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Henry O. Thayer

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# Engagement of Enterprise and Boxer

September 5, 1813

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By Reverend Henry O. Thayer



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SECOND WAR WITH ENGLAND

1812-1815

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Engagement of  
Enterprise and Boxer

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(Reprint from Sprague's Journal of Maine History,  
Vol. II, No. 2, 1914)

# Centenary of War 1812-15

Naval Combat of Enterprise and Boxer September  
5, 1813

By Reverend Henry O. Thayer

The centennial years of the War of 1812 are rapidly passing. They have presented reasons to recall occurrences, by public assemblies and celebrations to retell the story of events, or by memorial observances to honor heroic deeds, as was done in memory of "Perry's Victory on Lake Erie."

It is laudable and may be profitable during the centennial period for the press of New England to aid the memory of citizens to revert to that war and its meaning, and to instruct a new generation in one matter of national history; and it is fitting that in Maine should be retold the story of the engagement between the Enterprise and the Boxer, September 5, 1813.

It chanced that Maine had a share in the exploits of that war by a naval battle close upon her coast seen and heard by many of her people. In treating of it the writer proposes no new detailed narration; numerous libraries offer the information by brief statement, or in full particulars to any seeker for the facts. It is my purpose only to consider certain phases of the engagement, including pertinent references to past historical treatment, and emphasizing several incidents of the conflict, by adding some hitherto unpublished materials.

## I. Combat Located

Any one who has sought in many historical works comprehensive views of the war, and for any reason has given special notice to this one engagement, has not failed to perceive variant opinions respecting the place where the Yankee and the Briton contended for the prize of war.

Narrowly viewed it may be esteemed a trifling matter, but the entire movements of the vessels during two days are required for the clear apprehension and historical setting of the occurrence. Trifling items combine to make the fullness and truth of history.

Maine's excellent historian, Williamson, wrote not twenty years after the event. He states that the Boxer was ordered to cruise off Portland in order to bring on an engagement. His form of statement implied that the Enterprise was stationed there and responded upon challenge, and the fight then took place. His trusted accuracy and authority may have aided in guiding subsequent writers and in establishing an opinion that "off Portland" was the scene of the combat. Certainly that opinion has widely prevailed to the present time, as many volumes and lesser publications give evidence.

It will be found in at least four biographical dictionaries of dates from 1857 to 1910. Winsor's profound Critical History has it "near Portland;" Bryant's Popular History, "in sight of Portland;" J. S. C. Abbott's History of Maine repeats Williamson; Harper's Encyclopædia of U. S. History, 1912, asserts "off Portland," changing the statement of an earlier edition; an able local investigator of that city published the same. During recent decades a leading religious newspaper of Boston has three times at separate periods, so asserted in its children's department; a Portland newspaper of the passing centennial day of the engagement gave Portland and Casco bay as the locality. Other instances are not needed to show the existence of the opinion within and without the state.

In support of this belief our honored poet Longfellow has had weighty influence, though seldom are poets trustworthy historians. But it is by no means certain that the restrictions of rhyme allowed the clear utterance of his real opinion. Indeed he wrote of "the sea-fight far-away," and then in the cadence of four lines was woven the poet's reminiscent vision of two distinct facts, the fight and the burial, the shotted guns of the far away combat and the requiem guns resounding over the bay.

If historical students and writers, however informed, have drawn conclusions which assign the conflict to the vicinity of Portland, then ordinary readers and persons claiming some knowledge of the Enterprise-Boxer affair will in large majority be expected to declare the same belief. Such seems to be the fact in that city and in the state and in other states.

The authors cited, however, cannot be esteemed a majority. Several historians have written no more definitely than "the

coast of Maine." One assertion is broadly made "between Cape Elizabeth and Seguin." Another definitely, "near the mouth of the Kennebec." Others point farther east to the place of the encounter, "open sea inside Monhegan;" again "outside" and "off Monhegan;" but a larger number only localize the engagement by reference to Pemaquid or to its bay or point. Of these, first stands Lossing's War of 1812, (1868), a work of exacting research and authority; Harper's Cyclopædia, 1892; F. S. Hill, Twenty-Six Ships, 1903; and nine others to be hereafter mentioned.

