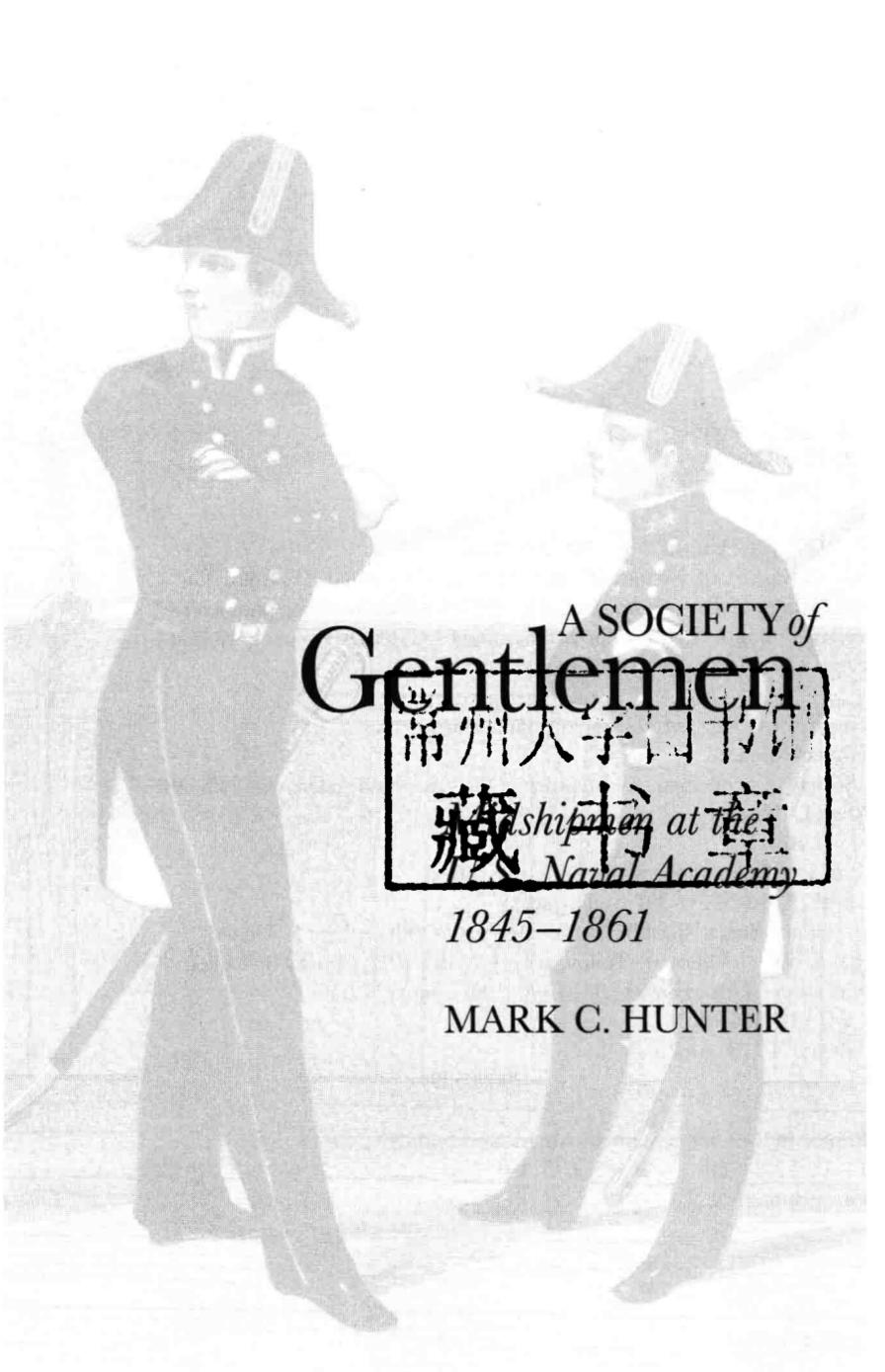


A SOCIETY OF Gentlemen

*Midshipmen at the
U.S. Naval Academy
1845–1861*

MARK C. HUNTER



A SOCIETY of
Gentlemen

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藏 *Shipmen at the*
藏 *Naval Academy*

