

## **Cranford Characters - Nathaniel G. Van Doren Cranford's own (somewhat xenophobic) Elliott Ness?**

*by Vic Bary*

While indexing the Society's People files recently, I ran across the March 2, 1933 *New York Herald Tribune* obituary for Grove Street resident Nathaniel G. Van Doren. His life, as related in the obituary, read a bit like a segment from the 1960s television series "The Untouchables". Since we have just passed the 95th anniversary of the effective date of the Volstead Act, I thought I'd share these portions of the obit. with you.

"Mr. Van Doren had been employed by the Government since his fifteenth year. After brief schooling in Columbus, Miss., where he was born, he went West with the Geological Survey of the Department of the Interior. For six years he roamed the country with the survey and on his return to Washington in 1894 was transferred to the Treasury Department.

### **Came to New York in 1902**

From 1894 to 1902 Mr. Van Doren was connected with the Offices of the Comptroller of the Currency and Immigration at the capital. An appointment to the customs service brought him to New York. Three years later, in 1905, he was made a special customs agent here.

President Harding selected him as Under Secretary of the Treasury in charge of customs in February, 1922. For seven years he fought traffic in narcotics, which he connected with rum running, and attributed the smuggling of aliens into the country to laxity in enforcement of the dry law. He ordered inspection of foreign vessels of the rum fleet by Coast Guard cutters in an effort to halt the narcotics trade."



"For this purpose Mr. Van Doren sought permission to board foreign vessels outside the twelve-mile limit. He wrote to authorities about the methods employed by the rum fleet, which centered its activity, he said, off Rockaway Point. He offered intercepted letters as evidence that Greeks, Chinese, and Italians were aboard vessels at anchor beyond his authority. They would be transported into the country by liquor runners, he said, at the first opportunity.

The government debated Mr. Van Doren's suggestions, approved his authority to penetrate the twelve-mile limit zone, and as suddenly rescinded its action. The Under Secretary tried again and again, but never succeeded in obtaining complete approval for his plan."



**Used Speedboats to Chase Fugitives**

"After Mr. Van Doren's appointment on April 1, 1929 as supervising agent of New York customs, he obtained better equipment to meet the increasing liquor and narcotics traffic. High powered speedboats which were able to overtake the swiftest rum runners were added to the Coast Guard fleet. From his office in the Customs House Mr. Van Doren directed seizures which often reached \$300,000 in value. (\$4,119,000 in current dollars.) The growing tide toward repeal made his job more and more difficult, but he continued to speed up departmental efforts."



"In recent years he had become bitter at the accusations of graft and laxity among customs agents. He reiterated in letters to the press, for he was bound by law not to answer charges officially, his belief in the integrity of the customs service despite scathing criticism under dry law enforcement."

*(For more about the role of the US Coast Guard during Prohibition see Donald L. Canney [Rum War: The U.S. Coast Guard and Prohibition](#), USCG Bicentennial Series, available free at [www.uscg.mil/history/articles/RumWar.pdf](http://www.uscg.mil/history/articles/RumWar.pdf))*