



**Barry Lawrence Ruderman  
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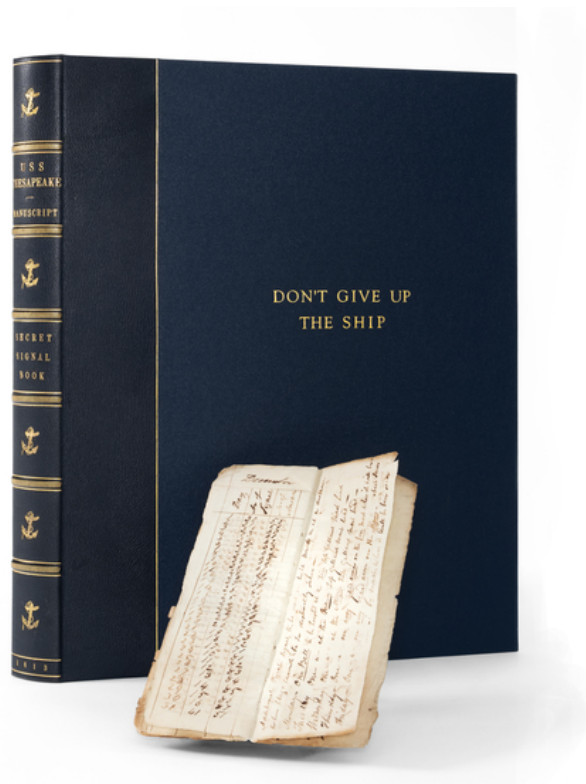
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**(US Navy - Chesapeake and the Shannon) [Manuscript signal book for the USS  
Chesapeake, taken by a British sailor after the Chesapeake was captured by the HMS  
Shannon in 1813]**

**Stock#:** 84354  
**Map Maker:** Capel  
**Date:** 1812 circa 1813  
**Place:** n.p.  
**Color:** Pen & Ink  
**Condition:** VG  
**Size:** 3 x 10 inches  
**Price:** \$ 29,500.00



**Description:**

***A Rare Artifact from One of the Most Famous Naval Battles of the War of 1812***

***The Manuscript Signal Book of the USS Chesapeake ("Don't Give up the Ship")***

***Taken by a Sailor of the HMS Shannon and Kept as a Memento by a Prominent British Naval Officer***

This fascinating manuscript artifact relates to one of the most famous naval battles of the War of 1812, when the British warship Shannon captured the U.S.S. Chesapeake in Boston Harbor on June 1, 1813. Created by a sailor on the U.S.S. Chesapeake, this compact manuscript signal book, quite possibly the primary signal book of the ship, contains the daily signals used by one of the most famous of early American warships. The document was taken as a souvenir by the capturing force and kept by a prominent



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British naval officer, Captain Thomas Bladen Capel.

The Chesapeake, a 38-gun wooden-hulled, three-masted frigate, was one of six such vessels commissioned by the Naval Act of 1794, and the only one not named by George Washington. In 1807 her disastrous encounter with the HMS Leopard, when the Chesapeake refused to allow a search for deserters, would lead to the United States Embargo Act of 1807, indirectly precipitating the War of 1812.

During the War of 1812, the Chesapeake fought a brief but intense battle in Boston Harbor on June 1, 1813, resulting in her capture by the HMS Shannon. This was one of the most famous battles of the nascent American Navy, a horrific and bloody confrontation that resulted in the loss of dozens of American sailors. The battle was quite literally a duel at sea, with all the formalities implied by the word. Captain Philip Broke of the Shannon, eager to engage one of the great American frigates, wrote a beautifully written letter challenging the Chesapeake's captain, "to try the fortune of our respective flags":

*As the Chesapeake appears now ready for sea, I request you will do me the favour to meet the Shannon with her, ship to ship, to try the fortune of our respective flags. The Shannon mounts twenty-four guns upon her broadside and one light boat-gun; 18 pounders upon her maindeck, and 32-pounder carronades upon her quarterdeck and forecastle; and is manned with a complement of 300 men and boys, beside thirty seamen, boys, and passengers, who were taken out of recaptured vessels lately. I entreat you, sir, not to imagine that I am urged by mere personal vanity to the wish of meeting the Chesapeake, or that I depend only upon your personal ambition for your acceding to this invitation. We have both noble motives. You will feel it as a compliment if I say that the result of our meeting may be the most grateful service I can render to my country; and I doubt not that you, equally confident of success, will feel convinced that it is only by repeated triumphs in even combats that your little navy can now hope to console your country for the loss of that trade it can no longer protect. Favour me with a speedy reply. We are short of provisions and water, and cannot stay long here.*

It did not matter that the letter never reached the American captain. It was during this battle that the Chesapeake's captain, James Lawrence, uttered the now immortal order to his crew, *Don't give up the ship!* before succumbing to his wounds sustained in the battle. After being captured the Chesapeake was adopted into the Royal Navy and ultimately scrapped in 1819. Shortly thereafter her timbers were repurposed in the construction of a flour mill in Wickham, England.

The present remarkable ship's signal book, compiled by a an unknown American sailor, was taken as a



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memento of the battle by Captain Thomas Bladen Capel, the senior port officer at Halifax, which fact is recorded on the front of the volume itself:

*Taken in the Chesapeake, Tho. Bladen Capel, Capt.*

Sir Thomas Bladen Capel, an important British naval officer, was in command of a squadron of British ships which operated in New England, where the Chesapeake was captured, and Nova Scotia, where she was brought afterward. Though not an eyewitness to the action between the Chesapeake and the Shannon, Capel interviewed the Shannon's officers and actually penned the official account of the naval battle on June 6, as the captain of the Shannon, Philip B. V. Broke, was incapacitated due to injuries sustained during the action. Capel was a close personal friend of Admiral Nelson and distinguished himself in the French Revolutionary War, the Napoleonic Wars, and in the War of 1812.

The signal book records the daily and special signals to be used on board the American vessel and primarily consists of practical instructions on the use of signals as well as logs that record the given signals for each day of the year, including both the number of the signal and the number of the answer. Horizontally written text (on some pages) provides detailed instructions on how certain signals should be given, including a series of "special signals" involving the use of canvas balls painted black. Another note instructs when to use a red pendant as a signal, and the use of lanterns as signals at night. On the inner front wrapper are written the brief directions: "Hail - 'Ohio' / Answer 'Ohio.'"

The famous naval duel between the U.S.S. Chesapeake and the HMS Shannon inspired one of the U.S. Navy's most enduring mottos, so brilliantly fixed in the public's imagination by Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry's "Don't give up the ship" battle flag flown on the U.S. Brig Lawrence during his decisive victory at the Battle of Lake Erie later in the same year.

**Rarity of early American ships' signal books**

Such manuscript signal books used aboard early American ships are incredibly rare in the market. We can find no sale records of early American signal books from the War of 1812, let alone such a superlative example as offered here.

**Provenance**

Dietrich American Foundation, acquired in the 1960s.



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*A truly amazing survival from one of the U.S. Navy's founding vessels and a remarkable item of Americana.*

**Detailed Condition:**

Narrow quarto leaves, folded in half vertically, stitched, resulting in a tall narrow booklet. Original self wrappers. Leaves a bit tanned. Some minor wear to the edges. Overall condition is very good.