1845-1861

MARK C. HUNTER

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INTRODUCTION

American naval history has concentrated primarily on battles, tactics, strategies, and the roles of great commanders in battle. It has rarely focused on sailors as a group, their social backgrounds, their training, or the society of which they were a part. Yet, there is debate about the relationship between the armed forces, the state, and the rise of professionalism. While most historians agree about the characteristics of a professional, they differ over when these characteristics emerged in the American armed forces. Samuel P. Huntington concludes that the professional soldier or sailor needs a type of specialized knowledge, or expertise, different from the public, gained through special training at institutions.¹ Similarly, Allen R. Millett believes that a profession is autonomous from the rest of society and entails a full-time commitment to service and identification with a “job subculture.” To “do other people’s unpleasant tasks,” a profession serves a client and refrains from passing judgment on the morality of the job. To uphold these standards, professions developed their own “ethical codes” and did their own recruiting and education to transform “an initiate into a fully-accepted member of a profession.”² Morris Janowitz notes that a “professional group develops a sense of group identity and a system of internal administration.”³ While Donald Chisholm explains that “occupations that achieve professional status do things full-time.”⁴

Huntington asserts that the main symbols of a professional American armed forces emerged between 1865 and 1914. This trend meant that Annapolis and West Point reduced their amount of “technical instruction,” and both services established graduate schools for technical and “advanced military study.” By 1884 Stephen Luce established the Naval War College, and by 1901 the Army created the Army War College. Moreover, professional military journals, promotion by merit, and greater bureaucratic organization also emerged in the postbellum era as further signs of professionalization.⁵ Connecting the military and civilian worlds, others surmise that professionalization in the late nineteenth century “fit well with the Progressive era’s emphasis on efficient management and scientific planning.”⁶

Frederick Winslow Taylor, a progressive-era engineer, was the pioneer of scientific management.⁷ He urged businesses to collect data, use it to develop rules for operations, and “scientifically select and then train, teach, and develop the workman.”⁸ Under this theory, the U.S. military adopted scientific management practices similar to those developed in the civilian world. Millett, for instance, opines that late-nineteenth-century generals eventually appreciated civilian management practices, underwent education, and used their experience to be a “hero, gentleman, student of human psychology, and manager.” The Civil War permitted this development because it killed many “amateurs,” allowing professional officers to rise through the ranks.⁹

Others, like William B. Skelton, surmise that U.S. armed forces professionalization emerged before the Civil War. Beyond West Point, the Army already had professional boards, officers wrote treatises, and the War Department established “schools of practice, training encampments, and other programs.” In sum, the army’s efforts “reflected an emerging professional culture in the antebellum officer corps.”¹⁰ This professional culture, Skelton argues, then attracted recruits from the commercial sector: those with political connections but a modest income, who desired an acceptable professional career.¹¹ Unlike the Army, the Navy had a clearly defined role even during peacetime: protecting diplomats and businessmen from threats like pirates and competitors along the Gulf of Mexico, the West African coast, and in the Pacific before the Civil War. Therefore, as Millett admits, the Navy “manifested more professional autonomy than the Army” and faced fewer impediments to the greater professionalization of its officer corps.¹² This study asserts that the U.S. Navy, through the U.S. Naval Academy, exhibited some of the characteristics of a profession in the antebellum era and sowed the seed for later developments after the Civil War.

