

ADMIRAL HENRY KNOX THATCHER

By Ellen Knight¹

Some of Winchester's most honored residents during the latter part of the 19th century were veterans of the Civil War. Among these was the distinguished naval officer, Adm. Henry Knox Thatcher who came to live in Winchester following his retirement.

Thatcher was the grandson of General Henry Knox, Washington's Secretary of War. Born on his grandfather's estate on May 26, 1806,² he was a native of Thomaston, Maine. According to his Grand Army of the Republic application, he enlisted as a midshipman in the U.S. Navy in 1823 and "served the government for the period of 42 years and continue subject to orders of Govmt. For 15 years (consecutively) afloat, including the entire period of late war, other periods of from 18 mos. to 4 years."

As a midshipman, he was assigned to the frigate *United States* under Commander Isaac Hull from 1823 to 1827. After two years on the *Delaware*, as a passed midshipman, he served as acting master of the schooner *Porpoise* and the sloop-of-war *Erie*, belonging to the West India Squadron.



Charcoal portrait
by Eva D. Cowdery

In Dec. 1831, Thatcher married Susan C. Crowell in Mercer, Maine. He received his commission as lieutenant on Feb. 28, 1833 and served at various stations, including the West India Squadron where he patrolled sugar islands, until 1836, suppressing the slave trade and protecting American commerce.

A variety of assignments followed, including service in the Mediterranean and along the African coast. He received his first command in 1852, when appointed commander of the storeship *Relief*. In 1855, he was made commander. In 1857, he commanded the sloop *Decatur* in the Pacific and patrolled from the northwest down to Chile.³

Thatcher was stationed in Boston in 1843, in 1850, and again in 1859, when he was in command at the Charlestown Navy Yard.⁴

CIVIL WAR

Thatcher was said to have been "an uncompromising Unionist and during the Civil War fought gallantly.... A competent and brave officer, he was highly respected."⁵

His first ship during the war was the sloop-of-war *Constellation*. Under his command, it left Portsmouth on March 11, 1862, for the Mediterranean, arriving at Gibraltar on April 19, to serve as a deterrent to Confederate cruisers and commerce raiders. In July, Thatcher was promoted to commodore, skipping the rank of captain. The *Constellation* patrolled constantly. Though it never engaged in battle, it assisted in blockading the CSS *Sumter* at Gibraltar and participated in the attempt to prevent the Confederate navy from taking possession of the steamer *Southerner* in Italy for use as a raider.⁶

An article in *The Winchester Star* of 1921⁷ says that Admiral Thatcher “nearly involved us in war with Spain. During the Civil War, as he was sailing in the Mediterranean, he put into the harbor of a neutral island for water. Here ships were allowed to stay only twenty-four hours. After paying off the men, he gave them shore leave, and they all proceeded to get drunk. They were put in jail for disturbing the peace, and so could not return to the ship. Admiral Thatcher sent word that he would pay the fine, but he must have the men. The authorities refused to give them up, and Thatcher replied that he would open fire on the town. The men returned in time to save a disastrous war with Spain.”

On July 18, 1863, Capt. Henry S. Stellwagen replaced Thatcher, who then commanded the steam frigate *Colorado* which formed part of North Atlantic Squadron under the command of Rear-Admiral David D. Porter.

According to an obituary,⁸ Thatcher’s “principal services [were] rendered in the engagement at Mobile, under Farragut, and in the storming of Fort Fisher under Porter.” Regarding the Battle of Mobile Bay, where Adm. David Farragut led the greater part of his fleet successfully through a dangerous torpedo-mined area opposite the city, this obituary says: “Admiral Thatcher’s chief characteristic was prompt and unhesitating obedience to the orders of his superior officers, let the consequences be what they might. It is narrated of him, that while the fleet under Farragut was steaming up Mobile Bay in line of battle by divisions to attack the rebel fleet, also in line of battle, near the head of the bay Commodore Thatcher’s ship, the *Colorado*, suddenly came to a stop. The *Colorado* was just in front of the *Hartford*, in the rigging of which stood Farragut, overlooking the scene. Noticing the halt of the *Colorado*, Farragut shouted out, ‘What’s the matter, Thatcher?’ Thatcher from his quarter deck, ‘Torpedoes directly in front, sir.’ Farragut--‘Go ahead, -- the torpedoes.’ Thatcher, ‘Ay, ay, sir.’ Then turning to his executive officer,--‘Captain, -- the torpedoes, and go ahead.’ The *Colorado* was pushed forward at speed, escaped the torpedoes by a miracle and was soon hotly engaged with the enemy. It was for cool gallantry in this action, especially, that Thatcher was appointed rear admiral of the navy.”

