AN OFFICER OF SIX NAVIES

The Life of Confederate Commander Hunter Davidson

John M. Coski
with Charles T. Jacobs

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Introduction

In December 1881, Hunter Davidson, late commander in the Confederate States Navy, penned an indignant letter to Jefferson Davis, asking the former Confederate president to "do an act of justice." In his recently published *Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government*, Davis had trumpeted the Confederacy's remarkable innovations in submarine or torpedo (mine) warfare, attributing the innovations to his West Point contemporary and friend, Brig. Gen. Gabriel J. Rains, but failing to mention the work of the Confederate Navy's Submarine Battery Service, which Davidson commanded for two years. Davidson laid before Davis the facts about the Submarine Battery Service's accomplishments, quoting the testimony of Confederate Navy Secretary Stephen R. Mallory and reminding Davis that he also had written a similar letter. "If your memory still fails you," Davidson wrote, "there are four well-known officers living who can testify to the exactness of what I have here written." He then reiterated his request "that as an act of simple justice you will answer this letter and correct the mistakes referred to."

"If you were surprised at not finding in my book your name mentioned in connection with torpedoes," Davis replied in January 1882, "I was certainly not less so at your arraignment of me as having done you an injustice by the omission." Davis tried weakly to conciliate Davidson with admiring words, but he reiterated his belief that Rains's torpedo work was the more effective and more appropriate for the Confederacy. He did not try to mask his contempt for what he clearly believed Davidson's petty complaint that his name had not appeared in *Rise and Fall*.

If Davis thought that his scolding would be the end of the exchange, he obviously did not know Hunter Davidson. Widely criticized for his tenacity and

unwillingness to let things go, the former Confederate president unwittingly had engaged a kindred soul. Davidson regarded Davis's reply as "an aggravated repetition of the injustice you have done me in your book" which was filled with "repeated historical mistakes." The former Confederate naval officer seethed with sarcasm as he observed that the former president's memory was "remarkably retentive" concerning Confederate torpedo warfare "if not to my credit," "but where the case concerns me . . . you persist in being wholly oblivious." Davidson advised Davis that "I will use whatever means I am possessed to give them all possible publicity." Indeed, he soon published his exchanges with Jefferson Davis in his local newspaper, the Buenos Aires *Herald*.[1]

Reprinted in 1894 in the more accessible *Southern Historical Society Papers* under the title "Davis versus Davidson," the spat raises some obvious questions. Who was Hunter Davidson and where did he find the audacity to confront and contradict Jefferson Davis so forthrightly and publicly? Did his arguments have merit? And, incidentally, what was he doing in Argentina?

Hunter Davidson served in or with six different naval forces over his 45-year career. The range of his professional activities and the diverse cast of people whose paths he crossed make his a fascinating life story.

As an officer in the U.S. Navy, he was for brief spells assigned to the nation's largest and most famous wooden warships, attended the fledgling U.S. Naval Academy, served in the Mexican War, in the Caribbean, along the Pacific coasts of South America, Mexico, California and Oregon, the U.S. Coast Survey, in the Africa Squadron suppressing the international slave trade, and on the Naval Academy faculty. While at Annapolis, he received two patents from the U.S. government. Then, as an officer in the Virginia State Navy and the Confederate States Navy, Davidson fought against the men who had been his commanders and comrades in blue as well as with men who had been brothers in blue before they were brothers in gray. As a Confederate officer he commanded a gun crew on the CSS *Virginia* in the battle of Hampton Roads, assisted Matthew Fontaine Maury in torpedo development and deployment, succeeded Maury in command of the Submarine Battery Service, won promotion for leading a daring torpedo boat attack against a Federal frigate, followed Maury abroad to acquire torpedo supplies, assisted in fitting out an ironclad commerce raider, and took a turn as a blockade runner. After the war he commanded an abortive gun-running expedition for the Chilean navy and commanded Maryland's so-called Oyster Navy before finding a remunerative position with the navy of Argentina.

1 "Davis and Davidson," *Southern Historical Society Papers* (1896), 24:284-91 (hereafter cited as *SHSP*); *Bueynos Ayres Herald*, July 14, 1882, copy courtesy of George M. Brooke, Jr.

