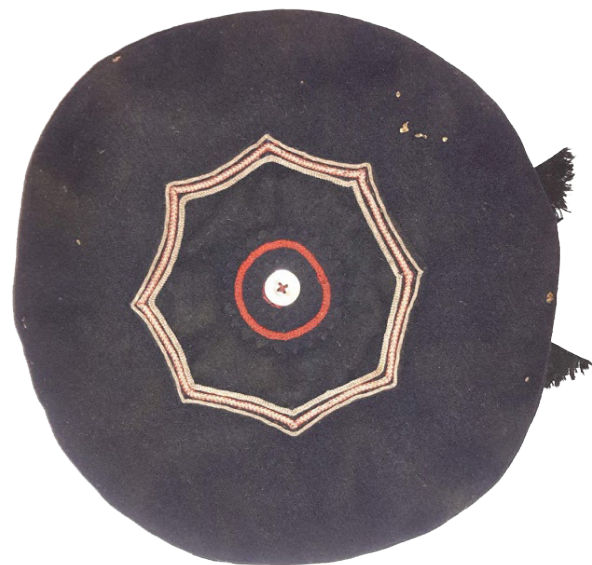
As an illustration of a single day's experience aboard the *Sabine*, *Harper's Weekly* (August 19, 1865) published the following account:



One of only 24 Navy Chaplains in navy service at the beginning of the Civil War, 51-year-old Thomas G. Salter was born in Connecticut in 1808 and was an Episcopal Clergyman residing at Dover in Strafford County, New Hampshire, when the war began. He was appointed Chaplain aboard the *Sabine* in 1864 and was transferred to the *Saratoga* on July 15, 1868. After prolonged illness he died of "chronic dyspepsia" at the Boston Navy Yard on February 24, 1872. A successful product of the apprenticeship system, his son Thomas G.C. Salter enrolled as an apprentice and was one of the few boys appointed to the Naval Academy on September 20, 1866. He graduated with the Class of 1870 and became an Ensign on July 13, 1871. He served in the Navy until retirement in 1893, having reached the rank of Lieutenant on August 30, 1881. Carte de visite by Morgan & Kenyon, 55 State Street, New London, Connecticut. Mike McAfee Collection.



Badges of Merit and Distinguishing Marks were awarded to those apprentices who had served six months with general good conduct, had made satisfactory progress in drills and school studies, had passed examinations, and performed the duties of petty officer. They consisted of a looped cable within which was an Old English letter "A" accompanied by rank device of the petty officer whose duties they have performed. Top left: cockswain or boatswain's mate. Top right: master-at-arms. Bottom left: first captain of gun. Bottom right: second captain of gun. These insignia were worked in gold silk thread for the cable and silver silk thread for the inset device when worn on the mustering jacket. Gold and silver was replaced by yellow and white when worn on the frock. From: Bureau of Navigation, Navy Department. *Regulations and Routine of Drills, Exercises, and Studies, On Board of Apprentice-Vessels* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1869), p 62.



This cap was worn by 17-year-old William Wentz who enlisted at New York as an apprentice and Boy Second Class on October 14, 1864. According to his rendezvous report, he had blue eyes, brown hair, a fair complexion, and was five feet three inches tall. In navy fashion, he had a shield tattooed on his left hand. Commander Gerald C. Roxbury, USN, Retired Collection.

“At daylight all the apprentices are turned out of their hammocks, which are stored in the nettings. The decks are washed down, and at 7 o’clock the boys are sent over the mast-head to familiarize them with that duty. At 7.30 breakfast is served; twenty minutes are allowed for the meal. At 9 o’clock all hands are ready to begin the exercises of the day. At 9.30 all hands go to quarters for inspection, after which the usual exercises are carried in till ¼ past 10. At 11 o’clock drill ceases, and at noon dinner is served. At 1 o’clock, the boys are again sent over the mast-heads. This occupies about a quarter of an hour in all its details. At ¼ to three school begins and is dismissed at 4.20. At 5 supper is served; at 6 the boys again run over the mast-heads. From 6.30 to 7 they are exercised in boating, battalion drill, or in reefing, furling, and loosing sails. After these exercises, recreation is indulged in; at 9 the signal is given to return to their hammocks, and at 9.30 p.m. ‘silence’ is ordered.”<sup>21</sup>