Obedient Thatcher may have been; however the *Colorado* was not in Mobile Bay in August 1864. It was out of commission from February to September 1864.⁹ Nor was Thatcher commanding any of the frigates that were there. The writer may have confused the battle of Mobile Bay with the surrender of Mobile.

Thatcher himself summarized his service during the war as “special service, blockading, capture of Mobile, Galveston, Fort Fisher NC.”¹⁰

In October 1864 the *Colorado* rejoined the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron and cruised off the coast of North Carolina until January 1865 when it took part in the attacks on Fort Fisher. “I was wounded at the battle of Fort-Fisher in the engagement therewith on the 2d day of January 1865 but not disabled.”¹¹ He was again promoted, this time to acting rear admiral.

That same month Thatcher became commander of the West Gulf Blockading Squadron, succeeding Farragut. On the *Portsmouth*, he conducted combined operations with Gen. Edward R. S. Canby which resulted in the surrender of Mobile, and, subsequently, he received the surrender of the Confederate fleet. He moved on to Galveston which he occupied in June. That July the east and west gulf squadrons were combined under Thatcher’s command.

Thatcher was commissioned as a rear-admiral in July 1866. From May 1866 to August 1868 he was in command of the North Pacific Squadron. During this time he was made a knight of the order of Kamehameha I by the king of the Hawaiian Islands. He retired from active service in 1868 but was stationed at Portsmouth, N. H., as Port Admiral from 1869 to 1871.¹²

RETIREMENT IN WINCHESTER

Then Thatcher came to Winchester. According to the town history, “His dignified and rather imposing figure was familiar in the streets of Winchester until his death in 1880.”¹³



Though he reportedly spent his summers at Nahant, he and his wife Susan and adopted daughter, Susan Emerson,¹⁴ had a house on Lake Street at the northern edge of Wedge Pond, built by Col. Samuel B. White. His property, as assessed in 1876, included a house (\$6,000), barn (\$500), two outbuildings (\$300), an acre tillage (\$1,800) and an acre pasture (\$1,400). The house survived into the early twentieth century but no longer stands.¹⁵

Of the other Civil War veterans who made their homes in Winchester, the next highest ranking naval officer, Commodore William F. Spicer, was a neighbor of Thatcher’s. Like Thatcher, Spicer had been stationed at the Charlestown Navy Yard, was assigned to the Atlantic Blockading Squadron, and saw action at Fort Fisher. Spicer took up residence in Winchester at least six years prior to Thatcher¹⁶ in a house also overlooking Wedge Pond.

The two officers were, in fact, their closest neighbors along the north edge of the pond.¹⁷

A hand-written, unsigned note on the back of his photograph in the Winchester Archives says that, "Rear-Admiral H. Thatcher came among us after the late war and lived in a house on the banks of our little lake. Unostentatious in his ways he was friendly with everybody, looked with pleasure on the lives of the young, and took his place quietly among the students in a Bible class. He had reminiscences of a cruise on the route of St. Paul as he had commanded the Mediterranean fleet -- at another time the Pacific fleet."

That photograph is located, curiously, in an album of members of the Winchester Historical and Genealogical Society, which was formed four years after Thatcher died in 1880. Apparently, though, Thatcher was interested in history. He was a member and president of the Massachusetts Society of Cincinnati (named after the Roman hero), founded by his grandfather Gen. Knox on May 10, 1783, and was a member of the Bunker Hill Monument Association.¹⁸

One organization in Winchester that Thatcher definitely joined was the A. D. Weld Post No. 148 of the Grand Army of the Republic. The post was organized in 1872. According to his application papers, Thatcher applied for membership in April 1876. He was recommended for membership by Sylvanus C. Small, another Maine native and a veteran of the Second Maine Cavalry who served until the close of the war and earned the rank of first lieutenant and quartermaster. Small also settled in Winchester in 1871, having lived in Boston previously.