Although his resume was rich and diverse and his accomplishments in the advancement of naval technology justify his indignant boasts to Jefferson Davis, Hunter Davidson does not merit the historical sobriquet of "forgotten naval hero." His career was hardly one of unbroken triumph and his character sometimes far from exemplary. Six of the ships on which he served were lost by fire, shipwreck, abandonment, or explosion–though he survived those disasters unscathed. So, too, the cause for which he sacrificed his chosen career proved to be a metaphorical shipwreck, compelling him to begin his life and career anew. In common with many other former Confederate officers, Davidson found his postwar livelihood in the employ of a foreign navy. Almost uniquely among his former Confederates, Davidson never came home. He spent the remaining 39 years of his life in South America, estranged from his family and from a country he perceived to be ruled by "Black Republicans" and the Black people for whom he held a life-long contempt.

Acknowledgments

A life and career like that of Hunter Davidson begs the obvious question of why he has remained so obscure. The answer in part is that no known collection of Hunter Davidson papers survives. Approximately 100 Davidson letters (only a handful of them personal) are scattered among other collections and documents relating to his U.S. and Confederate naval career and are in the National Archives. Although he was hardly a shrinking violet, Davidson never wrote an autobiography, and his decades-long self-exile in South America distanced him from the mainstream of late-19th century Civil War memory—despite his sporadic efforts to remind his former comrades of his wartime accomplishments.

Davidson captured the imagination of Charles T. Jacobs, who couldn't fathom why he and most students of the Civil War were unfamiliar with his story. A career CIA analyst and Civil War enthusiast, Jacobs had met and befriended Davidson's grandson and namesake. Both men were residents of Montgomery County, Maryland, where Jacobs helped establish a local Civil War roundtable. With the grandson's encouragement and assistance, Jacobs began researching Hunter Davidson as a retirement project. Over the course of 18 years of diligent labor, he amassed a wealth of primary and secondary source materials, corresponded with Davidson descendants and historians who had written about Davidson or the many activities in which he was involved, studied the art of historical writing, and published an article in the February 14, 1996, *Washington Times,* entitled "Hunter Davidson: Unsung Naval Commander."

Sadly, Charles Jacobs contracted cancer and died in 2008. When he learned he was dying, he asked me to take over his notes and see to the publication of

a Davidson biography. Although we never met, we had corresponded a decade earlier about Davidson, who was an important supporting character in my 1996 study, *Capital Navy: The Men, Ships, and Operations of the James River Squadron*, and one of the officers featured in my oft-delivered program entitled "The Four Most Valuable Men in the Confederate Navy."

For most of the years since then, the notes sat neglected—though not forgotten. During those years, the digitization of newspapers and the National Archives' naval records has made available valuable resources that supplement Charles Jacobs's prodigious research (what joy Mr. Jacobs would have found in mining those sources for new material).

This book is the collaboration of two historians who never met each other. Charles Jacobs conducted most of the archival research, primarily at the National Archives, the U.S. Naval Academy's Nimitz Library, and the Library of Congress, which I supplemented with research in newspapers, newly available primary and secondary sources, the Maryland Oyster Police records, and easier access to libraries and archives in Argentina. Mr. Jacobs roughed out the book that he intended to write in an 80-page draft that carried Davidson through 1864. Happily, his organizational scheme—which the course of Davidson's life and the available source material suggests—reflects my own approach. The writing is entirely my work, relying on Mr. Jacobs's draft for guidance and advice. I cannot be sure that the book that Mr. Jacobs would have written would resemble the one I wrote, but the organization of his research files and his several draft outlines suggest that our perception of the major chapters in Davidson's life coincide closely. Letters between Mr. Jacobs and Davidson descendants assure me that Mr. Jacobs recognized and would have dealt forthrightly with Davidson's egotism and the other unsavory aspects of his personality and character that readers will encounter in this book.