On December 12, 1864, the *New York Herald* reported the curriculum as consisting of “all the minutiae of man-of-war details, including rigging and unrigging masts and yards, bending and unbending sails, knotting, splicing, strapping blocks, heaving the lead, steering, making signals, pointing, grafting, weaving mats, making gaskets, reefing, furling, using muskets, pistols and cutlasses, exercising great guns, target firing, pulling oars, &c., &c.”<sup>22</sup>



A Young Tailor. Line engraving published in *Harper’s Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 451, p 521, August 19, 1865. As with adult enlisted sailors, apprentices were expected to make and mend their clothing and three hours were set aside for this activity, especially when in port.

# The Navy Apprentice System, 1837-1875



Knotting and Splicing. Line engraving published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 451, p 521, August 19, 1865. For instruction in knot tying, a "jack-stay" was stretched along the gun deck. At intervals of three feet small pieces of rope about 70 inches long were spliced to it. Each boy in the class held one piece of rope and awaited orders from the instructor who told them which knot or bend was to be made. The instructor then came around to examine the work and explain its uses.



The Mariners Compass. Line engraving published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 451, p 520, August 19, 1865. The Master, or other line officer of the vessel, gave instruction in navigation that included the use of the quadrant, octant, and sextant, and finding the latitude at sea, the longitude by chronometer. Here they learn the points of the compass.



Rifle Drill. Line engraving published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 451, p 521, August 19, 1865. Apprentices were regularly drilled in small arms, whether afloat or ashore, either by the officers of the Great Gun Divisions, or at General Drills and Exercises by the Executive Officer of the vessel, who commanded them in battalion drill.



Practising Gunnery. Line engraving published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 451, p 520, August 19, 1865. All apprentices were taught to man and fire the ship's great guns under the overall supervision of the Gunner. This included learning the nomenclature of the gun; sponging, loading, and pointing; dismounting and transporting; and detail of cartridges, shells, fuzes, and primers.



Singlestick. Line engraving published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 451, p 521, August 19, 1865. Apprentices were drilled in the use of the cutlass by companies, guns' crews, or in squads. On these occasions "single stick" practice cutlasses were used with blade of oak and hilt of toughened leather.



# The Navy Apprenticeship System, 1837-1875

## Post-Civil War Apprenticeship System

The naval apprentice system continued to develop during the postwar years. By 1867, the sloops-of-war *Saratoga*, stationed at New London, Connecticut, and *Portsmouth*, stationed at Norfolk, Virginia, were fitted out as practice ships for cruising purposes.<sup>23</sup> During the same year, a division of practice ships stationed at the Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, consisted of the sloops *Macedonian*, *Savannah*, and *Dale* under Commander Luce, and individual apprentices were assigned to each of these vessels. For example, Apprentice William G. Gilded arrived aboard the *Sabine* on April 12, 1865, and shipped aboard the *Macedonian* on July 1, 1865.<sup>24</sup>

In 1869, the Bureau of Navigation of the Navy Department published *Regulations and Routine of Drills, Exercises, and Studies, On Board of Apprentice-Vessels* which prescribed every aspect of the training of apprentices (available at [civilwarnavy.com/downloads/](http://civilwarnavy.com/downloads/)). On April 8, 1875, Secretary of the Navy George M. Robeson issued a circular that further consolidated the apprentice system. As a result, receiving ships for boys were established with the frigate *Minnesota* anchored in the New York Navy Yard and the *Michigan* at Erie, Pennsylvania.<sup>25</sup>

Thus, by the mid-1870s, the future of a well-trained supply of young American sailors was properly secured. Following further development and expansion during the remainder of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the naval apprenticeship system became the bone and sinew of the nation's naval strength and pride.

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3. An Act to provide for the enlistment of boys for the naval service, and extend the term of the enlistment of seamen, Approved March 2, 1837. *Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, 24th Congress, Session II, Volume V, p 153.
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