

William Crane

(1 Feb 1784 – 18 Mar 1846)

Crane. In this city, suddenly, yesterday afternoon, Commodore William M. Crane, of the Navy and Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography. *The National Intelligencer*, March 21, 1846



W M Crane

As a mark of respect to the memory of the late Commodore William M. Crane, of the United States Navy, Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography, and in recognition of his long and meritorious services, the flags of the several navy yards, and of vessels of the navy in commission, will be hoisted at half-mast, and thirteen minute-guns fired at noon on the day after the receipt of this order. Officers of the navy and marine corps will wear crape on the left arm for thirty days.

George Bancroft. Navy Department,
March 19, 1846

The National Intelligencer, March 28, 1846

Commodore Crane

The sudden death of this distinguished officer reminds us that he was one of a class of men now almost passed away - men whose

influence upon the destinies of this country will be better known when the stirring events of the times in which they lived shall be viewed as history, and will be better understood if ever the gloom and despair of defeat shall overtake us in the vicissitudes of future wars. Our people will then look back with gratitude to those men who shed so much lustre on our arms at sea, and whose deeds inspired us with a confidence of success, and made us ready to defy the world in the maintenance of a righteous cause.

To them we owe some of the wisest lessons ever learned by our infant nation, and we owe to them some of the most important facts which have come to our knowledge as a people. They taught us that the proper tribute to the barbarian was presented by the broadsides of our fleets; that the ocean was the great highway of the world, free to all nations, and not the domain "where not a sail but with permission spreads." They gave to every man born in these broad lands the unwritten certificate of freedom to go unquestioned, like the winds of heaven, "where he listeth," under the protection of our glorious flag. They made us a name among the nations of the earth, and caused us to be regarded as the champions of the freedom of the seas. They drove the pirate from the ocean, and secured the peaceful pursuits of commerce. It is one of those men who has passed away forever.

The subject of this notice was born at Elizabethtown, in New Jersey, the 1st of February, 1776, and was the son of General William Crane, who served with distinction as Colonel in the Revolutionary army before Quebec, where he received a wound of which he ultimately died. Commodore Crane entered the Navy on the 23d May, 1799, and first served as Midshipman on board the frigate *United States* in the following June. He served in this grade on board the *Chesapeake*, and as Master in the *General Greene*, and joined the brig *Vixen* in 1803 as Lieutenant, and remained in her in the Mediterranean as

part of the fleet under the command of Commodore Preble, and was present at all the attacks on Tripoli.

In consequence of the energy and vigor of his character, Lieut. Crane was appointed to command one of three gunboats captured from the enemy on the 3d of August, 1804, and on the 7th was hotly engaged with the other gun-boats appointed to attack the nine-gun battery on the west of the city, which they demolished. Several men were killed in his vessel, and he and his command narrowly escaped from the explosion of one of the gunboats which blew up close by him.

In the ensuing year he was selected by Captain Smith as first Lieutenant of the brig Siren; he served subsequently in the Constellation; and was afterwards transferred to the cutter Hornet, of some sixty tons burden. Whilst in command of this little vessel, close in shore at night, she was run upon the rocks, and the next day was attacked by a party of the enemy, whom he managed to keep at bay with the small arms until he got his guns overboard, and his vessel afloat; after which he coolly picked up the cannon, which had been carefully buoyed, and remounted them.

This little craft he navigated to Charleston, and narrowly escaped with his life on the passage having been thrown overboard by the breaking of some of the sloop's gear.

In 1807 the Commodore served as Lieutenant of the Chesapeake frigate, and remained in her until the outbreak of the War of 1812, when he was appointed to the command of the brig Nautilus, and was unfortunately captured by the British fleet shortly after sailing. On his exchange he was ordered to the lakes, where, in command of the Madison and Pike, for the remainder of the war, he became the tried, trusted, and able friend and second of his gallant chief, Commodore Chauncey.

In 1815 he was appointed captain of the Independence ship-of-the-line, and successively of the Erie sloop, and frigates Constellation and United States. He returned in the latter in 1819, after a protracted cruise of more than four years.

Capt. Crane was then employed as commandant at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and again at Boston, and, in 1827, hoisted his broad pennant on board the Java, for command in the Mediterranean. The Delaware ship-of-the-line afterwards bore his flag, and afforded a better opportunity for the display of his nautical abilities and naval talents, always known in the navy to be of a very high order.

While lying in a Spanish port, the Delaware ship-of-the-line, sent out as the flag ship of the squadron, arrived before the harbor, having on board as a passenger one of the family of Napoleon, who had married the daughter of Joseph, the Revolutionary King of Spain. With a prompt delicacy and high bred courtesy, he dispatched orders to the ship to proceed to Italy, and land the Prince, whose presence in a Spanish port in a national vessel would have given umbrage to the Government. So highly was this friendly interposition appreciated by the ministry that the King of Spain sent him the cross of Charles II, with a letter highly complimentary to the Commodore. But the honor thus intended to be conferred upon him, his duty compelled him to decline.