Research conducted sporadically over the course of 35 years has benefited from the assistance and kindness of many people. Mr. Jacobs's files reveal his voluminous correspondence with Davidson's grandson, Hunter Davidson (1906-1997), collateral descendant Mary Sheridan "Mike" Anderson, and Hunter family descendant Mr. Mayo Stuntz. He benefited from the research assistance of Dr. George M. Brooke, Jr., who provided access to the letters of his grandfather, Cdr. John M, Brooke, Kevin Foster, Naval History Center (now the Naval History and Heritage Command), Dr. Wilbur E. Meneray at Tulane University Libraries, archivist Mrs. Beverly Lyall and assistant archivist Jane H. Price of the Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy, AnnMarie Price, photo archivist at the Virginia Historical Society (now Virginia Museum of History and Culture), the staff of the National Archives, and Mark J. Davidson and Karen Schinnerer of the U.S. embassy in Asuncion, Paraguay; and helpful communications with historians

Edwin C. Bearss, Stephen R. Wise, and Benton McAdams, historian and collector Dr. Charles V. Peery, Col. Morris J. Herbert, U.S. Army (regarding John Wynne Davidson). Jose Curcio translated Spanish language sources about Davidson's decades in South America. Historian Gary Gallagher taught a course on historical writing that assisted Mr. Jacobs with writing an outline draft of his notes.

In the course of my own work on naval history and retracing some of Charles Jacobs's steps, I too, have benefited from the generosity of Professor George Brooke and the inimitable Charlie Peery (now both deceased), as well as the assistance of many archives and archivists: Dr. Jennifer A. Bryan at the Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy, Lucas Clawson at the Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, Delaware, Mel Frizzell, at the Old Dominion University Library, Lisa McCown at the Washington and Lee University Special Collections, Darby Nisbet at the Maryland State Archives, Hailey at the Dorchester Library information desk, Andrés at the Archives Department of the Mariano Moreno National Library, Buenos Aires, Argentina, and David Grabarek at the Library of Virginia. My former colleague, Robert Hancock, became a *de facto* research assistant, looking up citations in the American Civil War Museum library. Antonia Gowan, an English descendant of Hunter Davidson through his daughter, Leila Gowan, answered a long-distance appeal with family photographs and information.

Vital to my research have been the digitized newspapers available on the Library of Congress' "Chronicling America" website and on genealogical websites, and the published letters of Lt. Roswell Lamson edited for publication by James and Patricia McPherson. Thanks to Mike Gorman for providing access to additional digital newspapers.

I owe special thanks to Dr. Peter Luebke for research assistance and a critical reading of the manuscript as well as for a decades-long fellowship that has been the most gratifying of my career, and to Dr. David Werlich for assistance and advice about South American sources and historical context. Carrie Janney and Cynthia Nicoletti provided useful advice and sources in response to my several queries. Doug Crenshaw of the Richmond Civil War Round Table lit the fuse that reignited my commitment to this project and Terry Johnston, Dwight Hughes, and Chris Mackowski provided opportunities to publish the first fruits of my work. John Grady shared his valuable research on Matthew Fontaine Maury as well as camaraderie. My Richmond Civil War Roundtable beer buddies, Bert Dunkerly, Bernie Fisher, Richard Grosse, Rob Monroe, and Bill Welsch offered support and encouragement along with healthy doses of humor and snark.

A last-minute query about a photograph led me to Greg Bartles, retired historian of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, and an authority on Davidson's command of the Maryland Oyster Police. He, in turn, introduced me

to John M. McKee, of Illinois, who, unbeknownst to me, has been researching the life and career of Hunter Davidson. Mr. McKee's research skills are awe-inspiring. He generously shared his materials and insights with me, supplementing my work and Mr. Jacobs's and saving this book from numerous errors and oversights. I am grateful to both men for their generosity.

Cartographer and historian Edward Alexander translated my sterile lists of places into a series of masterful maps that track Hunter Davidson's travels perfectly.

I am grateful also for the work of indexer Derrick Lindow and to Sarah Keeney and Veronica Kane of Savas Beatie for translating words and images into a real book. As he did 30 years ago when we worked together on *Capital Navy*, publisher Theodore P. Savas has again transformed dreams into a reality—this time the dreams of two men—and continues to surprise me with the range of his interests and expertise.

To my co-author, Charles T. Jacobs, I owe enormous gratitude for his voluminous research and for his trust, which I hope has proven well placed.

To my wife, Ruth Ann, I owe pretty much everything. She has been the Center of my Universe for my entire adult life. Off and on for the last decade she has shared me with Hunter Davidson, often with the quip, "What's the old reprobate up to now?" I *think* she was referring to Hunter Davidson.

