

# Long Arm of the Confederacy Reaches....Maine?

While sitting in the day-surgery waiting room, after neglecting to charge my Kindle, I found myself needing something to read. I picked up a copy of "Portland", one of those regional rags that's not my usual cup of tea since it's by and for the well-to-do wannabe Mainers "from away", but I was desperate. I was surprised to come across an intriguing article about the long arm of the Confederate navy reaching into Maine.

Proportionally, Maine provided a lot of soldiers to the Union, and it made a lot of textiles for the forces in the field. That, however, was just about the extent of her direct involvement in the war. Except for...

Charles W. "Savez" Read, described as a small, spare, unprepossessing man originally from Mississippi, was an 1860 graduate of the US Naval Academy class of 1860. At the outbreak of hostilities, he resigned his commission as a midshipman in the USN and joined the CSN. There, he served with distinction as a 2nd LT on very successful Confederate raiders. He was given command of one of the prizes he helped capture, the brig "Clarence". Armed with only one 12-pounder and six rifles (not clear if this referred to artillery rifles or muskets, though given the size of his crew, 20 men, it seems unlikely it was the heavy ordinance), he was ordered to harass Union shipping in the rich northeast.

Read was incredibly successful. He transferred his weapons and crew to one of the first four ships he captured, the brig "Tacony". Then he went on a real tear, capturing and bonding 15 vessels in 2 weeks (June 12 and 24), including one trans-oceanic ship carrying 750 passengers. But this impressive young officer had even more daring ideas to implement.

On June 24, out of ammunition and hotly pursued by Union naval forces, he captured the fishing schooner "Archer", transferred his guns and crews to that ship, burned the "Tacony" and headed for the waters of Maine. He captured two fishermen tending their trawls off Damariscove Island, and learned from them that the Revenue Cutter "Caleb Cushing" and the 750-ton steamer "Chesapeake", as well as two unfinished gunboats, the "USS Agawam" and the "USS Pontoosuc" were lying at anchor in Portland Harbor.

Portland lies in Casco Bay, a well-protected anchorage guarded, at the time by the 133 guns of two War of 1812-era forts, Scammell and Preble. Read proposed to disguise himself as an ordinary fishing vessel and sneak past these two granite behemoths, capture the revenue cutter and steamer, and burn the gunboats. Using the two captured fishermen as guides and under the cover of darkness, Read entered the harbor and dropped anchor. A boarding party climbed aboard the "Chesapeake" but found her boilers out. Rather than waste time firing them and raising steam, Read had his boarding party move to the cutter "Caleb Cushing", manned by a junior officer and a skeleton crew. With pistols and cutlasses flashing, Read's men captured the cutter with nary a cry of warning. The cutter's crew were put in hand-cuffs and Read's men tried to weigh anchor, but the vessel's windlass didn't cooperate; the Confederate crew had to raise the anchor by hand. Once accomplished, Read tried to make his escape, but shortly after getting underway, the wind, previously a favorable westerly, had died to flat calm. The "Cushing" needed a tow from the ship's boats after running aground. Though he managed to get free of the sandbar, his luck had run out.

In Portland itself, the alarm had finally been sounded. The city was in a near state of panic. All the available men of the 7th Maine infantry, sent home on a recruiting mission after its mauling the previous autumn in a forlorn attack at Antietam, was mustered in response (Abner Small, the man in my avatar and an officer in the 7th, tells of this episode in his classic memoir, "Road to Richmond"). Read hoped the cutter had ordnance for him to protect himself, and so she did, but the shot was hidden away in a newly constructed locker, and the plentiful powder he found was all but useless. The citizens of Portland, panicked, hastily raised a committee of men to give chase aboard the "Chesapeake" and another steamer,

the "Forest City". The steamers fast overtook the "Caleb Cushing", though Read found a single shot and fired it in defiance.

But it was over. Overtaken by the Chesapeake, Read freed his two fishermen prisoners in a boat, set the "Cushing" afire and finally lowered his crew in boats and surrendered. Knowing the cutter had a load of powder, the captain of the "Cushing" hightailed it after taking his prisoners, returning to Portland. The enraged citizens of Portland wanted to hang the rebel crew, but cooler heads prevailed and they were sent to Fort Preble until exchanged later that year.

Read continued his stellar career after exchange, ending up on the Gulf coast. The city of Portland returned to normal, and the federal Navy had egg on its face after failing to bring the small, bold, brave Confederate raiders to book.