

“Don't Give Up The Ship!”

A TERRIBLE DEFEAT IN THE ATLANTIC WOULD RESULT IN THE US NAVY'S MOST FAMOUS RALLYING CRY
BY ADAM BISNO



During June 1813, the men of the HMS *Shannon* captured the US Navy frigate USS *Chesapeake*. In Halifax, Nova Scotia, citizens rejoiced. However, just 400 miles down the Atlantic coast, many Bostonians who had witnessed the battle openly wept in the streets. What had gone wrong involving the capture of this American frigate?

The news of the capture of the American ship became a focal point for public opinion on both sides of the Atlantic. This story, then, is about much more than what happened in the waters outside of Boston on the first of June 1813. It is also about citizens of America and Britain attempting to make meaning on what had become known as the War of 1812 — an enigmatic and ambivalent, yet decisive, moment in the history of the early American Republic.

The loss of the *Chesapeake* is significant in two respects. First, there is the incident itself — its causes and its lessons for the US Navy. But there is also the bigger question of the meaning of the event to contemporaries in the USA, British North America, and Great Britain; for the loss of the *Chesapeake* had its greatest impact regarding a set of stories people told about the war: Why it started, what it was supposed to accomplish, and whether it could be won.

The Navy assigned Capt. James Lawrence to USS *Chesapeake* in early May 1813. A few months earlier, Lawrence had achieved fame for his actions on board the sloop *Hornet*, which engaged and ultimately sank HMS *Peacock*, near Georgetown, Guiana (see sidebar).

His status as national hero notwithstanding, Lawrence now faced an inauspicious challenge when it came to manning *Chesapeake*. Much of the crew was refusing to re-enlist until a dispute about the distribution of prize money could be resolved. In their stead, Lawrence took a less-seasoned cohort of recruits.

Lawrence was in a hurry. William



The USS *Chesapeake* was one of the first six frigates constructed specifically for the USS Navy. She was launched in 1799. This oil painting was done circa 1910 by Frank Muller.



The USS *Chesapeake* in full sail.

Jones, Secretary of the Navy, wanted *Chesapeake* underway and patrolling for British supply ships as soon as possible. Beyond that objective, Jones' orders become less precise. “If in the course of your cruise you should derive such information of the force of the enemy, or other sufficient cause,

as to render a strict adherence to my instructions prejudicial to the Public Service, you are at liberty to exercise your own judgement.”

Lawrence exercised such judgment on that day in June when he decided to engage *Shannon* off the coast of Massachusetts. It was barely two

PREVIOUS PAGE: This dramatic oil painting by Montague Dawson shows the close-in battle between the ill-prepared USS *Chesapeake* and HMS *Shannon*. The battle was over in eleven minutes but Capt. Broke was a bit more generous, stating in his log that the engagement lasted 15 minutes.