

Located at the entrance to Portland Harbor, [Portland Head Lighthouse](#) is the oldest lighthouse in the state of Maine—and one of the oldest in the entire United States. Commissioned by George Washington even before the federal government officially existed, and while Maine was still a part of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, construction for the lighthouse began in 1787 and was completed three years later. Frugally-minded Washington urged workers to construct the lighthouse from local rubblestones collected from the coastline and fields. The resulting tower still stands, [one of only a handful of colonial-era lighthouses](#) that have never been torn down and rebuilt.

Although Maine isn't usually thought of as a Civil War battleground, the [northernmost naval battle of the Civil War](#) occurred right off the shore of Portland Head. On the [night of June 26, 1863](#), Charles W. Read, a Confederate second lieutenant, and his crew disguised as fishermen, snuck past the lighthouse and into Portland harbor aboard a stolen vessel. Read's plan was to commandeer the *Caleb Cushing*, a well-armed United States Revenue Cutter, sail it safely to open water, and then return the same night to bombard the city and burn the harbor and gunboats under construction there.

Under cover of darkness, Read's rebels successfully took the *Caleb Cushing* without resistance, but as they attempted to sail out of the harbor, the rebels discovered the bay's tides had turned against them, slowing their escape and making it impossible to return the same night. By dawn, Portlanders discovered the missing ship and a quickly assembled regiment of soldiers, civilian volunteers (and a brass band) set off in pursuit aboard a steamer. The wind proved poor and the *Cushing* was quickly overtaken. After exhausting their supply of ammunition (not knowing a secret compartment in the ship hid most of the ship's gunpowder) Read and his crew were captured after setting the vessel on fire in an attempt to escape by lifeboat.

"It's easy for us to smile about it now," says Portland historian Herb Adams said on a program on the Maine Public Broadcasting Network, "but [Read's] designs were absolutely serious. And had he succeeded this would have been considered one of the great calamities of the Civil War."

The lighthouse has also inspired literary references; poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow would often visit the lighthouse — some think his poem "[The Lighthouse](#)" describes Portland Head with its lines "a dim, gigantic shape, Holding its lantern o'er the restless sea." Other artists have been inspired by the lighthouse as well—it was the scene of Edward Hopper's [Portland Head-Light](#), and is still one of the most photographed lighthouses in Maine.