John M. Coski
Richmond, Virginia

Chapter One

Midshipman "Davie," U.S.N. (1841–1856)

Hunter Davidson's first orders as an officer in the United States Navy, dated February 8, 1842, assigned him to the U.S. Receiving Ship *Pennsylvania* stationed at Norfolk, Virginia.[1] Davidson entered the U.S. Navy in an eventful year that saw the commissioning of the Navy's first steam warships, the successful conclusion of the famed United States Exploring Expedition, and the execution of Midn. Philip Spencer (the "wild and uncontrollable" son of the U.S. secretary of war) and another officer and seaman charged with mutiny aboard the training brig, USS *Somers.* Those events and the ongoing evolution of naval technology augured important changes in the service during Davidson's naval career.

Midshipman Davidson's Navy

In an age before the telegraph and the trans-Atlantic cable, the world's navies represented the most regular and reliable means of communication between governments. Naval vessels were *de facto* instruments of diplomacy and intelligence gathering. The United States Exploring Expedition (1838-42) commanded by Lt. Charles Wilkes reinforced the navy's role in "showing the flag" around the world and, thus, the importance of training officers as gentlemen and diplomats. More immediately, the Wilkes Expedition, which explored broad swaths of the Pacific Ocean and Antarctica and gathered valuable data and specimens for the new

1 A. P. Upshur to Acting Midshipman Hunter Davidson, Feb. 8, 1842, Miscellaneous Records of the Navy Department, 1776-1930, RG 45, NARA.

Smithsonian Institution, transformed the navy into one of the nation's primary scientific organizations. The Wilkes expedition was the first of 17 expeditions undertaken before the Civil War.[2]

Beyond the exploring expeditions, the navy expanded its commitment to naval science. In 1844 the navy broadened the mission of its Depot of Charts and Instruments and relocated it to the U.S. Naval Observatory in northwest Washington, D.C. Supervising the Naval Observatory was Lt. Matthew Fontaine Maury. Lamed in a carriage accident, Maury proved his value to the service with his appointment in 1842 as Naval Hydrographer (developing, collecting, and distributing navigational charts and studies of oceanic currents). "The Pathfinder of the Seas," as Maury became known in the 1850s, transformed the Naval Observatory into an internationally significant center of oceanographic and hydrographic research. Davidson never served with Maury at the Naval Observatory, but he did earn a reputation in hydrography and became Maury's protégé in the Confederate Navy.

The decades in which Hunter Davidson served in the U.S. Navy were the last in the fabled "Age of Sail." The U.S. Navy already had introduced its first steam-powered floating battery, *Fulton*, in 1815 and a second experimental paddle wheel steam warship, also named *Fulton,* in 1837. Just over a month before Davidson reported for duty in February 1842, the U.S. Navy commissioned its first seagoing steam warship, the steam frigate *Mississippi*. She and her sister ship, *Missouri* (commissioned in March 1842) each carried a small battery of four heavy guns. Paddle wheel steamers obviously were vulnerable to enemy fire. Swedish naval engineer John Ericsson addressed this problem with the invention of a screw propeller, which Capt. Robert Stockton showcased in the USS *Princeton* in 1844. Best remembered for the explosion of Stockton's experimental 12-inch gun, the "Peace-maker" that wounded its inventor, killed the secretary of state and secretary of the navy, and nearly killed President John Tyler, the *Princeton's* February 28 sea trial on the Potomac River demonstrated the effectiveness of the screw propeller and portended the future of naval motive power.

Naval ordnance was also undergoing a revolution. In the early 1820s, French general Henri-Joseph Paixhans had designed guns that fired explosive shells. The effect of the guns was to rip ragged, irregular holes in wooden warships, making them virtually impossible to repair during battle. Paixhans's gun tilted the

2 David F. Long, *Gold Braids and Foreign Relations: Diplomatic Activities of U.S. Naval Officers 1798-1883* (Annapolis, MD, 1988); William P. Leeman, *The Long Road to Annapolis: The Founding of the Naval Academy and the Emerging American Republic.* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2010), 103-4, 157-8; Michael A. Verney, *A Great and Rising Nation: Naval Exploration and Global Empire in the Early U.S. Republic* (Chicago, 2022), 6 and passim.

advantage decisively in favor of ordnance over wooden ships. They were among the guns placed on the guns of the *Mississippi* class steam frigates.

