

Benjamin Hiller & the Cutter *Pickering* in the Quasi-War with France

by William H. Thiesen

Beginning in 1798, the United States and Revolutionary France fought an undeclared naval war known as the “Quasi-War,” just fourteen years after the end of the American Revolution. Angered that the United States had remained neutral in its struggle with Great Britain, France issued armed privateers letters of marque, papers permitting them to prey on American merchant vessels sailing the high seas. The fledgling US Navy was hardly equipped to take on this first test on its own, thus, American naval strategists called on the Revenue Cutter Service to help battle the privateers. The Revenue Cutter Service had been established in 1790 by the US Treasury Department with an initial fleet of ten cutters to enforce tariff laws. As an armed enforcement agency, the Service’s cutters were in a position to assist the navy, and they distinguished themselves fighting side-by-side with units of the United States Navy.

These cutters were designed to be fast sailers, as they needed to be able to catch vessels at sea trying to avoid paying tariffs. By early 1798, the Treasury Department employed the Merrill Shipyard of Newburyport, Massachusetts, to build a new cutter based on the plans of noted naval architect Josiah Fox, who had been involved with the design and building of the first naval frigates. Named in honor of then-Secretary of State Timothy



This painting of the Cutter Eagle capturing the French privateer Mehitable illustrates the sort of naval activities carried out by the cutters during the Quasi-War. US Navy ships and Revenue Cutter Service vessels worked together to capture and re-capture vessels held by the French. Most engagements were fought between the Caribbean and eastern seaboard of the United States. The ships themselves were often transferred from one agency to the other. The Eagle was built in 1798 for the Revenue Cutter Service but was transferred to the Navy that same year for service in the Quasi-War. She was officially commissioned as a US Navy ship in 1800. At only 58 feet in length and manned with a ship’s complement of seventy, this little vessel captured or assisted in the capture of twenty-two French vessels.

Pickering, the sleek two-masted cutter was fitted with double headsails and double topsails to each of its raked masts. The ship’s considerable spread of canvas in proportion to her hull size would provide greater speed and enable the cutter to overtake the highly mobile privateers. Smithsonian maritime historian Howard Chapelle referred to the cutter’s sail configuration as a “jackass brig,” but contemporaries just called it a brig. *Pickering* carried fourteen guns, even though a contemporary rendering shows the brig pierced by ten gunports per side. She was manned by a crew complement of seventy, which included a master, mates, able seamen, ordinary seamen, and boys.

New Englander Benjamin Hiller, captain of the *Pickering* for the final year of its career, was born in Boston in the 1770s. Before joining the Revenue Cutter Service, he was most likely an unmarried itinerant mariner, so few records document his early life in that city. Birth and marriage records indicate, however, that he was a member of the Hiller family of Boston, known locally for fine silversmithing work. Benjamin Hiller’s uncle, Revolutionary War hero Major Joseph Hiller, served as Salem’s collector of customs from 1789 to 1802. Major Hiller’s close ties to the Washington and Adams presidential administrations and his position as customs collector most likely helped his nephew win a mate’s commission onboard *Pickering* when the cutter set sail on its maiden voyage in 1798.

Aboard *Pickering*, and Benjamin Hiller served under two successive ship’s masters early in the war. Revenue Cutter Service Master Jonathan Chapman



(left) In addition to playing an important role in designing the US Navy’s first frigates, naval architect Josiah Fox (1763-1847) produced the plans for US Revenue Cutter Service cutter Pickering.

commanded the brig through the end of 1798 before resigning. In January 1799, at a time when Revenue Cutter Service masters typically commanded the Service's cutters, the Navy gave distinguished lieutenant Edward Preble command of *Pickering* to occupy him temporarily while shipbuilders completed the 32-gun frigate USS *Essex*. Meanwhile, Hiller advanced through the ranks, serving as a Revenue Cutter Service mate through 1798; in late January 1799, he received a US Navy lieutenant's commission. After seeing nearly a year of action under Chapman and Preble, the Revenue Cutter Service transferred control of *Pickering* to the navy in late May of 1799 and newly-commissioned Hiller assumed command a month later.

Hiller established quite a reputation for himself in this capacity. During his command, between the summers of 1799 and 1800, *Pickering* captured (or recaptured) fifteen vessels. This included one armed merchantman and four armed privateers, a few of which rivalled *Pickering's* own fighting strength in weapons and crew. *Pickering's* battle with the privateer *l'Egypte Conquise* serves as a testament to Hiller and his crew's bravery in the face of tremendous odds. In October 1799,

(right) This portrait depicts Benjamin Hiller's uncle, Major Joseph Hiller, who had become a friend of George Washington during the American Revolution. As customs collector for Salem in the 1790s, Joseph Hiller likely had a hand in getting Benjamin a mate's position onboard the new Revenue Cutter Service cutter.