It is justly due and is fully conceded to all writers who have declared for the Portland location to believe that the opinion would not have been entertained had they been able to consider intelligently the official report of the engagement.

A glance is here desirable at the state of local war affairs. At the beginning of September, 1813, the *Enterprise* had been ordered to the Eastern coast. J. Fenimore Cooper says she was to cruise from Cape Ann to the Bay of Fundy, to deal with swarming smugglers and British privateers. The plan, however, had become known at Halifax and the *Boxer*, newly fitted out at St. John, was on the lookout for the Yankee brig; indeed had just previously sailed as far as the Kennebec and returned eastward.

The *Enterprise* had entered on her duty, and sailing from Portsmouth harbor had anchored in Portland harbor on the third of the month. Her commander, Lieutenant Burrows, gained no information that such a vessel as his antagonist proved to be was on the coast, but sailing out on the morning of the fourth, (Saturday), and getting rumors of privateers about Monhegan, stood away for that island.

Early the next morning when off Pemaquid, a sail was descried,—a brig, wholly unknown, and Captain Burrows (to be called so, though in rank only a lieutenant) must discover whether friend or enemy. It was the *Boxer* at anchor in Pemaquid Bay,—a local report said, between John's Island and the shore. After reconnaissance for a time, more needed by the *Enterprise* than the other, the *Boxer's* ensigns were hoisted, accompanied by the challenge gun. This by naval etiquette was an invitation to further acquaintance and proclaimed the waiting vessel an eager adversary.

The *Enterprise* now tacked to the south and ran out to the open sea and was followed by the *Boxer* as if in chase,—both standing out a few miles west of Monhegan. Such was the meeting of the combatants,—the first stage of the engagement. It took place not “off Portland,” but nearly forty miles east, at Pemaquid. After those first courtesies of naval warfare, the two brigs, with defiant ensigns aloft, sought the free range of the open sea for the test of ships, and guns, and men.

These events of the morning of the fatal day are taken from reports made after the death of Captain Burrows, by the senior officer in command, Lieutenant Edward Rutley McCall. His own signature was M’Call, but the other form has come into use.

Captain Burrows sought full sea-room off shore for his tactics;—first, to discover the character of his antagonist, for his was the caution of true courage and prudence, not recklessly to risk his ship by engaging if disparity of size and guns was too great; also, he wished to test the sailing qualities of the foe and to seek the advantage of position.

## II. Aged Seaman’s Account

Information respecting incidents of the engagement, as well as its location, I am fortunately able to draw directly from a trusty source, a seaman who participated in the fight.

It was my privilege to know an aged Kennebec shipmaster, a sturdy, strong-minded seaman of the old school, Captain William Barnes of Woolwich, who when a youth of seventeen served one of the guns of the *Enterprise* on the fateful day. He was neither reluctant nor desirous to talk of the cruise and the fight; indeed frowned upon the thought that any distinction was due thereby. I was told that in former days at social or public gatherings, he had repelled attempts to do him honor, by toast or eulogy. Forcibly he declared to me his scorn for honors derived from warfare, emphatically asserting war to be wicked slaughter.

He informed me that in the anxious hours of preliminary tactics the contestants ranged and circled in free sea room between Monhegan and Seguin. Here was the arena of conflict; in extreme length twenty-one miles, but much less in their actual range. I gained the old seaman’s estimate of distances and position at the

hour of the final duel. The locality as I apprehended it, will best be shown by reference to a diagram in my note book made at the interview. Join Monhegan and Seguin by a line; extend a line from each, of nearly equal length, to intersect a few miles further seaward, forming a triangle. The apex of the triangle movable as the brigs held the eastward tack will represent the ocean space of combat where, after six hours of maneuvering, in part becalmed, the vessels closed in and their broadsides thundered. The offing of Damariscove island nearly agrees with the estimate; or a close approximation to the fact will be Longitude  $69^{\circ}, 36'$  and Latitude  $43^{\circ}, 42'$ .

