

# THE CAPTURE OF THE *CALEB CUSHING*

WILLIAM B. KENNISTON

Several years ago Mr. Samuel Prince, of Yarmouth, Me., and I were discussing the beauties of Casco Bay and Portland harbor and the advantages of those waters as a place for sailing.

"What a curious little back entrance to the harbor that passage between Cow and Diamond islands is," I remarked. "You've been through it, haven't you?"

"Been through the passage between Cow and Diamond islands," exclaimed Mr. Prince. "well I should say I had. Why, dear man, I've rowed through it as a boy, and sailed through it as a young man and one night in June, years ago, I was towed through it a prisoner in irons and under guard. And here," he said getting up from his rocking chair and taking something rusty and jangling from a hook in the wall below the mantel, "here are the hand-cuffs I wore that night."

Few men have carried into old age a face more peaceful or one giving less evidence of fights and brawls and those things usually associated with the wearers of hand-cuffs than has Mr. Samuel Prince. I knew him as a man of eminent respectability and that he had ever been "in irons and under guard" seemed hardly possible. My astonishment, not to say incredulity, must have been apparent for the old man laughed heartily as he watched me examine the rusty irons and in reply to my questioning look, told the following story:

"In April, 1863," he began, "I shipped as seaman on the U.S. Revenue Cutter *Caleb Cushing*, stationed off the Maine coast with headquarters at Portland. The *Cushing* was a brigantine of about two hundred tons, and carried between twenty and thirty men. She had not been built for the Revenue service, but had been a merchant vessel, and was fitted out as a cutter after the beginning of the

war, to take the place of the regular cutter that had been turned over to the navy and sent South.

"A revenue cutter, as you know, is not intended for a fighter. Her duties correspond more nearly to those of a policeman than of a soldier. She patrols the coast, renders aid to vessels in distress, helps shipwrecked mariners, sees to it that the buoys and other markings of the channels and ledges are all right, and looks after things on her beat generally. Ordinarily a cutter carries no cannon, but as there was always the possibility of an attack on our ports and shipping by the southerners, the *Cushing* was mounted with two guns, a 32-pounder amidships and a brass 15-pounder on the gallant fo'castle. "When she had been fitted out as a cutter, some eight to ten compartments had been made in the floor of the berth deck. In one of the compartments there was stored from 600 to 800 pounds of powder. In the others were provisions, and pork in another, and so on. I have been told that there was a regular magazine in the after part of the vessel, opening out of the captain's stateroom, the door concealed by a mirror, but whether this was true or not, I don't know. I do know there was powder in the compartment I have told you of, for I helped to store it there myself.

"Shortly after I shipped on the *Cushing* the captain became ill, and was put ashore at Portland. The command then fell to the first lieutenant. This lieutenant was a native of Savannah, Ga., and for some reason, perhaps solely because of his southern birth, he was unpopular both with his brother officers and the crew. It was sometimes whispered about

ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN *LEWISTON JOURNAL*  
*ILLUSTRATED MAGAZINE*, 30 Mar 1908.

that he was at heart in sympathy with the South, and would bear watching.

"The weather was fine all the spring, and we had an easy time. We cruised back and forth along the coast, but were never more than a few days from Portland. There were constant rumors of a southern fleet, always 'just a few miles out,' but they invariably proved to be false. The southern cruiser *Tacony*, that had done a deal of mischief to our shipping in Cuban waters the winter before, was reported to be coming North, and we kept a sharp lookout for her. But we saw neither the *Tacony* nor any other hostile craft.

"Late in June the captain died, and on the evening of the 27th we lay at anchor in Portland harbor, just off Custom House wharf, awaiting the appointment of a new commander. Nearly all the officers of the *Cushing* belonged in Portland, and that night all of them but the first lieutenant, the quartermaster and one or two petty officers went ashore on leave.

"The weather was fine, and there was not the usual number of vessels in the harbor. Late in the afternoon a fishing schooner, the *Archer*, had come in through Hussey's Sound, just before the light southerly breeze died away, and dropped anchor nearby. She was our only neighbor. Her battered, poorly painted hull and patched and weather-beaten sails contrasted sadly with our trim and rakish appearance.