Inevitably, the advent of Paixhans guns renewed the impetus to develop effective armor for warships. Two years after Davidson entered the service the U.S. Navy launched its first iron-hulled warship, the Great Lakes paddle wheel steamer, *Michigan.* Two years after that, naval constructor John Luke Porter drafted designs for an iron-clad floating battery, but the design sat on the shelf until 1861 when Porter resurrected it for the Confederate Navy.[3]

The advent of new technologies, as well as the increasingly important role of naval officers in American diplomatic affairs, intensified the periodic calls for reform in the education of American naval officers. The opening of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1802 stirred some interest in naval education, but an analogous naval academy did not admit its first students until 1845. Meanwhile, the U.S. Navy trained its officers primarily on the job, but with a theoretical opportunity for formal education. A naval school opened at the Washington Navy Yard in 1807, and others followed in Boston and New York in 1825, but attendance was voluntary and poor. An 1813 act provided for schoolmasters on 74-gun ships of the line—of which there were none then in service. The Navy abolished the three naval schools in 1839 in favor of a single school at the Asylum in Philadelphia that sought to prepare midshipmen for their exams to become lieutenants. With the lessons of the *Somers* mutiny still fresh, Navy Secretary George Bancroft in 1845 succeeded where his predecessors had failed in convincing Congress to authorize and fund a naval school at Fort Severn in Annapolis, Maryland.[4]

Until then, U.S. Navy midshipmen learned their trade as most young officers always had: on the job, at sea. Hunter Davidson was among the first young American naval officers to receive their training both on the job and in the classroom.

Davidson was in good and plentiful company. The 173 young men warranted as acting midshipmen in 1841 constituted the largest cohort of newly minted officers in the antebellum and Civil War eras and represented nearly half of the acting midshipmen warranted during the 1840s. The navy admitted so many midshipmen in 1841 that it admitted only eight midshipmen in 1842, none in 1843, six in 1844, and 24 in 1845. Designated by their entrance date, not by the

3 For good summaries of these developments see Craig L. Symonds, *The U. S. Navy: A Concise History* (New York, 2015), 44-6; Robert W. Love, Jr., *History of the U.S. Navy, volume One, 1775-1941:* (Harrisburg, PA, 1992), chapters 10 and 11; Allan Westcott, ed., *American Sea Power Since 1775*. (Chicago, 1947), chapter 7; and Edward L. Beach, *The United States Navy: A 200-Year History,* paperback edition (Boston, 1986), chapters 8 and 9.

4 Charles Todorich, *The Spirited Years: A History of the Antebellum Naval Academy* (Annapolis, MD, 1984), 8-18; Leeman, *The Long Road to Annapolis*, 58-9, 70-95, 195-224.

varied years when they completed their formal education, the "Date of 1841" men were an accomplished group, producing 10 rear admirals, seven captains, seven commodores, eight commanders, and 11 lieutenant commanders in the U.S. Navy and numerous officers who were destined to make their marks in the Confederate States Navy. One of those men, John McIntosh Kell, known best to history as the executive officer of the Confederate commerce raider *Alabama,* wondered aloud in his memoir "if it be possible that any class of naval officers have ever formed so brotherly an attachment for each other as did the class of 1841."[5]

Reaching professional maturity just as the Civil War provided unprecedented opportunity for glory and promotion, the Date of 1841 resembled the celebrated West Point Class of 1846. The 1841 men similarly made their marks in the United States and Confederate navies. Never together in the same place at the same time, the 1841ers reported to ships and stations around the country. On those ships and at those stations they began their long apprenticeships, learning practical seamanship, navigation, gunnery, and, ideally, the code of gentlemanly conduct for officers.

The ship to which 15-year-old Hunter Davidson reported in February 1842, the U.S. Receiving Ship *Pennsylvania*, was the largest American sailing warship ever built. She carried 120 guns and was the only American three-deck ship of the line. She was more than 210 feet in length, almost 57 feet in beam, with a depth of more than 24 feet, and, ideally, a complement of more than a thousand officers and crew. She was, however, as feeble in fact as she was formidable on paper. Conceived the year after the War of 1812 ended, her keel was laid at Philadelphia Navy Yard in 1821, but tight budgets delayed her launching until 1837. Her first voyage—down the Chesapeake Bay to Norfolk, Virginia—made when she was still incomplete and not yet commissioned, proved to be her only voyage. She remained the rest of her life at Norfolk, where she received hundreds of boys and young men entering U.S. naval service. Some of them would be present for her ignominious death in 1861.