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France sent its most powerful privateer in the West Indies on a mission to capture *Pickering*. With at least fourteen nine- and six-pound guns and double-manned with between 175 and 250 men, the privateer out-gunned and out-manned *Pickering's* defenses of fourteen four-pounders and a

crew, including marines, that numbered no more than a hundred men. Described by witnesses as "severe," the duel occurred on 8 October 1799. It continued for five hours, ceased for an hour and recommenced for three more hours, after which the privateer struck its colors and

Cutter *Pickering*

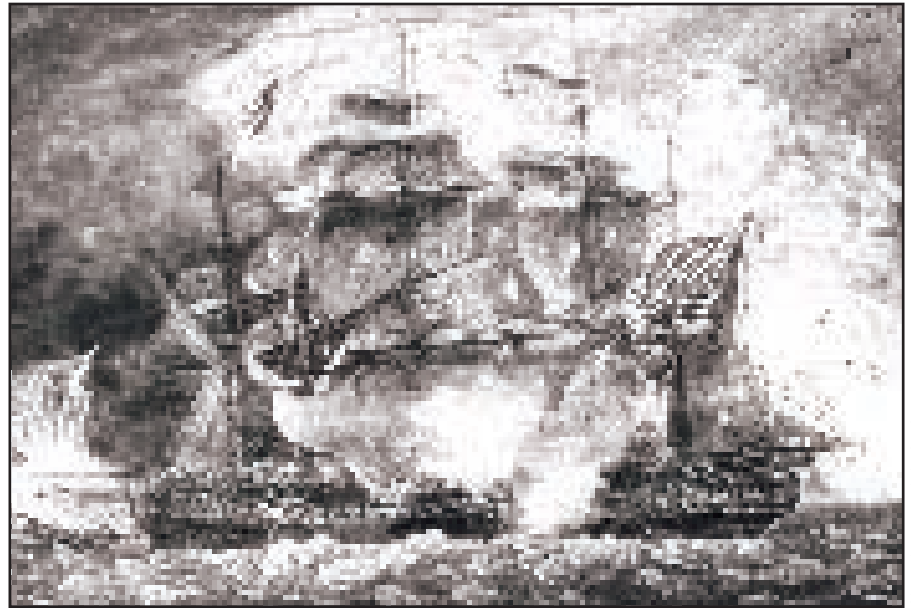


This contemporary rendering shows the 1798 Revenue Cutter *Pickering* pierced by ten gun ports per side, even though sources indicated that the cutter carried only fourteen guns. Congress, guided by Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, established the Revenue-Marine (later renamed the Revenue Cutter Service) in 1790 as an armed maritime law enforcement service. The agency began with a fleet of ten cutters. The term "cutter" refers to a specific type of sailing vessel, "a small, decked ship with one mast and bowsprit, with a gaff mainsail on a boom, a square yard and topsail, and two jibs or a jib and a staysail."¹ All the vessels built for the Revenue Cutter Service were designated as such, regardless of number of masts. The cutter *Pickering*, for example, stepped two masts and was rigged as a "jackass" brig. A 1915 Act of Congress combined the Revenue Cutter Service and the US Lifesaving Service to create the Coast Guard. Today a cutter in the Coast Guard is any USCG vessel over sixty-five feet in length.

¹(Peter Kemp, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Ships & the Sea*; London: Oxford University Press, 1976; pp. 221-222.)

surrendered. As often happened with reports from the Caribbean theater, it took the news a full month to travel north, and initial reports misrepresented aspects of the battle. Even some of today's accepted histories of *Pickering* claim that Preble commanded the ship during this capstone achievement despite the fact that Hiller had taken command of *Pickering* three months before. In addition to capturing privateers, *Pickering* re-captured more than ten American merchant ships the French had taken in earlier actions.

Captain Hiller grew to be highly esteemed by the American public, the press, and his superiors. In March 1800, New England newspapers printed the following: "We learn, that complaints are made in the West Indies of our naval commanders lounging at St. Kitts; except Lieut. Hiller, in the *Pickering*, who bears the reputation of an enterprising zealous officer." After *Pickering* returned to port in May, another paper reported, "The greatest praise is due to this enterprising commander, both for his vigilance in protecting the convoys under his care, in scourging the spoliators of our commerce, and in the excellent management and discipline of the



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This contemporary rendering shows the French frigate l'Insurgente (on the left) during its duel with USS Constellation off Nevis in the Caribbean in 1799. L'Insurgente became a prize vessel and was subsequently refitted and put in service to the US Navy as USS Insurgent. She was last seen on 8 August 1800 when she left Hampton Roads, Virginia, and sailed for the West Indies. It is presumed that the ship and all hands perished in the hurricane of 20 September 1800, along with the cutter Pickering and her crew.

ship and crew under his command. The crew without exception of an individual,

are all returned in perfect health." A later article claimed that "The activity of her commander is warmly spoken of at the southward—it deserves praise all around the compass." Navy Secretary Benjamin Stoddert was also aware of Hiller's qualities, writing to others "the Commander is an active and enterprising man, and well qualified to do good Service." In portending Hiller's future, Stoddert wrote to him, "The President is sensible of your merit, & will not be unmindful of it." By June of 1800, the merchants of Boston had asked Captain Thomas Truxtun to lobby Secretary Stoddert for a captaincy on behalf of Hiller and Hiller received a promotion to master commandant soon afterward.

