

That time the Civil War was fought in Portland Harbor

[December 11, 2017](#)[History](#)[civil war](#), [confederate](#), [maine](#), [ocean](#), [portland](#), [this week in portland history](#), [water](#)

By [Troy R. Bennett](#)

It happened on a quiet summer night in Portland. With the Civil War raging down south, Confederates made a move right here in Portland.

The Caleb Cushing was a tempting target. The schooner-rigged revenue cutter lay at anchor in the harbor with almost no one aboard. Her skipper died the day before from a heart attack. Most of her crew was ashore on leave, yucking it up at the local taverns.

That's when a daring, deceitful band of Confederates snuck into town and swiped the Caleb Cushing, 154 years ago this past summer, on June 26, 1863.

As a revenue cutter, working for the federal government, the Cushing's job was aiding ships in distress and maintaining channel buoys. Ordinarily, she wouldn't be armed. But with the war on, she carried two cannons. She also carried about 800 pounds of gunpowder. The actual shells were hidden in a secret room beside the captain's quarters. The door was concealed by a mirror. This is an important detail in the tale to come.



Lt. Charles W. Read (public domain image)

Lt. Charles Read was in charge of the rebel crew. They'd been raiding the New England coast with their ship, the Tacony, that spring. With the U.S. Navy looking for them, they captured a Maine fishing schooner called the Archer. Using the fishing boat as a disguise, they burned their own ship.

Time for a side note: Lt. Read had a nickname. They called him "Savvy" or "Savez" because he used the word savvy all the time — like the fictional Capt. Jack Sparrow from the hit Pirates of the Caribbean movies.

Anyway, on that June night in 1863, dressed in fishermen's clothing, the rebels slipped into Portland Harbor. They anchored the Archer between Munjoy Hill and Fort Gorges as the sun set. They planned to set fire to two unfinished gunboats at Franklin Wharf and steal the Caleb Cushing. They'd fire its cannons on the town if they met any resistance.

The Confederate sailors rowed over to the Cushing in two boats. They easily overpowered the skeleton crew and put them in handcuffs below decks. Then, they set off around Peaks Island, via Hussey Sound, for the open sea.



Confederate raiders sailed a stolen fishing boat into Portland harbor on June 26, 1863, then seized the revenue cutter Caleb Cushing, intending to return to harbor and burn several gun boats under construction. These handcuffs, used on the crew, belong to the Maine Historical Society. (This image is item no. 84560 at the Maine Memory Network)

At daybreak, word spread fast that the Cushing was missing. Mayor Jacob McClellan, and city customs collector Jedediah Jewett, chartered two private steamships to chase after her. Loaded with volunteer infantrymen and cannon from Fort Preble, the Chesapeake and the Forest City, set out in pursuit. The chase was directed via flags waved from the top of the Portland Observatory on Munjoy Hill, from which the fleeing Cushing could be seen.

While on the run, the Confederates were preparing to fight. They had one problem, though. They found plenty of gunpowder on the Cushing but they could not locate the the hidden shells. They questioned the ship's crew but no one would tell them where they were.

Instead, they started looking for any hard objects they could stuff into the cannons. Improvising, they collected piles of metal bits, ballast stones, potatoes and even very hard cheese.

The breeze was light and the Caleb Cushing was hardly moving. Before long, the Chesapeake and Forest City caught up, by Cod Ledge, just outside the harbor. The Cushing fired at least five times but didn't hit anything. The Chesapeake also fired but missed.

The captain of the Chesapeake then decided to pull up alongside the fleeing rebels, ram their boat amidships, and let the soldiers on board do the rest.

Lt. Read, in command of the Cushing, saw what was about to happen. Knowing his crew was vastly outnumbered, he ordered the prisoners released into small boats and the Cushing set ablaze. After the fire was going, the Confederates slipped away in the remaining boats. They dropped their sidearms overboard and hoisted a white flag.

The Forest City picked up Lt. Read and his men and the Chesapeake picked up the Cushing's original crew, still in handcuffs.

Then, kaboom. The fire reached the gunpowder and the Cushing scattered to the heavens and the sea.



Portland artist Harrison Bird Brown drew the revenue cutter Caleb Cushing exploding in Portland Harbor. Brown was aboard one of the ships that chased the Cushing. (This image is item no. 96870 at the Maine Memory Network)

The victorious local vessels sailed back into Portland Harbor around 4 p.m. with the forts firing guns in their honor. Church bells rang and hundreds lined the wharves to see the sight. When Lt. Read and his rebels were put ashore, soldiers had to brandish bayonets to keep an angry mob off them. Rumor has it, a secret exchange of Masonic hand signals between Read and the local soldiers kept them safe from the hoards.

The armed volunteers, who'd scared the Confederates into surrender, were treated to a free dinner at Barnum's Restaurant on Temple Street.

That was the last time the Confederates tried any funny business in Portland. But they went on on to rob a bank in Calais the next year. But you'll have to wait until I do "This Week in Calais History" to hear about that one.

Note: I stole this whole tale from Mason Philip Smith's excellent book "Confederates Downeast," published in 1985.

Disclaimer: I'm not a historian. I owe everything I know to the dedicated research of those who have come before me. These character sketches and historical tidbits are assembled from multiple (often antique) sources and sprinkled with my own conjecture. I'm happy to be set straight or to learn more.