**FIRST THERE WERE FIRSTS**  
  
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Imagine you are looking at a photograph of a U.S. Navy Sailor wearing a double breasted blue uniform coat with gilt buttons and a visor cap? And you were told that this individual is known as a deck-plate leader and is considered part of ‘the back-bone of the Navy.’ Why you would say ‘That‘s a Chief Petty Officer.’ Well if the image you are looking at predates 1893 you would be looking at a first class petty officer—before there were Chiefs there were Firsts!

Chief Petty Officers trace their tradition and heritage to that of First Class Petty Officers. Prior to the establishment of the Chief Petty Officer (CPO) rating in 1893, the Navy depended on First Class Petty Officers for enlisted leadership. They wore a uniform that distinguished them from the rest of their shipmates: a visor cap similar to the cap worn by officers and a sack coat with double rows of brass buttons. That distinctive uniform, particularly the hat, still defines Chief Petty Officers today.

First Class Petty Officers provided senior enlisted leadership in the last half of the nineteenth century. Prior to the Civil War, the Navy did not have a formal rank structure amongst its petty officers. One of the earliest references to class differences among petty officers appears in U.S. Navy Uniform Regulations, dated 19 February 1841, which authorizes a petty officer mark of distinction ‘to be worn on jackets in the winter and frocks in the summer.’

The mark consisted of an eagle perched above an anchor. No more than three inches long, this mark was worn on the right sleeve between the elbow and the shoulder by Boatswain's Mates, Gunner's Mates, Carpenter's Mates, Master at Arms, Ship's Stewards, and Ship's Cooks. All other petty officers wore the same mark on the left sleeve.

Navy Uniform Regulations, dated 8 March 1852, modified the mark, now referred to as a device, to include a one inch star above the eagle and the anchor. The device was to be worn by Boatswain's Mates, Gunner's Mates, Carpenter's Mates, Sailmaker's Mates, Ship's Stewards, and Ship's Cooks on the right sleeve. All other petty officers wore it on the left sleeve.

Changes to U.S. Navy Regulations, dated 18 April 1865, established two categories of petty officers--Petty Officers of the Line and Petty Officers of the Staff. Line petty officers were directed to wear the petty officer device on the right sleeve. All other petty officers and first-class fireman, except officer‘s stewards, were directed to wear the device on the left sleeve without the star.

Navy Uniform Regulations approved 1 December 1866, authorized petty officers with certain specialties to wear a coat and tie style uniform that distinguished them from other petty officers. The new uniform emphasized their special status among enlisted Sailors. Master at Arms, Yeomen, Surgeon‘s Stewards, and Paymaster‘s Stewards were authorized to wear a sack coat style uniform that had ‘blue jackets with rolling collars, double-breasted; two rows of medium size navy buttons on the breast, six in each row…slashed sleeves of cuffs, with three small size navy buttons, plain blue caps with visor.’ These selected petty officers also wore a blue visor cap featuring a device that was similar but slightly larger than the perched eagle brass buttons worn on the blue sack coat. All other petty officers and seaman continued to wear uniforms with overshirts (jumpers), bell-bottom trousers, and caps without visors.

This marked the beginning of formal class distinction between petty officers. Petty officers who wore sack coats were considered ‘senior’ and of more worth to the Navy and reflected the common practice to pay sailors according to how critical their skills were for shipboard operations. Surgeon‘s Stewards and Master at Arms were among the highest paid enlisted men at the time.

In 1876, the Navy again realigned its two categories of petty officers—into Petty Officers of the Line and Petty Officers. Petty Officers of the Line included the same rates as in 1865 except for specialties that had been discontinued. Line petty officers continued to wear the petty officer device with a star on the right sleeve. All other petty officers wore the petty officer device on the left sleeve minus the star.

The term ‘chief’ petty officer was used during the 1870‘s to refer to the petty officer that was the most experienced and senior member of a particular rate. Petty Officers wore marks on either the left or right lower sleeve to indicate their specialty.