Janowitz theorized that military professions use service academies to “set the standards of behavior” for their members. Moreover, service academies are important instruments that instill in recruits “‘like-mindedness’ about military honor” and help their students develop “the sense of fraternity which prevails among military men.”¹³ As a result, the Navy believed that its future officers needed structure, discipline, and appropriate role models to be an effective force and often tried to quantify these qualities during the midshipman’s stay at the academy. Annapolis took its lead from West Point’s system of classroom education, drill, and summer encampments. Training ashore over the academic year from October to June, the summer practice ships, established in 1851, then rounded out the young officer’s introduction to naval life. Annapolis selected and trained midshipmen as potential officers and then tested them at sea in a systematic and almost “scientific” manner. Here they were supervised by academy authorities and shown the at-sea responsibilities

of those who commanded others and worked on foreign stations. By 1859 this system was fully integrated with the shore-based system, with a school ship tied up at the academy during the academic year. In these safe and formal settings, instructors taught the midshipmen the corporateness and special requirements needed to fulfill their duties. The antebellum U.S. Naval Academy reveals that, before the Civil War, the Navy applied many of the criteria that historians have looked for in a professional organization.

Because of the changes that began at the institution at Annapolis in 1849, this study is divided into two periods: the school and academy eras. The former encompasses the time when the Navy founded the Naval School and catered to older midshipmen with prior sea experience (1845–49). The latter time, from the school's reorganization during the 1849–51 period, was when Annapolis educated younger students without prior sea experience until the outbreak of the Civil War. During both of these eras, vignettes will largely expand upon statistical data dealing with student backgrounds and discipline. Chapter 1 discusses how the Navy educated its officers before the foundation of the Naval School and Academy at Annapolis in 1845 and reveals that the new institution was a consolidation of efforts the Navy already used to educate its midshipmen. Still, the new structure, discussed in detail in chapter 2, was influenced by that of the Military Academy at West Point as the Navy brought forward plans for greater structure for officer education and development.

Chapter 2 shows that during the school era, students were older and had prior sea experience, but beginning in 1849 and into 1850 and 1851, the Naval School was reorganized. Under internal pressure from the Navy Examining Board, the Navy Board, and those who saw the success of the Army during the Mexican-American War, the Navy concluded that change was needed to educate its officers in truly a more professional manner. Annapolis supporters contended that the Navy's needs would be better served if new officers were taken directly from civilian schools while still youths and first educated at a naval academy similar to cadets at West Point before being sent to sea. This meant that only when the Navy educated a young man, often just in his early teens, on shore, did the Navy send them to sea to gain practical experience. All the while, the Navy assessed their suitability as officers and expunged those found deficient professionally in skill or character. To those ends, chapter 3, combined with statistical analysis, reveals the backgrounds of the academy-era students and how they were educated.

The program of studies and student supervision illustrates that the Navy considered it paramount to instill the organization's values into its young officer recruits, while realizing that they were learning the skills and ethos required of a professional officer. Nevertheless, the academy weeded out those who were unsuitable to the

Navy's needs. This was particularly shown in how the students were treated under school and academy discipline, the subject of chapters 4 and 5. Naval authorities believed in gradually introducing young students to the rigors of naval law and tried to reason with them as they taught them the expectations of their career. In turn, the school-era students were generally older and, contrary to myth, statistical analysis will show that they were generally well behaved. Meanwhile, during the academy era, students were much younger, often in their early teens, and academy officials concluded they should be given some leeway for simply acting as mere "boys." The institution often gave them warnings when in the real naval world they would have been severely punished. But in the end, the Navy still used discipline to teach the young recruits professional expectations. Ultimately, those who failed to meet them suffered a court martial.

The most remarkable change in naval officer education, to be discussed in chapter 6, was the establishment of summer cruises and the institution of school ships tied alongside the academy. Where new midshipmen were once educated on the job at sea, academy midshipmen were sent to sea under the supervision of academy officials. Here they were introduced to practical seamanship, navigation, and other skills to serve them in their future careers. On these cruises they also visited foreign ports and experienced a naval life all in the safe confines of their ship without the danger of active duty. Clearly the Navy no longer saw its young midshipmen as simply miniature officers, but also as recruits who first needed guidance and a clear introduction into naval life. Unfortunately, the Civil War interrupted this education and left Southern students to choose between upholding professional expectations and remaining in the Navy, or resigning and "going South." Meanwhile, the conclusion shows that many students failed to graduate, and many others spent little time in the Navy after graduation, moving on to other careers. But those who remained were the professional officers, like George Dewey, Alfred Thayer Mahan, and others, who contributed to the Navy's exploits and development after the Civil War.¹⁴ As James Calvert concludes, professionalism and academic need were pivotal in the Naval Academy's creation in 1845. Still, the institution's history was cyclical as it coped with the intertwined nature of congressional support, the Navy's duties, evolution, and periods of "high professionalism and productivity at the Academy."¹⁵

