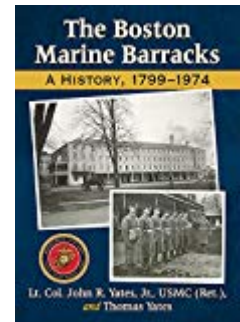


John R. Yates Jr., Thomas Yates. *The Boston Marine Barracks: A History, 1799-1974.* Jefferson: McFarland, 2015. 232 pp. \$45.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-9650-1.



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One commanding officer finally had enough of dealing with parents inquiring about their sons. Losing his temper, he wrote, "Please cease writing annoying letters to me and remember that this is not kindergarten, and that I have other and more important duties than that of inquiries into the private and personal affairs of several hundred grown-up men, presumably intelligent enough to be responsible for their own actions and find out why they do not write to their mothers" (p. 123). This and other incidents come to life in Lt. Col. John R. Yates Jr. (USMC, ret.) and Thomas Yates's *The Boston Marine Barracks, A History, 1799-1974*.

The book affectionately recounts the history of the longest-standing Marine barracks in the United States and its many transformations. The Marines moved into a humble lime shed in 1802, and the Corps approved its first permanent barracks in 1810, which was designed to hold up to 150 men. Seeking to build the cheapest barracks possible, the government encouraged the use of Marines as construction workers. Yates and Yates

detail the chronic problems with the barracks, which suffered from the constant need of repairs throughout the nineteenth century. By the Civil War, the barracks was in such a state of disrepair that Marines seemingly were more valued for their construction knowledge than their martial abilities, with one officer arguing vehemently with another in order to prevent a talented carpenter from transferring (p. 36). The 1870s, by contrast, led to significant new construction, with some of the weakest portions of the building being torn down to build a new addition for enlisted Marines between two already-extant officer wings housing about four officers. By the turn of the century, the barracks received a fourth floor that transformed it into one of the most prominent landmarks on the yard. Then came technological improvements such as indoor toilets and electricity.

Enthusiasts of the Marine Corps' history as well as those interested in the social history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century military institutions will be enthralled by the kind of particulars detailed. With most of the work focusing on events

prior to World War I, the range of experiences and emotions of those who inhabited the Boston Navy Yard comes to life. For those familiar with the formulaic military housing of the twentieth century, for example, the reader can chuckle at one nineteenth-century officer's complaints about wallpaper containing the "most grotesque figures you could imagine rendering the apartment exceedingly gloomy" (p. 30).

This book's almost micro-historical focus on the Boston Barracks provides one of the best "tours" of the nineteenth-century Marine Corps. To say this is a social history of the Marine Corps would be to go too far, however. While the authors touch on some larger historical changes, such as the Navy's shift from sail- to steam-powered vessels, their concern centers squarely on every detail of daily life that affected the Marines at the Boston Naval Yard with some focus on what those Marines did outside the nation's borders when they left the yard.

While academics will benefit from these kinds of carefully researched details, they should be wary of a few unsubstantiated interpretations. Describing a duel between a naval officer and a Marine officer, for example, the authors state that a "possible reason" that the Marine agreed to duel in the first place was the "prevailing attitude that Marines were members of a highly specialized organization" with "those in authority foster[ing] this feeling" (p. 16). Without any specific evidence included, such an interpretation seems to ahistorically project the Corps' identity back to the early nineteenth century. Elsewhere, it is difficult to ascertain whether the authors chose examples for their representativeness or for their shock value. For example, they describe the harshness of naval discipline with reference to the two hundred lashes received by the ironically named Private Simon Cry (p. 10). But the reader is left wondering if this punishment was common or an aberration.

The authors effectively have used archival resources to illuminate the daily life of the com-

manding officers in particular and Marines and their family members more generally. From these incidents, one can derive a general interpretation of officer-enlisted relations. At least as interpreted by the authors, the Marine officers come out well, showing a mix of sympathy and pragmatism for their men. One frustrated officer, for example, argued that his Marines should be paid only quarterly so they could not get inebriated so frequently (p. 49). Another officer kindly sought to promote a Marine from private before his retirement, and another helped a Marine end his service commitment so he could get a better-paying civilian job.

The authors have strong connections to the Corps and to the barracks itself. Lt. Col. John R. Yates Jr. (ret.) served as the last commanding officer of the Boston Barracks. Yates's long-time service in the Corps is evident in some of his humorous depictions of Marines behaving badly as well as in detailing the interest of commanding officers in improving barracks life. His son, an Air Force veteran who has taught history at the high school level, co-wrote the accessible book, which carefully explains many potentially unfamiliar terms. Still, academics might raise their eyebrows at the use of an adjective like "yuck" to describe how the bathroom offered the naval prison's only place to wash dishes (p. 102). Another colorful sentence explaining how Marines worked as telephone operators exclaims, "They don't just let knuckleheads be telephone operators" (p. 155). Black and white illustrations further illuminate the history of the barracks.

Most frustrating is the problematic organization. The authors cram various events from completely disparate topics into the same paragraph without transition. Later chapters devolve into a month-by-month description of any happenings in the barracks. For example, the archival records make several mentions of a colonel seeking to have a telephone installed in his government home (at his own expense, for the record). These are interspersed with other events instead of discussed in their own paragraph. This results in

short, choppy paragraphs that have no overarching analytical thread.

Some of the debates discussed in this book are still relevant to today's Marine Corps, such as whether civilians or Marines are better suited to guard them. Academics might have framed this research differently, but Yates and Yates lived the life of the Marines and family members they wrote about, and they enthusiastically detail those stories, even if it might be in more detail than some people need or want.

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