



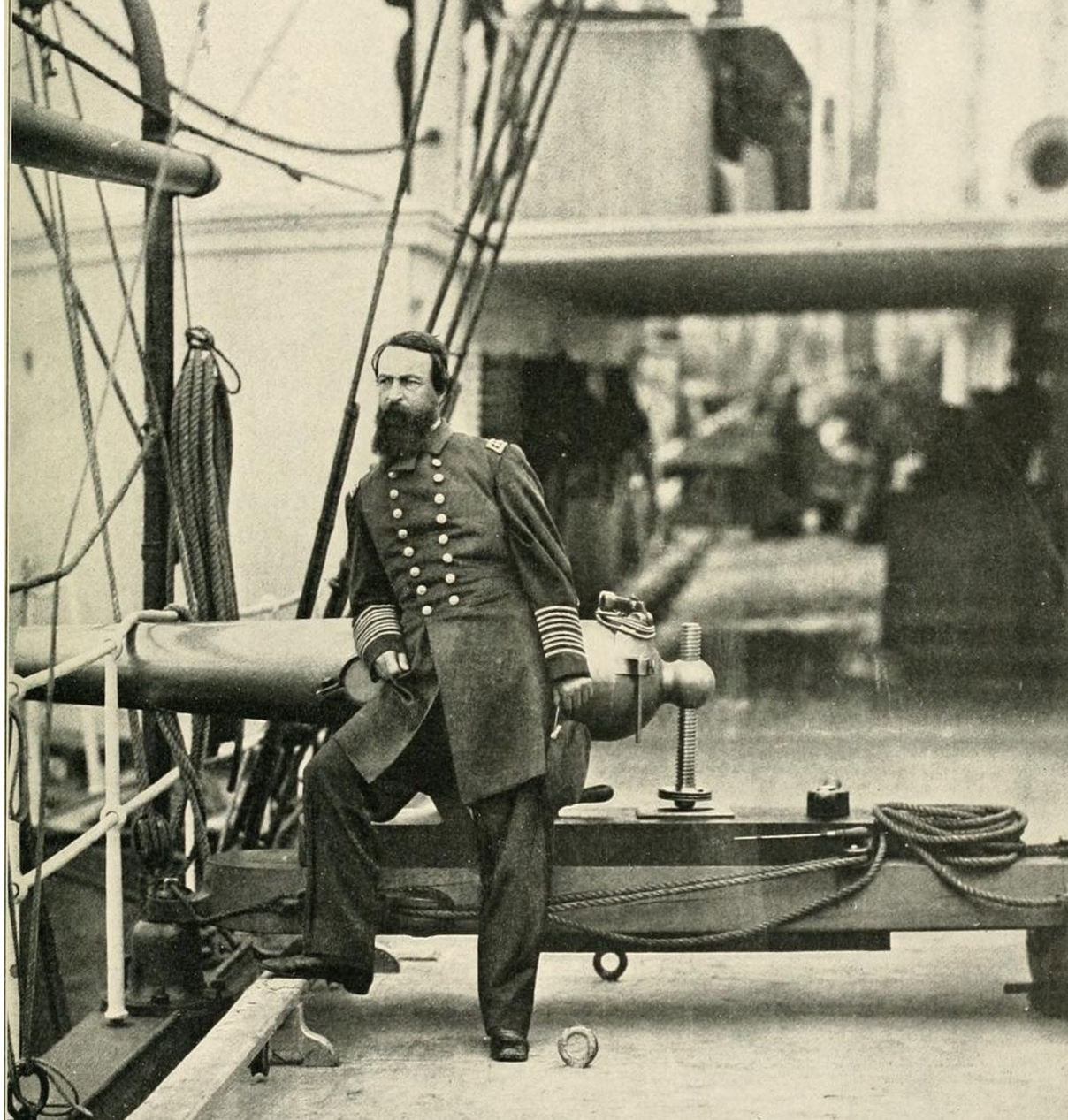
The Legacy of Commodore David Porter:

David Dixon Porter

Part Three of a three-part series

Vice Admiral Jim Sagerholm, USN (Ret.), November 6, 2020

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David Dixon Porter | public domain

David Dixon Porter was a lieutenant at the beginning of the Civil War, but four years later, he was a rear admiral commanding the Atlantic Blockading Squadron, the most prestigious sea assignment in the U.S. Navy at that time.