1877 Navy Uniform Regulations listed thirteen specialties which included Chief Boatswain‘s Mate and Chief or Signal Quartermaster. These ‘chiefs’ wore their specialty mark on both lower sleeves to indicate their status. While they were still petty officers, these highly respected Sailors had earned the right to be called ‘Chief’. The Master at Arms was also referred to as the Chief Petty Officer of the ship to which he was assigned.

In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, sailors often ate their meals in berthing spaces. Berthing deck cooks or mess cooks prepared food to be consumed in berthing spaces. In the second half of the nineteenth century separate petty officer messes began to emerge on U.S. Navy ships. By the late 1880s the petty officer mess had evolved to the first class petty officer mess.

In 1885, the Navy divided petty officers into three classes--first, second, and third. Classes defined seniority among petty officers but they were still paid according to their specialty. That is, for example, all first class petty officers did not receive equal pay.

1886 Navy Uniform Regulations, approved 1 July 1885, introduced new petty officer devices, now called rating badges. The new rating badges were similar to the type worn today and consisted of an eagle, with wings pointed down, perched above a specialty mark that was placed above scarlet chevrons. The same regulations also authorized all first class petty officers to wear sack coat style uniforms and visor caps. All other petty officers and seamen continued wearing overshirts, bell-bottoms, and caps without visors.

The 1886 Master at Arms First Class Petty Officer can be compared to a Command Master Chief of today. Master at Arms was the senior rate among first class petty officers. They wore a rating badge that distinguished them from all other first class petty officers. The rating badge had an eagle perched above three arced stripes. Below the arced stripes was a specialty mark which was placed above three scarlet chevrons. The specialty mark for the Master at Arms was a five point star-- the same mark used by Command Master Chiefs today. The Master at Arms first class rating badge style was later adopted by the chief petty officer rating when it was established in 1893—the basic design remains in vogue today.

All other first class petty officers wore a different style rating badge. It didn‘t have arced stripes but it did have three chevrons. The specialty mark was laid upon a scarlet diamond-shaped lozenge. The lozenge was the only difference with the petty officer second class rating badge, which had also had three chevrons. Petty officers third class wore the same style rating badge as second class petty officers but with only two chevrons.

The visor cap, worn by first class petty officers, was also adopted by chief petty officers in 1893. Chief petty officers continued wearing the first class petty officer cap device until 1897 when the Navy introduced the current style CPO cap device. Navy Department Circular #79, dated 12 June 1897, described the new CPO cap device as ‘The device for chief petty officers‘ caps (except Bandmaster) shall be the letters U.S.N., in silver, upon a gilt foul anchor.’

First class petty officers exercised ‘deck plate leadership’ long before ships had deck plates. They lived and worked closely with the crew and were responsible for training and discipline. Serving as an interface between the crew and the officers, these men were considered the backbone of the Navy.

1893 is often thought of as the year that chief petty officer traditions and heritage began. However, it can be argued that those traditions really began in 1866 when the first senior petty officers began wearing the ‘hat’ or in the 1870s when ‘chief’ referred to a senior petty officer or in 1885 when first class petty officers began wearing what is now the CPO style rating badge.

In 1893, several first class petty officers received temporary appointments to the new Chief Petty Officer rating. All of the new chiefs wore a rating badge of the same basic design as the old Master at Arms first class petty officer but with the specialty mark for their rate. The old Master at Arms first class rating badge became the new Chief Master at Arms rating badge.

In 1894, the rating badge design for all petty officers, including chiefs, was modified to the style still being worn today. The 1893 first class petty officers that were not appointed as chief petty officers began wearing the jumper uniforms previously worn by petty officers second class and below.

In 1973, the U.S. Navy began a two year phase-in program which transitioned the male enlisted uniform from the jumper style to a sack coat and tie style which included a visor cap. At the time, it was noted that many first class petty officers immediately switched to the new coat and new hat. It was often said that the first class petty officers were just trying to look like chiefs. However, after eighty years, maybe they were just anxious to see if their old uniforms still fit. It might be that all along it had been the chiefs who were trying to look like the first classes because before there were chiefs there were firsts.