

War of 1812 Naval Telescope

By Rusty Edwards in 2011

I recently purchased an old single-pull telescope that I believe dates to the early 1800s. This is based on its construction and style, and similarity to naval telescopes documented from the War of 1812. It is made of brass, is 20 inches while closed, and 39 inches fully extended. It is nearly identical to a telescope in the Smithsonian collection that the institute believes is the same type used by Francis Scott Key to observe the Star-Spangled Banner above Fort McHenry. Below is a comparison of these two instruments.



Screen capture from the Smithsonian web site (top), my telescope (below).

"G., Brooks" is engraved on the brass pull near the eye piece. (I suspect that two commas after the first initial mean something, but I have not been able to determine exactly what.) Some early spyglass makers engraved their name and business address in this location. I searched the internet but could not find any mention to an early 19th Century instrument maker by this surname and first initial.



Since these early telescopes were somewhat unique and expensive, I believe that "G., Brooks" might be the original owner, who was probably a ship captain or master. The only period ship's captain that I can find with this name is Captain George Brooks. Brooks served in the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, a precursor to the U.S. Coast Guard. He commanded the U.S. revenue cutter James Madison.

The U.S. Treasury Department authorized the Baltimore customs collector to build the James Madison on June 26, 1807; and the cutter was completed in 1808. On January 18, 1809, the James Madison, under the command of Captain Brooks, sailed from Baltimore to take up station at Savannah, Georgia. The cutter had 14 cannon, and a crew of 65 men.

The U.S. Revenue Cutter James Madison is credited with numerous conquests in the early part of the War of 1812. During July 1812, it captured the 300-ton British brig Shamrock, one of the first British vessels captured by the U.S. during the War of 1812. The Niles Weekly Register reported on 25 July 1812 that: "Yesterday arrived from a short cruise the Cutter Madison, Captain Brooks, with a fine British ship, mounting 6 six and nine pounders, with a quantity of small arms and ammunition and navigated with 14 men." Later that month she brought into Amelia Island, FL, the Bahamian schooner Wade carrying \$20,000 in gold.



On August 22, 1812, the James Madison was captured by the larger Royal Navy frigate HMS Barbados after a seven hour chase. Her crew was taken to New York and held on the Cartel

Brig Diamond. On November 28, 1812, the British paroled Captain Brooks. There is no record of him serving as a revenue cutter master again.



Eyepiece Closed



Eyepiece Open



Lens Covered



Lens Opened





During 2012, I donated this telescope to the National Park Service (NPS). It is now on permanent display at the Fort McHenry National Monument and Shrine in Baltimore, MD. In 2025, it was featured in the following video jointly produced by the National Battlefield Trust and the NPS. In the video, NPS historians discuss several War of 1812 artifacts at Fort McHenry. This telescope is one of them.

War of 1812 Artifacts at Fort McHenry

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hP6nMIIGeYA&list=WL&index=70&t=323s>