In character and temperament, Porter is analogous to Gen. George Patton of World War II fame. Perhaps having been named David made him feel a closer affinity with his father than was evident among any of his nine siblings. Whatever the reason, David Dixon deeply admired his father, whose heroic exploits in the War of 1812 had made him a national hero, and the desire to emulate his father was a strong influence on the son.

Like Patton, David Dixon was outspoken, extremely competitive, inordinately ambitious, creatively innovative, above average intelligence, aggressive, paranoid, thin-skinned, and, at times, devious. He was a man of impetuous energy and daring who was undaunted in his pursuit of a goal, regardless of difficulties encountered. He embellished his reports of his actions in a campaign while downplaying and criticizing the actions of peers and seniors. But above all, David Dixon Porter obtained desired results, and was one of the few senior naval officers who cooperated willingly and effectively with the army when called to do so. The best-known example of his work with the army is the Vicksburg campaign, led by General Grant and assisted by General Sherman. A quick mutual recognition of one another's respective capabilities brought a quick rapport among the three that lasted until their deaths.



War-time Fort Pickens | Harper's Weekly

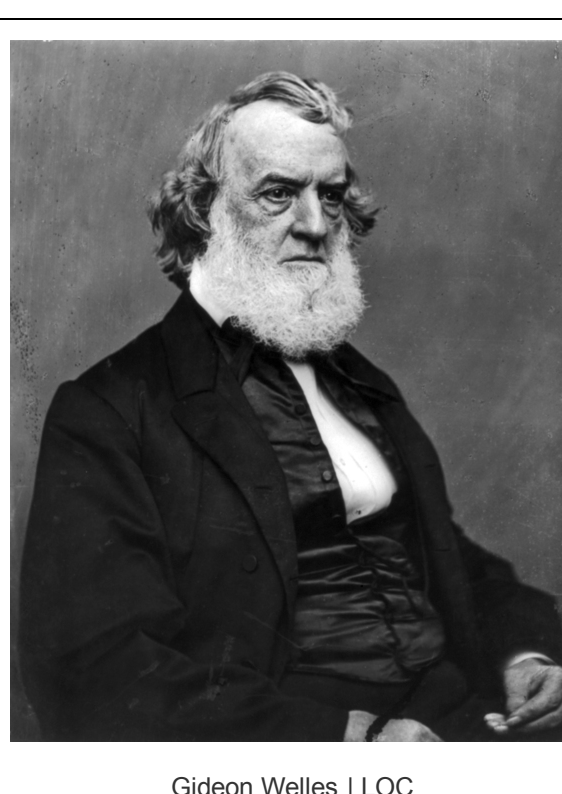
An example of Porter's audacity, spurred by ambition and his naturally aggressive character, was his initiative to take upon himself the reinforcement of Fort Pickens at Pensacola, Florida.

When war was imminent in April 1861, Lieutenant Porter was in Washington preparing to go to the West Coast for assignment to the Coast Survey. The 47-year-old officer had been a lieutenant for 20 years. Forts and equipment throughout the South were being seized, and Lincoln was determined to hold Fort Sumter, situated in the center of Charleston harbor, completely surrounded by water. At the same time, naval captain James Armstrong, commandant of the Navy Yard at Pensacola, Florida, had turned the Fort over to the Confederates, but Lieutenant Slemmer, the army officer in charge of the defenses at Pensacola, thought differently. Slemmer had moved all weapons, ammunition, and supplies to Fort Pickens, located directly across Pensacola Bay from the Navy Yard. Now Lincoln was faced with the problem of reinforcing and resupplying both Pickens and Sumter.

