

# Our Black Naval Officers Join AOIP Organizations In "Reaching Back!"

*"The history of Afro-Americans serving in the Sea Services—U.S. Coast Guard, Marines and Navy—is one of the most overlooked areas of American History. This history is one of mystery, intrigue, action, education and numerous contributions to the widespread developments and defense of the United States of America."*

—LCdr. Roosevelt Wright Jr., USNR

**I**N many positive ways the National Naval Officers Association (NNOA), representing some 525 Black Naval, Marine and Coast Guard commissioned officers, is firmly pledged to guarantee that this history is overlooked no longer and that the numerous and wonderful military contributions of Black Americans receive deserved recognition and praise.

NNOA has "stayed the course" for more than a decade now. It has survived the winds of uncertainty and navigated the storms of unrest and discontent. The membership now includes not only Black officers, but also other ethnic officers and members of the U.S. Marine Corps. Its membership comprises all ranks of commissioned officers including admirals and generals.

## Blacks in the Navy: The Past

**M**ARINE PURSUITS of one kind or another were one of the most important forms of employment for Black men in the pre-Civil War period. Blacks, both free and slave, were employed on privateers, trading vessels and fishing boats. Some of the most distinguished names in Black history earned their living, at some point, at sea. One recalls, in this regard, such famous Afro-Americans as Crispus Attucks, Paul Cuffee, Prince Hall, Denmark Vesey,



*Captain Gordon E. Fisher, President, National Naval Officers Association*

James Forten and Henry Highland Garnet.

More than 2,000 Blacks served in the Continental Navy during the American Revolution, despite efforts by Southern Congressmen to halt their enlistment.

Black sailors served in many capacities—maintaining the decks, loading guns, manning boats, working the sails and piloting ships.

The willingness of Blacks to serve in the armed forces of this country has

always been limited only by the willingness of those in power to allow them to serve. Unlike White citizens, Black citizens have had to struggle for the privilege of fighting and dying for their country.

Black sailors also played an important part in the naval battles of the War of 1812. During the war and for several years thereafter, Blacks made up from 10 to 20 percent of the crews of all U.S. naval vessels and experienced little or no segregation. Congress made special provision for the enlistment of free Blacks into the Navy by an act of March 3, 1813.

By 1839, so many free Black men were enlisting in the Navy that White sailors began to complain that they were seriously outnumbered on many vessels. To remedy this situation, a quota system was established that would be law in the Navy for many years to come.

A policy directive was issued that stated, in part: "You will direct the recruiting officer...in future, not to enter a greater proportion of free colored persons than five per cent of the whole number of white persons...and in no instance and under no circumstances to enter a slave...." Subsequent regulations limited Black enlistments to 1/20 part of the crew.

The Navy began enlisting fugitive slaves in September 1861, months before the Army allowed any Blacks to enlist. The only way that Blacks could get into the war against slavery—before the latter part of 1862—was to join the Navy.

Throughout the war, the Navy suffered from a serious shortage of manpower due to the tremendous expansion of the service from a total of 76 vessels in 1861 to 672 vessels in 1864. This chronic  
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**"Pulling Ourselves Up By Our Own Bootstraps" ...A Series.**