The enduring stereotype of American ship captains in the Age of Sail is that of the ruddy, weather-beaten Yankee from New England. Although the stereotype may have been true for the whaling fleet, clipper ships, and other merchant vessels, it was not accurate for the United States Navy. Three days before Hunter Davidson received his first orders, the *Boston Transcript* acknowledged a demographic trend:

5 Numbers from Mark C. Hunter, *A Society of Gentlemen: Midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy, 1845-1861* (Annapolis, MD, 2010), 27; John McIntosh Kell, *Recollections of a Naval Life* (Washington, D.C., 1900), 122.

The earliest identified photograph of Hunter Davidson taken when he was a midshipman, probably in the 1850s when he was in his mid-20s. (It was misidentified in the author's *Capital Navy* as being from the 1861 Naval Academy album.) *Charles V. Peery Collection*

> If any State has cause to be proud of our navy, it would seem to be Virginia. The President of the United States, who is ex-officio commander in chief of the army and navy, is a Virginian; the Secretary of the Navy is a Virginian; the first clerk of the Navy Department is a Virginian; the President of the Navy Board is a Virginian; the commodore of the Mediterranean squadron is a Virginian; and the commander of the frigate Columbia, one of the Home squadron, (so called, we believe, from its staying at home,) is a Virginian. A noble list this, truly. Glory enough for one State."

The growing predominance of men from Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia was evident among the men entering the new Naval School, including Davidson's Date of 1841. Forty-one percent (55 of 135) of the Date of 1841 men who graduated from the Naval School were born in or appointed from Virginia, Maryland, or D.C., half of them from Virginia.[6]

