

FATHER AND SON BECAME LOCAL HEROES IN TWO WARS

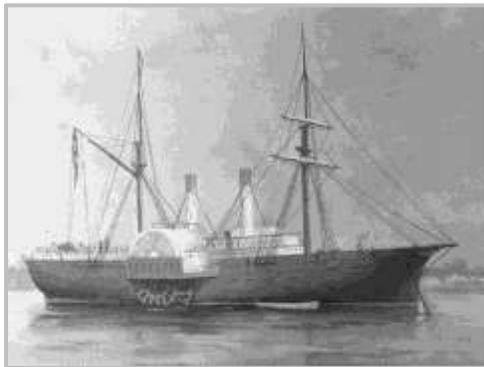
By Ellen Knight¹

In the history of our nation, many sons have following in the footsteps of their fathers when serving in the military during successive conflicts. One such pair in Winchester included the heroic figures of Commodore William F. Spicer, a veteran of the Civil War, and his son William F. Jr., a participant in the Spanish-American War who became the third person in the nation to receive the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Commodore William F. Spicer (1820 - 1878), a native of New York, entered the navy in 1839 and rose through the ranks from midshipman to commodore. He arrived in Winchester shortly before 1860 as Lieutenant Spicer.

Prior to the Civil War, Spicer had a varied career, sailing to the west coast of Africa, the Mediterranean, the Orient, and the Danish West Indies.² In this last place he met his wife, Emily Louisa Kierulff, who had been born there but was quoted in 1898 as saying, "I am half English, half Danish and wholly American."³ They married in New York. Their children were born in the West Indies, Italy, and Massachusetts, including Winchester.⁴ They established a home in Winchester while Spicer was stationed at the Charlestown Navy Yard.

Spicer was reportedly a man of excellent qualities and generous impulses. He also had a musical bent. During his youthful years in the Navy, he composed some popular ballads, among which are "Absent Friends and You, Mary," "The Gale," "All Hands, Up Anchor," "Off Sicily's Isles," "The Date of '39," and "The Last Voyage." He was a member of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States and of the Swedenborgian Church.



U.S.S. Quaker City

Spicer first experienced wartime service during the latter part of the Mexican War in 1846-1848, participating in the capture of Tusan. However, he saw much more action during the Civil War. After the war broke out, he was promoted to Lieutenant Commander and Commander. With the latter rank, he left Boston to join the Atlantic Blockading Squadron and during that service commanded the U.S.S. *Cambridge* and U.S.S. *Quaker City* and participated in the attacks on Fort Fisher. In 1865, he was on special duty at the Portsmouth Navy Yard and was once more in Boston from 1869 to 1872, on equipment duty.

Spicer returned to his Winchester home, which overlooked Wedge Pond not far from the home of Rear-Admiral Henry Knox Thatcher, another veteran of the Atlantic Blockading Squadron. His family lived there and in Charlestown through his death.

Commodore Spicer died at the Charlestown Navy Yard and was buried at Wildwood Cemetery. According to his obituary, "Minute guns were fired as the funeral cortege moved away from the house, in front of which gathered a number of naval officers and prominent citizens to pay their tribute of respect."

SECOND GENERATION

Twenty years after Commodore Spicer's death, enmity between Spain and the United States, provoked by the explosion of the *Maine* at anchor in Havana Harbor on Feb. 15, 1898 and other causes, escalated to the point that war was declared that April. All of Spicer's sons contributed to the war effort in some manner, with his namesake, William F. Spicer Jr. (1851-1920) distinguishing himself at Guantanamo Bay and earning the Congressional Medal of Honor

Born in the West Indies, this Spicer lived a few years in Italy but essentially grew up in Winchester. Reportedly, he had "always been a marine since he was old enough to carry a cutlass." Like his father, he rose through the ranks and traveled to some exotic ports.⁵ At the time of his father's death, he was assigned to the Boston Navy Yard. He held the rank of captain when the battleship *Maine* was blown up and his country went to war with Spain.

