Father of the US Navy?

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Who was the father of the United States Navy?

by John T. Kuehn

Contenders for this title vary. There is, of course John Paul Jones, but he is more icon than father. The Continental Navy’s father was actually the Continental Congress, so they were fathers, not A father. However, the Continental Navy was disestablished after the War for American Independence. The lack of a navy thereafter was one reason that Article 1 section 8 stipulated that Congress “establish and maintain a navy,” unlike the army side which was limited to an establishment of two year only in the same section.

However, just because the Constitution said to do it did not mean Jefferson and the Anti-Federalists were going to let a navy be established tout suite. To get around their prevarications Alexander Hamilton, the anti-slavery Secretary of the Treasury established instead the nucleus around which a fleet might form, the Revenue Cutter service—the first federal fleet of ships post-Constitution.

So, Alexander Hamilton is in the running, although partisans of the US Coast Guard can claim him as their father, too.

And then there is the guy everyone-- except maybe some Annapolis graduates and dusty US naval historians-- forget...yep, good old Benjamin Stoddert, who presided over the belated action to enact the provisions of 1:8 in the Constitution and actually give the young Republic a real navy. In 1798, on the eve of the United States’ first external war post-Constitution with France President John Adams appointed Stoddert Secretary of the Navy and the US Navy, to some degree, was “born again.” It would have its up and downs after that, especially at the hands of the land-lubbing Thomas Jefferson.

So who is the father of the Navy? Not so simple, eh?


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