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Coast Guard History

Frequently Asked Questions

When was the Coast Guard established?

The Coast Guard is an amalgamation of five formerly distinct federal services. The following timeline reflects the establishment of those services and when they became part of what is now the United States Coast Guard as well as changes in the organizational structure of the Coast Guard itself.

- 7 August 1789: The service, eventually to be known as the U.S. Lighthouse Service, was established under the control of the Treasury Department (1 Stat. L., 53).
- 1 September 1789: Navigation law administration was placed under Secretary of the Treasury by an act of 1 September 1789 (1 Stat. 55), with local enforcement by Treasury customs officials. On 22 January 1793, the Register of the Treasury became responsible for vessel documentation and for navigation and tonnage statistics. The Bureau of Statistics was established by an act of 28 July 1866 (14 Stat. 331), to collect navigation statistics, assign numbers to merchant vessels, and publish the annual list of American merchant vessels. Pursuant to acts of 26 May 1790 (1 Stat. 122) and 3 March 1797 (1 Stat. 506), district court judges submitted requests to the Secretary of the Treasury for remission of fines and penalties under the navigation laws. The Navigation Division was established in the Treasury Department in 1870 to administer the fines and penalties function. Redesignated as the Internal Revenue and Navigation Division in 1878 it was redesignated Mercantile Marine and Internal Revenue Division in 1884. It was abolished in 1887. U.S. circuit courts handled disputes between seamen and masters until 7 June 1872 when judges were authorized to appoint shipping commissioners at various ports to administer navigation laws relating to merchant seamen.
- 4 August 1790: Congress authorized the Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, to create a maritime service to enforce customs laws (1 Stat. L. 145, 175). Alternately known as the *system of cutters*, *Revenue Service*, and *Revenue-Marine* this service was placed under the control of the Treasury Department.
- 7 July 1838: Vessel inspections, first required by an act of 7 July 1838 (5 Stat. 304), were performed by engineers appointed by U.S. District Court judges. The Steamboat Act (10 Stat. 61), 30 August 1852, formally established the Steamboat Inspection Service in the Department of the Treasury and authorized the appointment of supervising steam vessel inspectors, who collectively constituted the Board of Supervising Inspectors. An

act of 28 February 1871 (16 Stat. 458), authorized the appointment of a Supervising Inspector General for the Steamboat Inspection Service. Steamboat Inspection Service was transferred to the Department of Commerce and Labor by act of 14 February 1903 (32 Stat. 825), and to the Department of Commerce by act of 4 March 1913 (37 Stat. 736). It was combined with the Bureau of Navigation to form Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection by act of 30 June 1932 (47 Stat. 415). It was renamed Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation in 1936.

- 14 August 1848: Congress appropriated funds to pay for life-saving equipment to be used by volunteer organizations (9 Stat. L., 321, 322).
- 30 August 1852: Steamboat Act established the Steamboat Inspection Service under the control of the Treasury Department (10 Stat. L. 61, 1852).
- 9 October 1852: The Lighthouse Board, which administered the nation's lighthouse system until 1 July 1910, was organized. "This Board was composed of two officers of the Navy, two officers of the Engineer Corps, and two civilians of high scientific attainments whose services were at the disposal of the President, and an officer of the Navy and of the, Engineers as secretaries. It was empowered under the Secretary of the Treasury to "discharge all the administrative duties" relative to lighthouses and other aids to navigation. The Secretary of the Treasury was president of the Board, and it was authorized to elect a chairman and to divide the coast of the United States into twelve lighthouse districts, to each of which the President was to assign an army or navy officer as lighthouse inspector."
- 18 June 1878: U.S. Life-Saving Service established as a separate agency under the control of the Treasury Department (20 Stat. L., 163).
- 5 July 1884: U.S. Bureau of Navigation was established in the Treasury Department by act of 5 July 1884 (23 Stat 118), to consolidate the administration of all navigation laws except those relating to vessel inspection, lighthouses, lifesaving, and revenue collection. Comprised of employees from the Bureau of Statistics concerned with numbering merchant vessels; the Register and Tonnage Division of the Register of the Treasury; the Internal Revenue and Navigation Division; and shipping commissioners, thereafter appointed by the Secretary of the Treasury. It was transferred to Department of Commerce and Labor by act of 14 February 1903 (32 Stat. 825), and to the Department of Commerce by act of 4 March 1913 (37 Stat. 736). It was consolidated with Steamboat Inspection Service, effective 1 August 1932, by an appropriations act of 30 June 1932 (47 Stat. 415) to form the Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection. It was redesignated Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation by Public Law 622 (49 Stat. L., 1380), 27 May 1936.