The command of our squadron in the Mediterranean was conducted ably and satisfactorily to the Government throughout its entire period, and besides affording the usual protection to our commerce, and cementing by friendly intercourse our relations with the Barbary and other Powers, laid the foundation of our present diplomatic intercourse with the Ottoman Porte. Commodore Crane was appointed joint Commissioner with our resident Consul at Smyrna, Mr. Offley, to open and conduct the negotiations preliminary to the desired commercial treaty. To the favorable impressions then made, and the judicious measures then taken, we are indebted for the extension of our commerce in the East.

On the return of the Delaware in 1830, after a short respite, Commodore Crane was ordered to the command of the Navy Yard, at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and in 1841 was made Commissioner of the Navy; and, finally, on the re-organization of the Navy Department, he was appointed Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography. Into this important department of the naval service he infused vigor and system, and continued until within a short period of his death to administer its affairs with admitted zeal and ability.

After passing through the several subordinate grades, he was promoted to a Captaincy in November, 1814, and at his death had attained the highest rank in the naval service, Barron, Steward, Jonas, Morris and Warrington alone standing before him in seniority. He was magnanimous, chivalrous, and brave; accomplished in the arts of peace as of war; a gentleman and scholar no less than a seaman, he leaves few equals and no superior in the service which he illustrated and adorned. To a numerous circle of attached personal friends his death will prove a source of lasting grief. He leaves a wife, a lady of Norfolk, Virginia, of rare personal merit, and two brothers, the gallant Col. Crane of the United States Artillery, and Judge Crane of Ohio. The Commodore was the second son, and was sixty-two years of age the 1st of February last.

At the last meeting of the New Jersey History Society, he was proposed as an honorary member, in consideration of his rare personal and professional worth.

In person the Commodore was a man to be remembered. In youth he is said to have been of striking manly beauty, and in matured years he was the beau ideal of the brave "old commodore." He was tall and of large and massive frame, of commanding and imposing presence, and no one could approach him with indifference. Afloat, in his appropriate element, he was stern, uncompromising, and exact in the execution of the duties of his office, and endowed with a firmness of purpose which seemed to know no change. In private life he was social, gentle, and affectionate, and guileless as a child.

The example of his discipline, which he leaves as a legacy to the Navy, will not be forgotten; his country will not forget his faithful services for nearly half a century; and his mourning friends will never cease to cherish his memory in their hearts. P.

Diary of John Silva Meehan

(at Library of Congress, Manuscript Division)

March 19, 1846:

Commodore Crane of the Navy cut his throat yesterday at the Navy Department. It is believed that his mind was under a morbid aberration some time before the horrid deed was committed. No cause existed to evidence it except the state of his health which had for a long time been painfully delicate. He was a very intelligent and gallant officer and his distressing death is deplored not only by his fellow officers but by a very extensive circle of acquaintances.

William M. Crane, of Washington, D.C. (dtd. March 14, 1846, probated March 27, 1846; Book 6, pp. 80-82; O.S. 2635; Box 18)

To wife Eliza Crane, all household goods and furniture, recommending to her to sell and dispose of house and lots in City of Washington; her pew in St. John's Church; at her decease property to two brothers and sister: Joseph H. Crane, of Dayton, Ohio, and Col. Ichabod B. Crane, of the U.S. Army, the balance after sister; and sister Maria Crane of Dayton, Ohio, \$1,200 to wife all plate, money, table and bed furniture.

Exrs.: Eliza Crane, wife; friend Commodore Lewis Warrington, of the U.S. Navy

Wits.: Charles K. King; Gustavus Harrison; Joseph P. McCorkle; Geo. W. Kimberly

Codicil, March 16, 1846: should Warring decline as Exr., wife to be sole Exrx., with Warrington as advisor; same wits.

Autobiography of Rear Admiral Charles Wilkes, Chapter 4, 1818-1821, p. 63

Capn McDonough was a moral and religious Man of high tone and character, and carefully watched over his officers and crew. Profanity, rowing, and crime of any sort were never suffered to go unpunished,

and correct deportment was urged upon all and suitably rewarded. The Guerrier was a sober ship and bore no marks upon the conduct of officers and crew, but the United States, Capn Crane, was, I regret to say, the reverse, and one could not well be on board or alongside of her without hearing oaths and imprecations. The Capn himself set the example and a more foul mouthed officer could not be found. He obtained the Sobriquet of Billy the Bilger. He was about the usual height, broad and corpulent, awkward and very unwieldy in his person his face full and broad and rubicund all over giving him the appearance of a dissipated Man. He was firm & tyrannical & both officers and Men I think despised him. His discipline, through the lash and vulgar abuse to his officers, kept them in awe of him. I always felt glad that my lot had not been thrown under his command. He was a great leader, and one of ready wit, and described as very entertaining. He was greatly afflicted with gout. I did not perceive any refinement in him but coarseness and vulgarity of the old Benbow style. He was in charge of one of the Bureaus in the Navy Dept. when he brought himself to an untimely end by committing suicide in his office by deliberately cutting his throat with a razor. At the time of his death this act was attributed to excess of spirits brought on by a religious excitement for several weeks. His manners were very austere and his prejudices very strong. None of his officers cared for him, and he elicited much fear on their intercourse with him. There are many anecdotes relative of him, but as they have no interest to you, I will not relate them, especially as they do not redound to his credit or that of the Navy. Captn McDonough was in every way a contrast to him, abstemious and very correct in his deportment and having an eye in constant watchfulness over his officers.