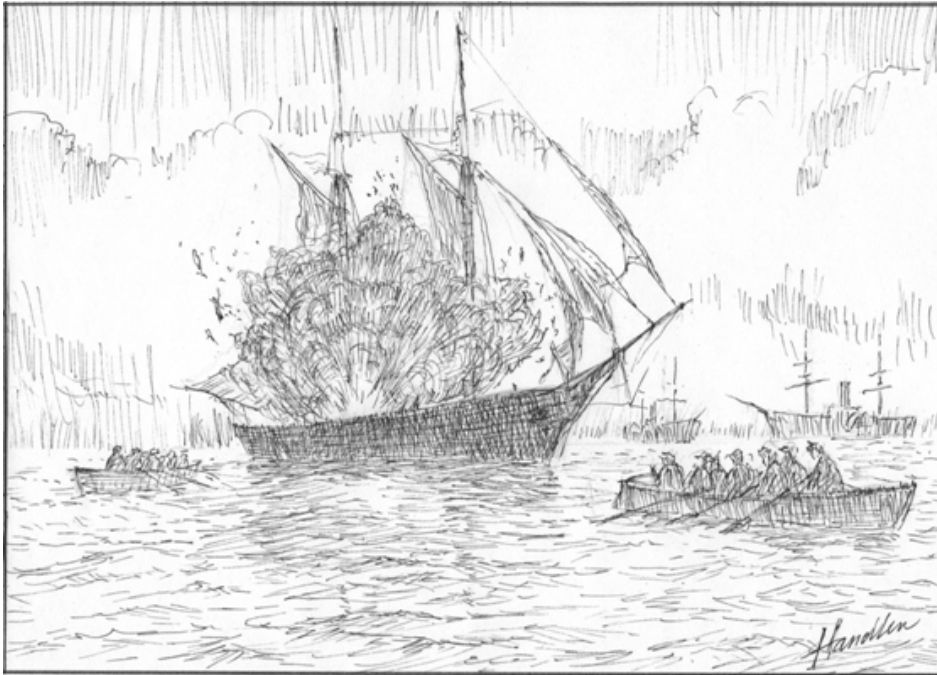


# Civil War battle in Portland Harbor



Stolen cutter

blown up to avoid re-taking

Coastal Maine does not instantly come to mind as an American Civil War battleground, but one explosive encounter in Portland Harbor put Maine on the map.

Confederate Second Lt. Charles W. Read was barely yet able to grow a beard when he convinced his commanding officer to put him in charge of the captured brig *Clarence*, and let him run it up the coast as a privateer cruiser. The bright-faced rebel captain burned or captured 22 Union vessels between May 6 and June 25 of 1863, moving his crew from prize to prize to avoid detection. He and his crew, disguised as hard-working fishermen, were sailing the captured fishing schooner *Archer* of Southport, Maine on the morning of June 26, 1863.

Two Falmouth fishermen, Albert T. Bibber and Elbridge Titcomb, who had been out hauling trawls, later testified that there was nothing to indicate the *Archer* was a vessel of war. So when they saw the schooner approaching them at a reckless pace, they assumed her crew consisted of “drunken fishermen on a frolic.”

Bibber and Titcomb were taken aboard the *Archer* for questioning by the captain. They told him about the gunboats being built at Portland and about the two passenger steamships in the harbor, the *Chesapeake* and the *Forest City*. They also informed him that the captain of the United States revenue cutter *Caleb Cushing* had recently died, and that the ship was lying in Portland Harbor awaiting a new commanding officer.

The schooner *Archer* came to anchor off Fish Point after sunset. Her sailors quickly transformed themselves from fishermen to an armed crew of the Confederate Navy while their Falmouth captives were confined in the cabin. When Bibber and Titcomb were finally brought on deck to help guide the rebels into the harbor, it was after midnight.

Capt. Read was most interested in destroying the gunboats *Agawam* and *Pontoosic* at Franklin Wharf and taking the propeller steamer *Chesapeake* as his new privateer cruiser, but First Officer Brown was not confident he would be able to get the cold steamer engine running without being detected. It was decided

that the cutter would be quietly taken out beyond the harbor's armed forts under the cover of darkness before any attempt was made to burn shipping at the wharves or seize the coveted Chesapeake.

The Caleb Cushing was boarded at 1:30 am. She was taken quietly without resistance and her sails set, but the incoming tide proved a challenging deterrent and even with two boats towing her she didn't pass through Hussey Sound till dawn. Aware that he could not return for the steamer in daylight, Capt. Read sailed seaward.

Confusion reigned onshore. Customs Collector Jedediah Jewett was alerted around 8 a.m. that the Caleb Cushing had sailed out during the night without orders. His first inclination was to suspect that Georgia born Lt. Dudley Davenport, who had temporary charge of the cutter, had deserted.

Word was sent to Fort Preble to prepare arms and soldiers of the 7th Maine Regiment. The side wheel steamer Forest City set off after the Caleb Cushing, but she was in no position to fire on the rebels. The better-equipped propeller steamer Chesapeake followed with 50 civilian volunteers, 27 soldiers and 2 brass six-pounders ready for battle. They knew their fire power was no match for the U.S. revenue cutter, which had a 32-pounder pivot gun and was said to be carrying 400 pounds of gunpowder, but Yankee zeal fueled their resolve.

Fortunately, the yet loyal Lt. Davenport had refused to disclose to the rebel privateers the secret onboard location of most of the solid shot and powder. They fired through the available ammunition while the Forest City and the Chesapeake were attempting to run them down.

When the steamers were within firing range of the Caleb Cushing, Capt. Read could see he was running out of fire power. He set the cutter on fire hoping the fire would find the hidden gunpowder before the cutter was recaptured. He loaded his crew and captives into small boats and rowed away from the ticking time bomb.

For an hour, Portlanders watched as the cutter burned, acutely aware that the 400 pounds of gunpowder she carried made it imprudent for them to approach.

"Finally," it was reported in the Eastern Argus, "a terrific explosion shook the very heavens at 2:15 pm. Fragments of shells, masts, spars and blackened timbers are seen hundreds of feet in the air. The cutter begins to sink stem first, her gleaming guns slipping off the deck and into the deep."

The steamer Forest City picked up the boated rebels and then captured the fishing schooner Archer. The rebel captain and his crew were sent to Fort Warren in Boston for 16 months before being traded for northern prisoners in 1864. Charles W. Read concluded his Civil War service before his 25th birthday and died a Confederate War Hero before his 50th.