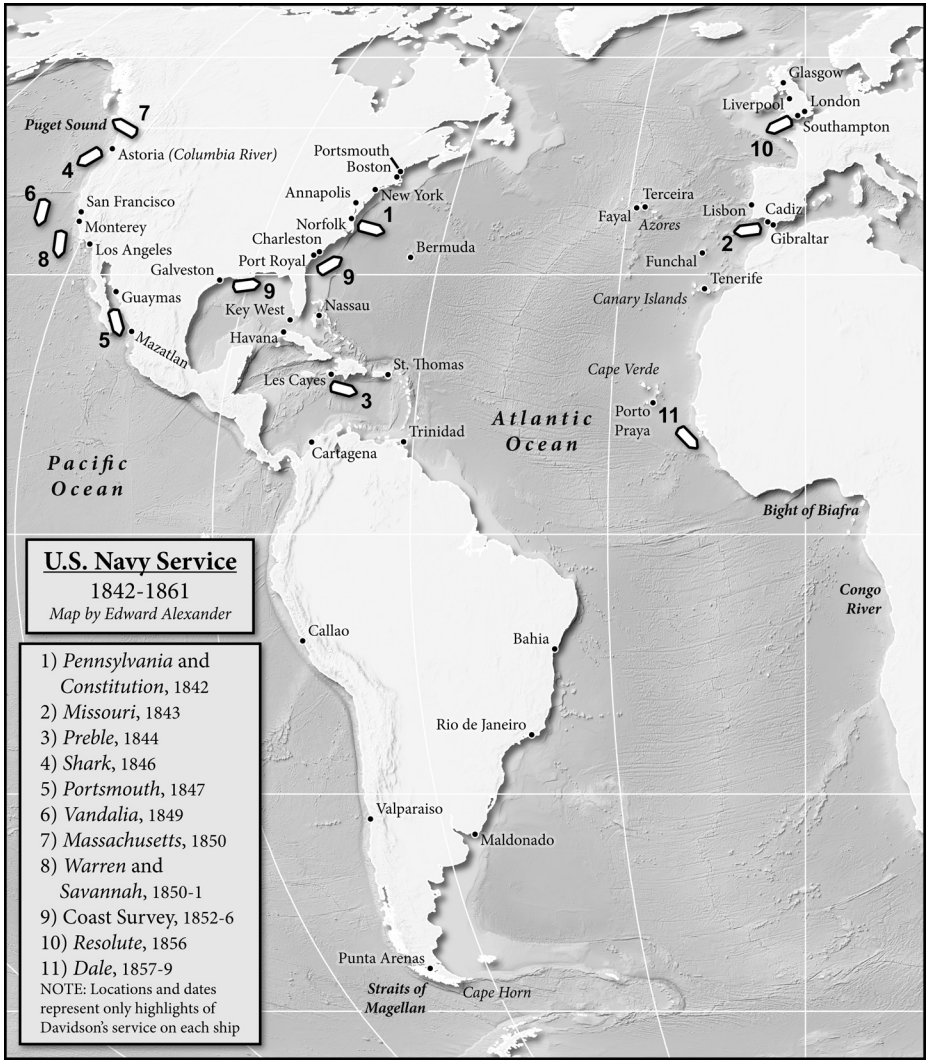
Sea Service

Two months after reporting to his first duty station, Davidson requested a transfer. "Being very desirous of seeing sea service, I respectfully request orders to the U.S. Frigate Constitution," he wrote to Navy Secretary Abel Upshur of Virginia, "knowing that sea service would be much more advantageous than the present employment."[7] The secretary approved the request, so Davidson transferred on May 1 from the largest warship in the U.S. Navy to the most famous American warship.

The USS *Constitution,* "Old Ironsides," as she became known after her victory over HMS *Guerrière* in 1812, was built at Charlestown, Massachusetts, in 1797. Commanded in 1842 by Capt. Foxhall Alexander Parker, Sr., *Constitution* was one of 10 warships in the U.S. Navy's newly established Home Squadron. Authorized in 1841, the Home Squadron assumed the duties of the old West Indian Squadron, patrolling the Atlantic coast from Newfoundland to the Amazon and the Gulf of

6 "VIRGINIA AND THE NAVY" quoted in *Army and Navy Chronicle,* Feb. 5, 1842, 45, from the *Boston Transcript*. The commanding officer to whom young Davidson reported, Captain Charles William Skinner, was in fact a native of Maine, but he was appointed to the service from Virginia. Leeman, *Long Road to Annapolis,* 53-4, noted this geographic trend and attributed it in part to the proximity of Maryland and Virginia to the nation's capital. Hunter, *A Society of Gentlemen,* 27-9, determined that the earlier dominance of Virginia, Maryland, and Washington, D.C., among naval officers had diminished by the end of the 1840s.

7 Davidson to Secretary Abel Upshur, Apr. 6, 1842, Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Commissioned Officers below the rank of Commander and from Warrant Officers, 1802-1886 (hereafter cited as LRSN), vol. 282-283, RG 45, NARA.



Mexico and Caribbean. It joined the Mediterranean Squadron (a legacy of the early 19th-century war against the Barbary Pirates), the Pacific, Brazil, and East Indian squadrons, established between 1821 and 1835, to protect America's expanding commercial, diplomatic, and missionary interests. The Navy created the Africa Squadron in 1842 to help combat the illicit Atlantic slave trade.[8] In his U.S. Navy career Davidson would spend time with the Home, Pacific, and African squadrons.

8 Annual Report of Secretary of the Navy, 1842, NH&HC, 535; Westcott, ed., *American Sea Power*, 91-95. Formally the Africa Squadron, it often appeared in period sources as African Squadron, and this book will use them interchangeably.

In November 1842, the *Constitution* prepared to leave Norfolk, reportedly for Vera Cruz, Mexico. She was to join a small armada of American ships intended to dissuade the Mexican government from trying to re-conquer Texas. The new steam frigate, *Missouri,* and the war sloop, *Falmouth,* showed the Stars and Stripes at Vera Cruz, but the *Constitution* never joined them. Instead of a mission to a hemispheric hot spot, Hunter Davidson's first sea duty apparently was a routine weeks-long cruise off the Virginia coast. The training cruise revealed severe leakage problems, and *Constitution* laid up at Norfolk waiting for repairs.[9]

Davidson, along with Captain Parker and *Constitution*'s other officers and crew, transferred in February 1843 to the frigate *Brandywine.* But Davidson soon parted from an officer whose son, William Harwar Parker, would become a close associate in both the United States and Confederate navies. In April Davidson received new orders for the new side wheel steamer frigate *Missouri*. In July 1843, the *Missouri* steamed up the Potomac River to rendezvous with America's newly appointed minister to China, Caleb Cushing, and transport him on the first leg of his journey to his post. Ominously, *Missouri* ran aground on oyster beds and had to retreat to Hampton Roads for repairs. Three weeks later, the *Missouri* picked up the minister and transported him via the Azores into the Mediterranean.[10] She put into port at Gibraltar to take on more coal.