- 14 February 1903: Congress created the Department of Commerce and Labor (32 Stat. L., Ch. 552). Bureau of Navigation, Steamship Inspection Service, and Lighthouse Service (Lighthouse Board and Lighthouse Establishment) were transferred to the new department (32 Stat. L., 825-827) .
- 17 June 1910: An Act of Congress (36 Stat. L., 534) abolished the Lighthouse Board and created the Bureau of Lighthouses to have complete charge of the Lighthouse Service (Establishment). This law constituted the organic act under which the Lighthouse Service operated thereafter. Mr. George R. Putnam, the first Commissioner of Lighthouses, took office on 1 July 1910. He served in that capacity until his retirement in 1935.
- 4 March 1913: The Department of Commerce and Labor was renamed Department of Commerce.
- 28 January 1915: President Woodrow Wilson signed into law the "Act to Create the Coast Guard," an act passed by Congress on 20 January, 1915 that combined the Life-Saving Service and Revenue Cutter Service to form the Coast Guard (38 Stat. L., 800).
- 6 April 1917: With the declaration of war against Germany the Coast Guard was transferred by Executive Order to the control of the Navy Department.
- 28 August 1919: Coast Guard reverted to Treasury Department after President Wilson signed Executive Order 3160.
- 30 June 1932: Steamboat Inspection Service and Bureau of Navigation were combined to form the Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection (47 Stat. L., 415). The new agency remained under Commerce Department control.
- 27 May 1936: Public Law 622 reorganized and changed the name of the Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection Service to Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation (49 Stat. L., 1380). The Bureau remained under Commerce Department control.
- 1 September 1938: The U. S. Maritime Service was placed under the administration of the Coast Guard. The Coast Guard was then responsible for administering the Maritime Service's training stations.
- 1 July 1939: The Lighthouse Service became part of the Coast Guard (53 Stat. L., 1432).
- 1 November 1941: President Roosevelt's Executive Order 8929 transferred the Coast Guard to Navy Department control.

- 28 February 1942: Executive Order 9083 transferred Bureau of Marine Inspection temporarily to the Coast Guard.
- 1 September 1942: The Coast Guard's administration of Maritime Service training ended and that power was transferred to the newly established War Shipping Administration.
- 1 January 1946: In compliance with Executive Order 9666, the Coast Guard returned to Treasury Department control.
- In April 1946 the Coast Guard created the Eastern, Western, and Pacific Area commands to coordinate cases that required the assets of more than one district.
- 16 July 1946: Pursuant to Executive Order 9083 and Reorganization Plan No. 3 the Bureau of Marine Inspection was abolished and became a permanent part of the Coast Guard under Treasury Department control.
- 31 March 1948: The Tenth District, with headquarters at San Juan, Puerto Rico and comprising of the Panama Canal Zone, all of the island possessions of the United States pertaining to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, and all United States reservations in the islands of the West Indies and on the north coast of South America, was abolished, and its functions, responsibilities, and facilities were transferred to and combined with the Seventh District, with headquarters at Miami, Florida.
- 1 April 1967: Executive Order 167-81 transferred the Coast Guard from the Treasury Department to the newly-formed Department of Transportation.
- 1967: The Bridge Program was transferred from the Army Corp of Engineers to the U.S. Coast Guard within the Department of Transportation. The Coast Guard then became responsible for approval of the location and plans of bridges and causeways constructed across navigable waters of U.S. In addition, the Coast Guard was responsible for approval of the location and plans of international bridges and the alteration of bridges found to be unreasonable obstructions to navigation. Authority for these actions is found in in the following laws: 33 U.S.C 401, 491, 494, 511-524, 525 and 535a, 535b, 535c, 535e, 535f, 535g, and 535h (Note: these are all separate sections, not subsections of 535). Section 535 and following is popularly known as the International Bridge Act of 1972. The implementing regulations are found in Title 33, Code of Federal Regulations Parts 114 through 118.
- In January 1973, the Coast Guard renamed the Eastern and Western areas to the Atlantic and Pacific areas, respectively.

- 30 May 1996: The Eighth and Second Districts were combined to form the new Eighth District.
- 1 March 2003: The Coast Guard formally transferred from the Department of Transportation to the newly-created Department of Homeland Security.
- 2004: To create unity of command in America's ports, better align field command structures, and improve Coast Guard operational effectiveness, Sector Commands were created throughout the Coast Guard by integrating Groups, Marine Safety Offices (MSOs), Vessel Traffic Services (VTSs), and in some cases, Air Stations. Sector Commands were established by 2006.