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The Foundation of a System

During the nineteenth century, Americans started to place greater emphasis on formal education for a professional career.¹ Engineering, for example, moved from shop training, apprenticeship style, to sustained education in universities like Yale and Rensselaer Polytechnic.² Meanwhile, the Naval Academy, established in 1845, was where young men went to become naval officers. However, change in American naval officer education was gradual. Those who advocated a centralized naval school faced a conservative officer corps that believed in tradition and a nation wary of powerful federal institutions. Consequently, before Annapolis, midshipmen attended several tenuous shore schools at naval yards, or on ships attached to the yards, and were educated at sea. Secretaries of the Navy, and some members of Congress, advocated more-structured naval education, but disagreements over its nature stalled change. Therefore, when he became secretary of the Navy in 1845, George Bancroft reorganized the system by using existing resources to show Congress that a new school at Annapolis worked. The idea built on existing trends, with support from naval officers who backed a formal way to educate naval officers for the growing needs of the country.

The duties and training of naval officers had a long tradition in the Atlantic world. As captains, officers commanded warships in accordance with government's instructions, while other officers ensured efficient vessel operations. The modern naval officer profession originated in Europe as states monopolized sea power, expanded their navies, and competed with each other. Before the development of a standing national navy, the British monarch, for example, called on private maritime resources, if needed. The monarch's officers gave the vessel's master a heading but played no part in the ship's operations: military and maritime operations were separate, and the relationship was temporary. While sufficient for hand-to-hand fighting and boarding the enemy's ships, where land tactics were essentially transferred to sea, the command structure was problematic as ship battles involving guns emerged. On a practical level, a naval officer, with both

military and seamanship skills, was born to coordinate effectively ship movement, gunfire, naval tactics, and strategy.³

Historically, as with army officers, European governments generally preferred naval officers who were from and loyal to their own class, often the nobility and upper class—from the elite. Norbert Elias contends that officers were gentlemen, and, at minimum, it was unseemly for them to have “done manual work at any time during” life.⁴ Elias asserts that the conflict in Britain between the upper and lower classes gave rise to “a new kind of officer corps,” with professional status that allowed middle- and upper-class Britons to embark on a seafaring career, in command of others, without the working-class stigma of a seafaring job associated with manual labor.⁵ The problem for many governments was developing methods to control who were officers, while fusing together the qualities of a gentleman and an expert seafarer.⁶

When England created its own state-sponsored navy, several methods emerged for becoming an officer. Established officers took young boys as servants, as apprentices at sea, to learn the officer’s ways, and someone could also become an officer by first serving as a rating and working their way up as a midshipman. After the Restoration, the Admiralty and Charles II, with the support of Samuel Pepys, secretary to the Admiralty and naval administrator, instituted reforms to cultivate better officers, allow the Admiralty more control over their numbers, and ensure their obedience and diligence to duty. Beginning in 1677, potential lieutenants spent three years at sea—one as a midshipman—and were examined to prove their navigation and seamanship skills.⁷ By the eighteenth century, a potential lieutenant first spent six years at sea—at least two as a midshipman—presented journals and good conduct certificates from their commanding officers, and proved proficiency in practical navigation and theory. The reforms would also allow lower-class seafarers to become officers, but “the skills required in navigation and keeping journals excluded those without some formal education.”⁸