Porter was a close friend of Gustavus Fox, occupant of the newly created office of Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Through Fox, Porter had gained access to the discussions regarding Sumter and Pickens. Porter's neighbor was Army Captain Montgomery Meigs. He and Meigs devised a plan wherein a large steamer loaded with six companies of soldiers and their artillery could be landed at Pickens, making it a Union stronghold commanding Pensacola harbor with sufficient strength to be held indefinitely. Lincoln approved the plan and Porter selected USS *Powhatan* for the mission, it being the only ship available. Porter had thoughtfully included in the plan the need to keep the Navy Department excluded to prevent southern sympathizers from informing their friends in the South. In the meantime, Gideon Welles and Fox had ordered the Brooklyn Navy Yard to prepare *Powhatan* for the Sumter expedition, to be led by Fox.



Gustavus Fox | LOC

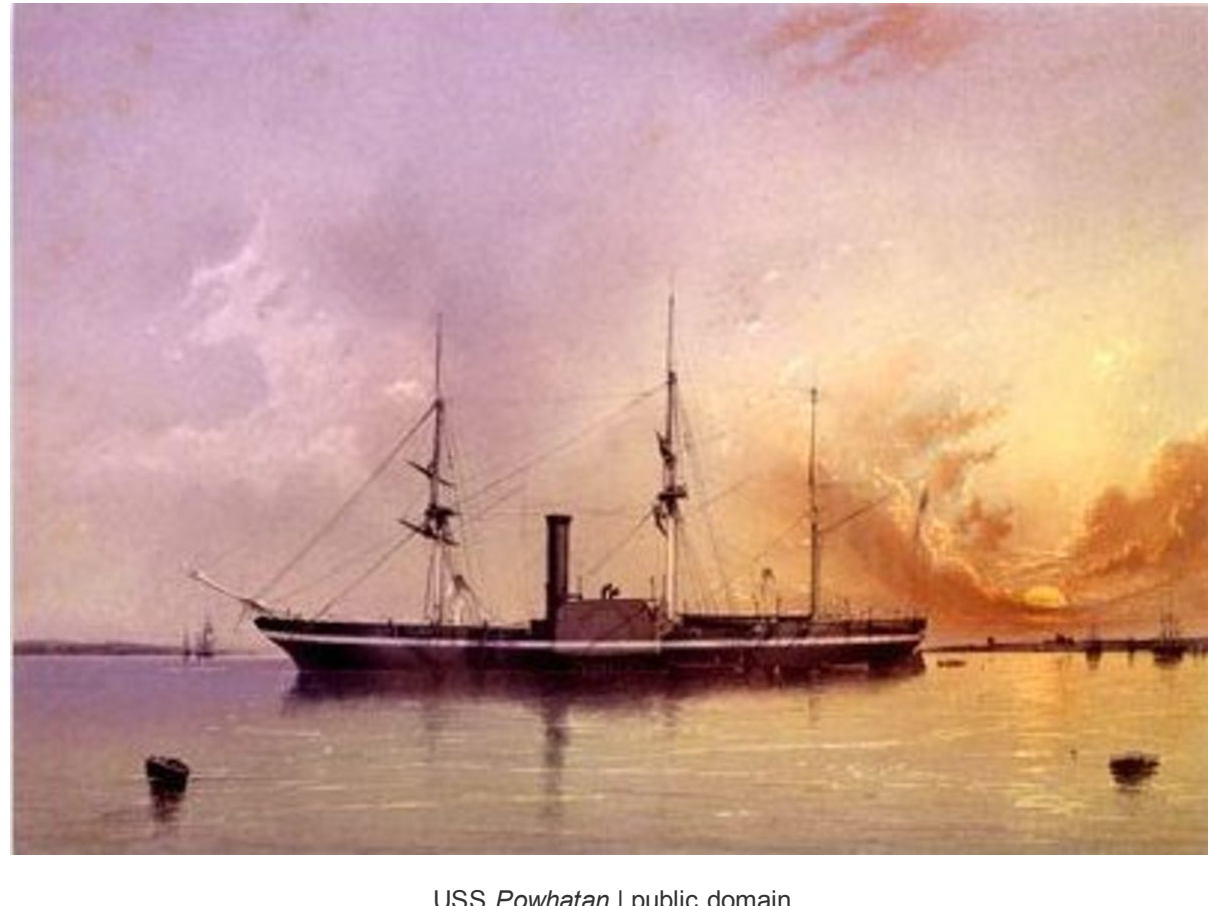


Gideon Welles | LOC

Porter arrived on April 2 at the Brooklyn Navy Yard where *Powhatan* had been sent for decommissioning. It was typical of Porter to expect that he would be given command of *Powhatan*, but Welles refused on the grounds that a lieutenant was too junior for such a command. Besides, *Powhatan* was to be the flagship for Fox in the Sumter plan. Even more typical of Porter, he went behind and over Welles, conniving with Secretary of State Seward to help Porter convince Lincoln that Porter and Meigs should lead the Pickens expedition. Now, with Lincoln's approval, he was there to take command of the ship.

The commandant, Captain Foote, had received written orders from Welles to hold *Powhatan* for Fox, so Foote wired Pickens that he could not include names. Since Welles knew no Foote wired the Pickens expedition, he assumed Foote was referring to the ship's assignment to the Sumter expedition and confirmed that she was to be readied for sea. Lincoln was uneasy about having excluded Welles, but instead of bringing Welles on board, he casually mentioned it to General-in-Chief Winfield Scott, who then assigned 65-year-old Col. Harvey Brown, whose subsequent arrival at Pickens caused further complications. Still suspicious, Foote invited Porter to stay at Foote's residence, thereby keeping an eye on Porter's activities. Porter was pleased to accept since it enabled Porter to keep watch on Foote! [I am not making this up.]