Late in the summer of 1800, Hiller steered *Pickering* out of its anchorage in Delaware Bay to set out on yet another Caribbean tour. In late September, a hurricane brewed along the equator and swept up through the Bahamas with devastating winds and towering waves that threatened even the American frigate *Insurgent*, recently captured from the French. Onboard the cutter *Scammel*, the crew jettisoned guns and anchors in

Ships Captured by Cutter *Pickering*

Name	Type	Activity	Date	Captain
<i>Fair American</i>	Brig	re-capture	1799	Preble
<i>Francis</i>	Schooner	re-capture	1799	Preble
<i>Cynthia</i>	Schooner	re-capture	1799	Hiller
_____	English Sloop	re-capture	1799	Hiller
<i>Helen</i>	Schooner	re-capture	1799	Hiller
<i>Brothers</i>	Brig	re-capture	1799	Hiller
_____	Danish Ship	re-capture	1799	Hiller
<i>l'Egypte Conquise</i>	Privateer (14 guns)	capture	1799	Hiller
<i>Helen</i>	Brig	re-capture	1799	Hiller
<i>La Voltigeuse</i>	Privateer (10 guns)	capture	1799	Hiller
<i>Atalanta</i>	Armed merchantman	capture	1799	Hiller
<i>Henrich</i>	Brig	re-capture	1799	Hiller
<i>Mary</i>	Brig	re-capture	1800	Hiller
<i>Eliza</i>	Brig	re-capture	1800	Hiller
<i>Harriet</i>	Schooner	re-capture	1800	Hiller
<i>Fly</i>	Privateer (4 guns)	capture	1800	Hiller
<i>l'Active</i>	Privateer (12 guns)	capture	1800	Hiller
<i>Portland</i>	Ship	re-capture	1800	Hiller

Source: Dudley Knox, editor, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War between the United States and France*, vols. I-V (Washington: Govt. Printing Office, 1935-1937).

an effort to ride out the hurricane. Over on the *Pickering*, a similar scene of bravery and desperation likely played out as Benjamin Hiller and his crew fought to save their ship.

As the deadly hurricane moved on, it left only one of the US warships afloat. It was the *Scammel*, however, that survived to fight another day. The winds and sea conditions must have been horrific to have swallowed up the 148-foot frigate *Insurgent* and her 340 men without leaving a trace. With the sudden disappearance of *Pickering*, rumors spread in the papers that Hiller and his crew had been captured and massacred in a French takeover of Curaçao. The massacre never happened, and by the time newspapers printed this rumor in October, the ship, skipper and crew had been gone for a month. A newspaper article printed in December probably provided a more likely account. It noted that a merchant vessel sailing through the hurricane's track, after it had passed, reported "a large copper-bottomed brig, with quarter-boards and a range of ports, was seen bottom upwards."

The case of *Pickering* underscores the obstacles to documenting the early history of the Revenue Cutter Service and of any ship that put to sea never to return. When *Pickering* went down in that September storm, it took with it many documents, including bookkeeping records, letters, logbooks, and memoirs. In addition, the sacking of Washington by the British in the War of 1812 and fires at the Treasury Department in the early 1800s destroyed much of the archival material that was left to document the story of this historic cutter and crew. Today, only contemporary accounts from newspapers, a few Treasury letters, and some naval records can trace *Pickering's* distinguished history.

The *Pickering's* story is one of many lost chapters in the history of the Coast Guard and its predecessor services. During his day, Master Commandant Benjamin Hiller was considered quite the hero by both the general citizenry and within the Revenue Cutter Service and the US Navy. Had *Pickering* survived that September hurricane, it is possible that Hiller could have achieved even greater feats of heroism and joined the pantheon of early American

naval figures, such as Thomas Truxtun, Stephen Decatur Jr. and Edward Preble. With the loss of his ship with all hands, Benjamin Hiller is a forgotten leader and warrior from a forgotten war. No portrait or rendering commemorates his existence, and no obituary or grave stone memorializes his death. Captain Benjamin Hiller is one of the many unrecognized heroes of the Coast Guard and its predecessor services who have sacrificed their lives in the line of duty, each of whom is worthy of our attention and respect. †

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It was common for distinguished naval figures, such as Edward Preble (right), to sit for several portraits, such as this. Half a dozen naval ships have been named in his honor as well. There are no paintings, renderings, or monuments that commemorate the service of distinguished cutter captain Benjamin Hiller.

*Unlike many of our naval heroes of the period whose paper trails allow historians to retrace their lives completely, gaps in the records for Captain Hiller leave room for some guesswork. He was not registered in any of the census records and city directories for the Boston area at the time, but they do list his brother Thomas, who was a stevedore. There are no birth or marriage records for him and his estate records show that he never married; however, it is indicated that he spent a little time in England. Based on his incredible record as a mate and then captain aboard *Pickering*, there can be no doubt that he was a skilled leader and mariner—he was no older than 30 years. That would indicate that he had made a living on the sea for some, if not all, of his previous career—but no one knows where he sailed during that time.*

(Preble portrait courtesy of the Naval Historical Center)