"It was Saturday night, very warm and pleasant. The harbor was full of small craft all the evening. There was a party at Peaks Island, and it was nearly midnight when the last of the young people who had attended it had returned and the harbor was quiet.

"I stood watch from 10 o'clock to 12, and then turned in. When I had been in my hammock about a half hour, and was just dropping off to sleep, I heard men climbing over the side and then the sound of many footsteps on deck.

"'It's the new captain,' I thought, 'come to take command.' The next instant I learned my mistake. A voice close to my ear cried: 'Surrender, in the name of the Southern Confederacy!' For an instant I lay as one paralyzed, then jumped up to find the berth deck swarming with men armed with pistols and cutlasses, and everything in confusion.

"There was hardly the semblance of a

have gone to sleep unarmed, with a sense of perfect security, are awakened to find pistols held to their heads by enemies, armed and desperate, their bravery has hardly a chance. It took but a few minutes to have the whole crew of the *Cushing* prisoners. We were handcuffed in pairs, and my companion in misery happened to be a Dutchman. When we were all in irons, and had been huddled together in the forward part of the berth deck, the lieutenant, quartermaster and one or two petty officers, half-dressed, and also in irons, were brought from their staterooms and placed with us.

"'Now, boys,' said [Lieutenant Charles Reed,] the man who seemed to be in command of the invaders, addressing us not unkindly, 'what we want is the *Cushing*, not you Yanks. If you behave yourselves, we'll put you off on some island as we go out of the harbor. If you make trouble, you'll be shot and thrown overboard.' With that he left two stalwart Rebels, with a cocked pistol in each hand, to guard us, and with the rest hurried on deck.

"Presently we heard the rattle of the anchor chain. They tried to slip it, but for some reason couldn't undo the end from its fastening, and had to weigh the anchor. There was very little wind. The southerly breeze of the afternoon had died out at sunset, and it was too early for the usual off-shore breeze of the morning. They set sail, however, and in a few minutes we were moving slowly down the harbor.

"As soon as we were under way, a half dozen of the Rebels came down to the berth deck and began to search for powder. They pulled open the compartments in the floor, that I have told you of, one after the other, but, in their hurry and excitement, by chance they failed to open the one containing it, and in a short time they gave up the search.

"Before long the slight breeze died out entirely, and our captors manned two boats and took the vessel in tow. It was slow work, but there never was a gang of men more anxious to get to sea than they were, and they kept at it till long after daylight. Then the wind came up again, not strong, but enough for steerage way, and, pretty well exhausted, they came aboard for breakfast.

"Among the prisoners there was a boy about fifteen years of age, who had been assistant to the cook. This boy was freed from

served, we were given breakfast of coffee and hardtack. I am afraid some of our number had little appetite even for that much.

"The morning wore away slowly. When they had breakfast and rested awhile, the Rebels again took their boats and continued the towing. We had been expecting to be called on deck at any moment to be sent ashore, as we had been promised: for certainly we had 'behaved' ourselves. We were beginning to think we must be well outside the islands, and were wondering what would be done with us. We were anything but a happy crowd. Glum and sullen we sat in the dim light of the berth deck, and reviewed the situation. Who our captors were, except they were Rebels, we had not the least idea. Where they had come from we could not guess. We had no hope for being pursued and retaken, for we knew there was no armed craft in the harbor, while, as I have said, the *Cushing* carried two cannon. There seemed nothing for us, but that we would be taken South, and held as prisoners of war in some Rebel prison. But in thinking this, we had not, as you shall see, relled sufficiently on Yankee energy, ingenuity, and bravery.

"Shortly after noon we heard the Rebels who had been towing scramble on deck in a great hurry, and we wondered what was up. We were not kept long in doubt. The booming of a cannon some distance away, and then in an instant after, the almost deafening report of our 32-pounder as she replied, showing us we were being pursued, and by an armed craft too. In a few minutes the distant cannon spoke again, and this time was replied to by our 15-pounder.