Capt. Spicer sailed to Cuba, in command of Company D in the First Marine Battalion. He led the first landing party of marines—he reportedly was himself the first man ashore—and took part in the battle of Guantanamo.

The Spanish-American War was infamous for jungle- and disease-related casualties. Conditions in Cuba were hard on Americans, and Spicer (then age 47) was not immune to them. During a mission described by author Stephen Crane (who accompanied the detachment), in June 1898, Spicer was in command of a detachment of 160 marines⁶ assigned to go to Cuzco, six miles down the coast from Guantanamo Bay, to destroy a guerilla encampment guarding the only well in the area.

Half-way to their destination along the jungle trails, Spicer fell victim to heat stroke, as did 19 other marines in the detachment, and was rescued by a stretcher party from the *U.S.S. Dolphin* which was taking a parallel track. (The mission was accomplished under other command.)

The conditions did not keep Spicer down. The local paper that July reported an unusual incident during the war when Spicer "on short notice organized a detail of army cooks at Caimanera and manning whatever guns were not in the hands of the guard, protected the camp against an unexpected onslaught by the Spanish."



Spicer survived the war and was given further assignments. Through at least 1900, his home residence of record was Winchester (where the family had moved to Highland Avenue by 1893⁷). By 1910, he had attained the rank of Lt. Colonel and moved with his wife and sons to Lexington. He later lived in Charlestown. The rest of the family disbursed to other parts of the country, leaving Commodore Spicer and an infant daughter to rest alone at Wildwood.

¹ This article © 2019 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Feb. 21, 2007. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² Details of his career, as given in his obituaries, include entering the navy as a Midshipman, June 21, 1839, serving on the west coast of Africa from August of that year until July 1840, appointment to the U.S. Naval Academy 1843-45, promotion on July 2, 1845, to Passed Midshipman, cruising in the steamer *Vixen* during the latter part of the Mexican War in 1846-48, participating in the capture of Tuspan, again serving on the West African coast until 1847, duty on several home posts, participating in the Mediterranean squadron from September 1852 to February 1855, being promoted to be Master June 28, 1853 and commissioned a lieutenant on Feb. 25, 1854. From October 1856 to August 1858, he was again attached to the Mediterranean squadron, and on his return home was ordered to the Charlestown Navy Yard, where he remained until the spring of 1860, when he joined the *Niagara*, serving in China, Japan, and on the blockade. Promoted to be Lieutenant Commander on July 16, 1862, he was again placed on duty at the Boston station, his stay, however, being only from October 1862 to February 1863, a promotion to the rank of Commander occurring on Jan. 2, 1863. He was ordered to the Atlantic Blockading Squadron and during that service commanded the *U.S.S. Cambridge* and *U.S.S. Quaker City* and participated in the attacks on Fort Fisher. In 1865, he was on special duty at the Portsmouth Navy Yard and was once more in Boston from 1869 to 1872, on equipment duty. On Apr. 22, 1870, he was promoted to be Captain and commanded successively the monitor *Terror* and *Dictator*. He commanded the latter in 1874-75 during the threatened war with Spain on account of the *Virginus* Affair. From March 1875 to July 1876, he was in command of the *Rendezvous* in Boston. His promotion to the rank of Commodore was made Apr. 23, 1877. He remained assigned to the Charlestown Navy Yard through the time of his death.

³ *The Winchester Star*, July 1, 1898.

⁴ Of their eight children, three, Emily, Vibe Clay, and Alice were born in Italy. The final three children John, Paul, and Margaret Spicer were born in Massachusetts.

⁵ He entered the Marine Corps, appointed from Massachusetts as 2nd Lieutenant March 31, 1872. His first cruise was to China and Japan. At the time of his father's death, he was assigned to the Boston Navy Yard. He was promoted 1st Lieutenant Jan. 1, 1880, and captain Jan. 6, 1892. In 1889, he commanded the U.S.S. Chicago Marine Detachment.

⁶ The detachment included men from his own Company D and from Captain George F. Elliott's Company C plus 50 Cubans.

⁷ His mother was still in Winchester as of 1900 but in 1910 was residing in California, where she died that year and where most of her children also lived.