The methods of officer selection meant a bias toward officers from the higher classes. By 1794 the Admiralty eliminated the servant-style of officer entry and established First-Class Volunteers, but it took until 1830 before they eradicated the ability of admirals and captains to recruit future officers.⁹ Other European nations had similar patterns of officer selection. The Dutch navy had few requirements to become a naval officer at first, and the nobility dominated admiral-level ranks. On a practical level, Jaap R. Bruijn notes, anyone could become an officer, but the “higher classes” had a better opportunity.¹⁰ The French naval officer corps was also largely aristocratic, and the *Code des armées navales* (1689) stipulated that commissions were solely for the nobility. French naval reform was impossible; when Commodore Charles Henri d’Estaing, for instance, made suggestions to bring

greater professionalization to the service in 1763, other officers opposed it and any notions of egalitarianism.¹¹

Beyond learning their profession at sea, the European tradition of naval officer education varied. As Anglo-Dutch rivalry led to larger navies and at-sea confrontations, the Dutch navy expanded and the requirements to become an officer evolved. By the 1650s, Dutch officers followed formal written instructions, and by the 1780s, all five Dutch admiralties forced officers to undergo examination before promotion. Regardless, the Netherlands only established a formal shore school for naval officers in the early nineteenth century.¹² Meanwhile, France established naval schools on shore in 1682 to educate officers in theory and practice, but the *École Navale* opened only in 1830.¹³ Nearby, in 1701, the Royal Danish Navy required its officers to graduate from the Royal Danish Naval Academy, which provided theoretical education in mathematics, writing, navigation, geography, and languages. By the 1740s, cadets also took summer cruises, where authorities tested their skills, and in 1763 the Danish introduced officer promotion exams. Jacob Seerup opines that the Danes equated the creation of a naval academy with a professional navy, composed of Dano-Norwegian citizens rather than foreigners, and the facility was important in bonding citizenship, the profession, and the state.¹⁴

In Britain officer education was confined largely to sea, learning on the job with the assistance of shipboard schoolmasters.¹⁵ The Admiralty still wanted officers from the upper classes and thought that shore-based training would help control officer corps composition. In 1733 the Royal Naval Academy at Portsmouth opened and limited enrollment to students aged thirteen to sixteen, of a noble background, in an attempt to recruit a good class of boys. The navy allowed the Portsmouth students three years to prepare for their examinations and complete their studies. By 1806 the program consisted of fortification, gunnery, physics, naval history, and astronomy education, but it failed to attract many upper-class sons of noblemen and gentlemen, who continued to obtain their naval appointments under the patronage scheme.¹⁶ The navy closed the Portsmouth academy in 1837. A new shore-based officer education program waited for later in the century, and until then naval instructors taught new officer recruits at sea.

In 1839 the Admiralty instituted more promotion examinations and in 1857 ordered all officer recruits first to a training vessel, regardless of their initial method of appointment.¹⁷ In the end, the British Admiralty had to overcome the centuries-old patterns of naval appointments and patronage. European nations had a tradition of selecting their naval officers for the specific needs of the profession according to the desires of the government that owned the navy, but once ensconced, change was difficult as organizational inertia and the desires of existing officers emerged.

European naval officers had a “gentleman’s” temperament and social origins, and American naval tradition is rooted in European antecedents. When Congress authorized a naval force to protect U.S. shipping from the Barbary corsairs in 1794, it assumed the navy was “temporary” and authorized the president to appoint officers, subject to the Senate’s confirmation. As the Navy became permanent, members of Congress petitioned the president to obtain midshipmen’s appointments, although the secretary of the Navy handled the process on a practical level. The Navy only examined midshipmen candidates to see if they were literate and could do basic mathematics. After seven years service, with two to three years spent at sea, and if a midshipman was eighteen or twenty years old—depending on the regulations at the time—an idiosyncratic board of two captains, a commodore, and a naval teacher examined the midshipman in seamanship, navigation, and morals before promotion to lieutenant—or passed midshipman if no lieutenant’s commission was available. After 1841 passed midshipmen underwent reexamination if, after three years, they had not been promoted and had not been to sea for two years. If they failed, they lost seniority and another failure meant dismissal.