During the next three days, while *Powhatan* was being readied for sea, Foote by wire made several more attempts to gain clarification from Welles, but the need for vague wording in his messages caused Welles to continue in the belief that Foote was referring to Sumter.



USS *Powhatan* | public domain

Late on April 4, Seward learned that Welles had ordered Foote to hold *Powhatan* for the Sumter expedition. Concerned that Pickens's relief would be delayed by conflicting orders for *Powhatan*, Seward went to the Willard Hotel and awakened Welles, accusing him of obstructing the Pickens expedition. Welles heatedly replied that Porter had not been ordered to command *Powhatan* and after some angry debate, agreed to accompany Seward to the White House. It was near midnight, but Lincoln was still in his office. Lincoln had assumed that Seward would clear the Pickens plan with Welles, and realizing that Seward had failed to do so, Lincoln now explained the plan to Welles. At Welles's insistence, the meeting closed with Seward reluctantly agreeing to wire orders for Porter to return to Washington. The next day, a disgruntled Seward delayed sending Porter his new orders until late in the afternoon. By the time the orders arrived at Brooklyn, Porter and Meigs were on their way out of New York harbor. Foote sent a lieutenant on a fast steam packet to intercept *Powhatan* and deliver Seward's orders to Porter. Catching *Powhatan* at the seaward exit, the lieutenant gave Porter the wire from Seward. Seeing it was from Seward, Porter stated that his orders were from the president, and he intended to carry them out.

In the event, Pickens was reinforced and remained in Union hands for the rest of the war. Porter was forgiven by Welles who saw in Porter the kind of officer that took action and succeeded in attaining the objective. Porter went on to participate in the capture of New Orleans, in the siege of Vicksburg, in Mobile Bay, and as a rear admiral commanding in 1865 the North Atlantic squadron, directed the capture of Fort Fisher, closing Wilmington, North Carolina, the last major port of the Confederacy.



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