"A few minutes after this second shot, a voice shouted down the companion way, 'bring those prisoners on deck!' We hurried up the steps, and almost before we had a chance to look about to see what manner of craft was bold enough to give us chase, we were ordered to get into our boats, and were hustled over the side. When we were in the boats, and about to shove off, I shouted to the Rebels on deck to throw us down some keys, for we were still in irons. Someone threw down a handful that fell in a shower into the boat. We didn't stop to unloose the irons then, however, but pushed off and manned the oars as we were.

"Then we looked about to get our bearings. We were about five miles outside of Peak's Island. Hardly a mile away were our

pursuers, the New York steamer *Chesapeake*, and the Boston packet *Forest City*, while somewhat farther off was a fleet of smaller steamers and sailing craft that had come out to see the chase. Fearing that our friends on the steamer might mistake us for the enemy, the only white shirt in the crowd, that of the lieu-

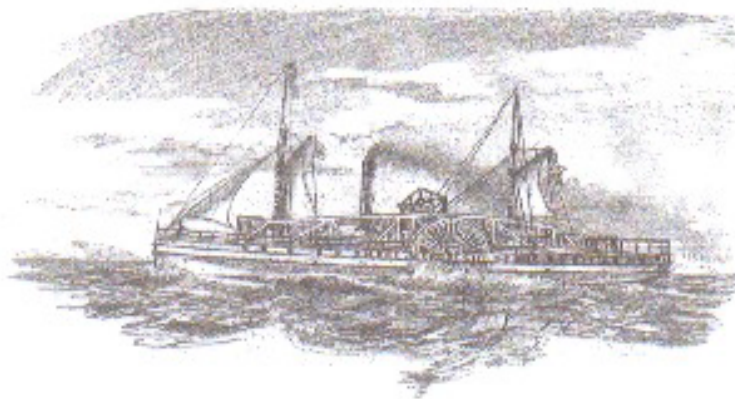


LIEUTENANT CHARLES RESD, WHO CAPTURED THE CALIB CUSHING

tenant, was hung upon an oar and raised in the bow of the boat. Then we pulled away for the nearest steamer, the *Chesapeake*.

"We had rowed but a short distance from the *Cushing* when smoke began to rise from her hatches. The Rebels, as I have told you, could not find our powder, and seeing they must certainly be taken, spilled a barrel of oil on the berth deck, and set it afire. Then they took to their boats, and pulled away in an opposite direction to the one we had taken. The cutter took fire quickly and in a few minutes was a mass of flames. She burned for an hour or so, and then blew up with a tremendous explosion.

"In the meantime, we had been picked up by the steamer *Chesapeake*. We had been through a hard trying time, and we expected to get from the men on the steamer sympathy and condolence. In this we were bitterly disappointed. To be surprised and captured by a gang of men springing from we knew not where; to be manacled, and carried to sea; to be under the fire of the steamer pursuing; all this was hard and not without danger, but to be hissed and hooted at, and called traitors, and every degrading epithet in the language



THE COASTWISE SIDEWHEELER FOREST CITY

by those from whom we had looked for friendliness, and kindness was harder yet, and we could not understand it. In the midst of derisive shouts and cries, we were ordered to be taken below, and kept under a strong guard.

"We soon learned the reason for this apparently harsh treatment. When the *Cushing* had been missed from her anchorage that morning by the officers returning from their shore leave, with one accord they had concluded that the Lieutenant, who, as I have told you, was a Southerner by birth, had stolen the vessel. They thought he must have taken the opportunity, when so many of the officers were ashore, to bribe a part of the crew by promise of large rewards, overcome the rest, and away to the South with his prize. That a gang of Rebels could have entered the harbor under the very shadow of the forts, and have captured the *Cushing*, crew and all, did not seem reasonable nor possible. Believing this to be true, it was little wonder that they had no sympathy for us.

