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# Fort Ward Museum launches Navy exhibit

The City of Alexandria's Fort Ward Museum launched a new exhibition this month, "Aboard Ship with the Jack-Tars of the Union Navy," in recognition of the 250th anniversary of the founding of the U.S. Navy on Oct. 3, 1775. The exhibit focuses on the U.S. Navy during the Civil War and continues through 2026.

The Federal Navy began as a small and unprepared force at the outbreak of the Civil War. The Union Navy quickly expanded to successfully blockade more than 3,500 miles of Confederate coastline, securing the South's major waterways and engaging in a number of significant combat operations. By the end of the war in 1865, the U.S. Navy was the world's largest naval force and a key factor in the North's eventual victory.

Fort Ward's namesake Commander James Harmon Ward, the first Union Navy officer to die in the Civil War, receives a special profile.

The service of the thousands of sailors, or "jack-tars," who manned the ships was the foundational strength of the U.S. Navy. A typical ship's crew included men and boys of various ages and ethnic backgrounds, including a significant number of Black seamen who served on integrated crews.

The "Jack-Tars" exhibition



PHOTO/FORT WARD MUSEUM COLLECTION

A 19th century brass sextant.

features examples of the tools, equipment, clothing articles, weapons and personal items used by Union sailors from Fort Ward Museum's Civil War collection. Major themes focus on naval dress, which identifies men by various ranks and roles, communications aboard ship, navigation and weaponry used in combat.

The Union Navy relied on a combination of traditional sea-

faring skills and modern innovations to navigate ships. For long-distance voyages, officers and trained navigators primarily used celestial navigation. Sextants measured the angle of the sun, moon or stars above the horizon, and with the aid of a nautical almanac and a chronometer, calculated the ship's latitude and longitude. However, the patrolling of Confederate coastlines and

rivers meant that a ship's position was frequently determined by visual cues and landmarks. Captains and navigators relied on coastal charts to identify lighthouses, buoys and topographical features.

Sometimes "dead reckoning" was needed to navigate. This involved estimating a ship's position based on its course and speed. A sailor would use a compass to maintain a consistent course and a log line to measure the vessel's speed.

These observations, combined with a record of the time and any notable events such as changes in wind or current, were meticulously recorded in the ship's logbook. Constant vigilance was crucial; otherwise, the ship risked running aground or being ambushed by shore batteries.

Fort Ward is the best preserved of the extensive system of Union forts that comprised the Civil War Defenses of Washington. For more information on the museum, please call 703-746-4848 or visit alexandriava.gov/FortWard.

Readers can find out more about the new exhibit at alexandriava.gov/museums/aboard-ship-with-the-jack-tars-of-the-union-navy.

*Out of the Attic is  
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