Once appointed, officers saw their commissions and promotion by seniority as a right. But for the Navy Department, efficiency meant having the correct officers in the proper location at the right time, in a system where officers joined decades earlier and the special responsibilities of the service meant that the Navy was unable to “hire its top executives from [the] outside.”¹⁸ For the U.S. Navy, a good start for a new officer was important for the future of the service.

John Paul Jones was one of the first Americans to consider formal naval officer education. He believed officers should be taught the theory and practice of officership, for efficiency and culture, and that only “gentlemen” should obtain commissions. In linking the concepts, Jones declared that commanding officers should be able to put their ideas to paper in a manner suited to their role. John Locke, who wrote on the education of gentlemen, likely influenced Jones’ thinking, because the latter encountered Locke’s work while moving among an educated circle.¹⁹ A naval education was to instill certain values. Officers were to be merciful, empathic, and humble: heroes like Oliver Hazard Perry rather than embroiled in personal scandal like Britain’s Horatio Nelson and his infidelity.²⁰ Their behavior, according to Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith, had to be free of self-destructiveness and vice. The officer had to be clean, neat, and friendly with his fellow officers, a philosophy that would be echoed at Annapolis.²¹ Moreover, each frigate-class vessel needed a little academy for training, and President John Adams agreed that there should be a school on every frigate of the U.S. Navy. When in port, seamen would be required to attend shore academies to learn more about science and art needed for character formation.²² Henry L. Burr concluded that “naval education of the

period, then, was socially realistic in preparing for a practical career, disciplinary in inculcating the military virtues, and idealistic in being a means to an end.”²³

Samuel P. Huntington concluded that the professional officer had a duty to society, was more than a wage laborer, and extolled expertise, responsibility, and “corporateness”—in naval terms, the Band of Brothers’ philosophy.²⁴ As tradition dictated, the American officer’s first introduction to sea life was on the ocean, where he learned the officer’s role while on the job. In their sea duties, midshipmen did everything from commanding to being personal servants. At times, if needed, they were promoted to acting lieutenant, master, or sailing master, and experienced midshipmen were made officers of the deck. The youngest might be responsible for giving the captain his pistols and belt when the crew was called to quarters. Older midshipmen were posted about the ship to provide general supervision. They ensured that the lieutenant’s orders were followed, helped the officer of the deck, mustered the men on deck at night, and kept them awake. Other midshipmen manned the guns, or the tops, and experienced lads were sent to the foretop. Finally, while ashore, midshipmen worked in the Navy Department and with the secretary of the Navy and others were clerks. More often than not, older officers acted like parental figures.²⁵

Key to the professional socialization of young men into the early U.S. Navy were role models. When Midshipman Lynch arrived on his first ship, for example, an older midshipman showed him the ropes. In another case, Captain Bolton found Farragut asleep on deck and he put a pea jacket over him rather than discipline the future hero.²⁶ But it was generally accepted that small gunboats were an inappropriate place to train young men. The commanders of the smaller vessels were usually sailing masters or older midshipmen and were unsuitable role models for young midshipmen because they were too close to their crews; real officers, in the British tradition, were a class of their own. The small gunboats also stayed close to shore, and their small crew complement and small number of officers—usually one or two—were insufficient to instruct the new midshipmen in how to work as a team, or learn shared values and attitudes through a common routine. The gunboat failed to instill, it was thought, the proper sense of “corporateness” into the new midshipmen.²⁷

While new midshipmen were looked out for, they were still sent to sea at a tender age, were exposed to the rigors of naval life with a minimal transition period, and were expected to fit in with the crew. Stephen Bleecker Luce, eventually one of the nineteenth century’s most famous advocates of naval education, was born in Albany, New York, on 25 March 1827. On 4 November 1841, Luce was ordered to report to the receiving ship *North Carolina* at New York after obtaining a midshipman’s appointment. Luce wrote that “to be suddenly cut adrift from one’s mother’s