"The Rebels were picked up by the *Forest City*, and then the true situation was found out, which was more than we ourselves knew. The Rebels were the officers and crew of the *Tacony*, which we in the *Cushing* had looked for all the spring, and it was our innocent looking little neighbor, the *Archer*, that had brought them into Portland harbor. They had captured the *Archer* two days before, off Danarts Cove Island, had set her crew ashore, all but one man, whom they held to act as pilot, sunk their own vessel, and came to Portland. Their plan was to capture the *Cushing*, get her all ready to start, and then set fire to some of the wharves, and warehouses, and especially to destroy two wooden war vessels, then on the stocks in the city. In the confusion

and excitement that would follow, they expected to get to sea, unnoticed. The almost dead calm prevented their carrying out this plan.

"About a mile from the *Cushing*, her sails flapping, and useless in the calm, the *Archer* was captured. There were three men upon her. One of them was the Maine fisherman, whom they had expected to use as a pilot. He was in irons for refusing to act in that capacity. The guns of the *Tacony*, and several nautical instruments were found on the *Archer*, and a great quantity of oakum, rolled into balls and soaked in oil, ready for use in setting the fires they had planned. She was captured without resistance, and taken in tow by a tug.

"When we arrived at the city, a mob met us at the wharf, and gave us a reception very similar to what we had received when the steamer picked us up. The people had, of course, not learned the true state of affairs, and believed the crew, or a part of them, at least, had been disloyal. We were marched under a strong guard to the jail, where we were left till the next day, when an investigation was held and we were given our liberty.

"The Rebels were held as prisoners of war, at Fort Preble for a time, then sent to Fort Warren, and were afterwards, I believe, exchanged."

#### ALSO SEE

"Account of the Capture of Two Escaped Confederate Prisoners from Fort Warren," *Eastern Argus*, 21 August 1863, p. 3.

"Account of the Efforts of a Confederate Officer to Steal a U.S. Revenue Cutter, *Caleb Cushing*," *Portland Press Herald*, 29 May 1862, p. 84.

"Account of the Theft of the U.S. Revenue Cutter *Caleb Cushing*," *Maine Sunday Telegram*, 26 June 1888, pp. 31A, 34A.

"Capture by Rebels of Revenue Cutter *Caleb Cushing* in Portland Harbor," *Eastern Argus*, 29 June 1863, p. 2.

"Citizens Rushed to Fend 'Invasion' 100 Years Ago," *Portland Press Herald*, 27 June 1963, p. 48.

"Civil War Came to Maine, 80 Years Ago Today," *Lewiston Journal Illustrated Magazine*, 26 June 1943, p. 1.

"Confederate Cruiser Played Havoc with Friendship Vessels During Bay Visit," *Midcoast Progress Review*, 26 February 1972, p. 4B.

"A Confederate Raid," Winfield Martin Thompson, *The Rudder* 16, 1905, pp. 130–136, 243–250.

"Confederate Raid on Portland Harbor," Arthur Menzies Johnson, *Down East* 7, July 1961, pp. 52–54, 62–64.

"An Incident on the Coast of Maine in 1861," *Magazine of History* 15, 1912, pp. 38–41.

"Little Sidewheeler Manned by Crew of Soldiers Pursues, Helps Capture Rebel Raiders in Cutter,"

*Portland Press Herald*, 20 October 1962, p. 16B.

"Maine's Only Civil War Battle Comic Opera Affair," *Portland Evening Express*, 21 June 1963, p. 17.

"Rebel Cutters Made Exciting Times Along Maine Coast in Civil War," *Lewiston Journal Illustrated Magazine*, 29 May 1942, p. 7.

"Rebel Officer Falls at Ship Stealing," *Portland Evening Express*, 29 May 1962, p. 8A.

"The Rebs Invade Portland Harbor," Francis Whiting Hatch, *Yankee* 18, July 1954, pp. 38–39.

"The Story of the Blowing up of the Revenue Cutter *Caleb Cushing* in Portland Harbor June 27, 1863," *Portland Sunday Telegram*, 18 May 1958, p. 1D.

"The *Tacony* Affair," 1863 Report of the Adjutant General of Maine, pp. 15–23.

"Two Confederate Prisoners Captured Near the Isles of Shoals," *Eastern Argus*, 22 August 1863, p. 3.

"Unsung Battleground of the Civil War," *Down East*, May 1983, pp. 62–66.