At Gibraltar, as Minister Cushing dined ashore with the American consul, the *Missouri* caught fire while refueling. "[T]his costly ship—an ornament to the navy—was entirely destroyed," reported Navy Secretary Upshur. "All the accounts of this disaster concur in representing the officers and crew as having made the utmost exertion to extinguish the flames, and that their conduct during this perilous period, when an explosion of the magazine was momentarily expected, was marked by great coolness and intrepidity." Minister Cushing resumed his eastward journey, rendezvousing with Parker's *Brandywine* at Bombay, India, for the last leg. The *Missouri's* officers and men turned west. Hunter Davidson returned to the United States in October aboard the chartered vessel, *Rajah.* It was the first of many misadventures Davidson would experience in several different navies.[11]

As an officer aboard the ill-fated *Missouri* transporting Minister Cushing toward China, Hunter Davidson served the ambitious East Asian vision of his

9 "Naval," *New York Herald* (hereafter cited as *NYH*), Nov. 6, 1842; *New York Daily Tribune* (hereafter cited as *NYDT*), Nov. 25, 1842; *NYH,* Nov. 12, 1842; *NYH*, Dec. 6, 1842.

10 The *Army and Navy Chronicle* reported that Davidson's orders were dated Apr. 10, 1863. *Spectator* [NY], Apr. 19, 1843; Claude Moore Fuess, *The Life of Caleb Cushing* (New York, 1923), 1:421-424.

11 Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy 1843, NH&HC, 482-3; "Official Report of the Loss of the United States Steam Frigate Missouri," printed in *NYH,* Oct. 7, 1843; Fuess, *Cushing*, 423-4.

fellow Virginian, President John Tyler. Davidson's next assignment served Tyler's similarly ambitious policies in the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. On January 9, 1844, he reported in Boston for his next assignment aboard the USS *Preble.*[12]

In late January 1844, the U.S. war sloop *Preble* sailed from Boston on unspecified "special service." The second American warship named for Commo. Edward Preble (1761-1807), the officer who had commanded the expedition of the USS *Constitution* and six other ships against the Barbary Pirates, *Preble* was built in 1839 and carried 16 32-pound guns. As she sailed into the Atlantic in January 1844, she was under the command of Cdr. Thomas W. Freelon. Davidson was one of three midshipmen, as well as a passed midshipman and an acting midshipman. After 13 days at sea, *Preble* arrived February 6 at St. Thomas in the Danish West Indies—battered by a gale off Bermuda. Her mission then took her via Trinidad to Cartagena (now Colombia), then to Jamaica.[13]

A hint about the nature of *Preble's* mission came in a message that President Tyler sent to Congress, along with relevant documents, on May 15. The report listed U.S. ships, primarily belonging to the Home Squadron, under orders to the Gulf of Mexico, and including the unattached *Preble* "on a temporary cruise among the West India islands and to the ports in Central America, &c." The Mexican government was not reconciled to losing Texas, and the Tyler administration sought to deter any effort to re-conquer the breakaway republic. Tyler also noted reports of "domestic disturbances in the islands of Hayti and of Cuba, which will render the presence of a ship necessary to the protection of American interests."[14]

Even as Tyler delivered his report to Congress, Davidson and his fellow officers on the *Preble* were in the port of Aux Cayes (now Les Cay) on the southwest coast of Haiti, showing the American flag. Commander Freelon sent a cable reporting his arrival at Aux Cayes on May 5 and that the officers and crew were in good health. "This city is in possession of the negroes," he reported, "and the whole island is in a state of war, anarchy and confusion." Civil unrest between rival parties had led to threats against European and American ships and cargo in the harbor and appeals

End of Unedited Excerpt

12 See Edward P. Crapol, *John Tyler The Accidental President* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006); Davidson to Hon. David Henshaw, Jan. 10, 1844, LRSN, vol. 304-305.

13 *NYH,* Jan. 24, 1844; *The Whig Standard* [Washington, D.C.], Jan. 29, 1844; *The North-Carolina Standard,* May 1, 1844; *NYH,* Mar. 18, 1844; *NYH,* Apr. 30, 1844.

14 *Alexandria Gazette* [VA] (hereafter cited as *AG*), May 20, 1844; *Iowa Territorial Gazette and Advertiser,* June 8, 1844.