It was doubtless also upon Small's suggestion that Thatcher's portrait was presented to the Grand Army Post.¹⁹ The artist was Sylvanus's sister, Eva Dora Small, who lived with him during the late 1870s prior to her marriage to Charles Cowdery in 1880, the year of the admiral's death.

One anecdotal reference to Thatcher in surviving Winchester records was written by C. F. Lunt, in 1890. While writing about a Winchester resident named Solomon Fletcher, Lunt related: "One of the pleasant incidents of his old home was a supper given in his honor by some of his gentleman friends.... The late Adm. H. K. Thatcher was president of the evening, and after justice had been done to the repast, called the company to order, and his introduction of Uncle Sol. done in his dignified and gentlemanly manner, as none but the Adm. could do, is worthy of note. He said, 'Gentlemen, you have all heard of the great African explorer, Livingstone, and his great work in exploring the Congo River, but (turning to Uncle Solomon, who sat at his right) we have as our guest to-night one whose fame exceeds them all. I refer to the exposé of the Concord River.' This, of course, was unexpected, and it was some time before the old man could reply, but finally, answered him by saying, 'The Admiral is two many guns for me.' ...It should be said by way of explanation that Solomon was extremely fond of the Concord River, his earlier days being passed in its vicinity, and he spent many hours camping on its banks."²⁰

Thatcher died on April 5, 1880 from cystitis. Reportedly, he suffered from a kidney complaint, had had a protracted illness, and had been living at the Evans House (a hotel) in Boston with his wife and daughter since the previous October.²¹ He was buried at Forest Hills.

He was survived by his wife and daughter, then age 28, who apparently moved back to Winchester²² since she owned the Lake Street house at least through 1890.²³

USS THATCHER

In 1918, a new navy vessel, USS *Thatcher*, destroyer #162, was named in the Admiral's honor. It was decommissioned in 1940 and a second *Thatcher* was commissioned in 1943 and decommissioned in 1945.²⁴

¹ This article © 2019 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Apr. 18, 2002. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² His Grand Army of the Republic application papers say he was born in 1809.

³ This synopsis of his career has been compiled from *New York Times* obituary, a history provided by the USS *Constellation*, and various other sources.

⁴ The 1860 Mass. census enumerated Thatcher in Charlestown with his wife and daughter Susan, age 9.

⁵ Obituary printed both in *Woburn Journal* Apr. 10, 1880 and *Boston Daily Globe* Apr. 8, 1880.

⁶ USS *Constellation* Web site.

⁷ Harriet Eustis, "Some Famous Residents of Winchester," *Winchester Star*, Feb. 18, 1921.

⁸ See note 4.

⁹ *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*, 11:144-45, via Internet.

¹⁰ GAR application.

¹¹ GAR application.

¹² *New York Times* obituary.

¹³ Henry Chapman, *History of Winchester*, p. 194.

¹⁴ No other child but Susan, described as adopted in the 1880 census, is known.

¹⁵ In 1906 it was the home of Elbridge Barker, in 1918 and 1936 Thomas Quigley, Jr. Condominiums now occupy the site.

¹⁶ He is located in Winchester in the 1865 Massachusetts census. He lived there until his death on Nov. 29, 1878.

¹⁷ An 1875 map shows the locations of both these properties. Thatcher's was to the northwest of the pond, Spicer's to the southwest.

¹⁸ Thatcher reportedly donated his grandfather's Cincinnati papers to the New England Historical Genealogical Society.

¹⁹ The portrait now belongs to the Winchester Historical Society. Although the artist may have known her subject, the portrait was apparently done from a photograph.

²⁰ *The Winchester Star*, Oct. 4, 1890.

²¹ Death record and obituary.

²² 1880 census.

²³ She was a resident of San Diego by 1900.

²⁴ The WWII destroyer launched at Bath Iron Works was christened by Charlotte L. Hyde of Hollywood, Cal., Thatcher's gggniece, 7 Dec. 1942.