An aged woman of Georgetown told me of viewing the battle at no long distance easterly. A statement in an address on September 9, 1913, before the Portland Board of Trade by Mr. Fritz H. Jordan points to the same locality, and is in closer agreement than any other account so far found, with the description given by the aged captain.

A fair presumption, therefore, will place the vessels at the first broadside some eight miles southeasterly from Seguin; their movements during forty-five minutes in action would advance them at surrender well towards the offing of Monhegan several miles out to sea. Captain Barnes asserted one disadvantage of the Boxer: the brig stood higher out of the water and offered a better target. He mentioned, as have others, how badly cut up she was both above and below; that eight eighteen-pound shot holes were in one plank in her hull, near the water line; her condition required that twenty-two men be put to the pumps, and had rough weather come on, she would have foundered before reaching Portland. Commodore Hull when later he examined the prize said there was difficulty in keeping her afloat to get her in.

Young Barnes was stationed at the second gun aft and saw much of his commander. Of the fatal wound he told how at a moment of special need Burrows stepped forward to aid in running a gun into place, and while bent over, with foot for advantage on the bulwarks to exert all his strength, a musket ball drove in at the groin and upward into his body. Further he asserted that Lieutenant McCall refused to take command, but yielding to the obvious demand, I conclude that he with his associate, Lieutenant

Tillinghast, continued the action aided by suggestions and directions of their commander, who heroically endured his suffering and refused to be carried from the deck. His death delayed eight hours. His antagonist, Captain Blythe, was instantly killed at the beginning of the combat.

Captain Barnes further gave high commendation to Tillinghast, and regarded him the superior of the two in efficiency. He thought him deserving a major share of praise for the success when the two officers were forced to take such responsibility. The Boxer once attempted boarding, which was skillfully evaded, yet her jib dragged along the Enterprise's quarter.

Another unreported incident was detailed by Captain Barnes who as a member of the crew was fully cognizant of the facts. A subordinate officer, the sailing master, Harper by name, he regarded a coward, but also called him a braggart, yet he was the first to show weak knees in the action, left his post, ran about, kneeled to peek over the bulwarks to see what was going on. During the preceding hours of the commander's sailing tactics, his talk to the men was unworthy of a seaman in his position, harmful, insubordinate, through casting reflections on his commander, declaring in loose talk before the crew,—“Oh, there'll be no fight; he won't fight; he'll run away; I'm ashamed; I'll quit the service.” For this conduct he was summoned before a court martial, was condemned and cashiered. Barnes asserted, “He only saved his neck because he did not stand well with the crew,” the board of inquiry believing their testimony was biased and hostile, more damaging than the facts warranted. Full details of the case are desirable, but minutes and findings of the board of inquiry were doubtless destroyed with other naval records. Four men on the Boxer were examined and listed for cowardly deserting their posts.

A recent historian has a story germane to the Harper case, which gives support to the statement of Captain Barnes. Preparing for the fight which he planned to make, Captain Burrows had a long nine brought aft and placed to play out of a stern port, even cutting away woodwork to get range. Some looked on the proceeding with startled eyes and in suspense, and subdued talk went around that the captain was planning to run away and had put out the gun to be a stern chaser and ensure escape. The intense feeling

brought a party of men together, who decided to make representations to the captain of their sentiments and fears and declare their eagerness to meet the enemy. Their delegate, F. H. Aulick, proved weakhearted in going aft and only gave the message to Lieutenant McCall who reported it to the captain. The answer given was clear and emphatic, they would speedily have the fighting they wanted. I must presume that the suspicion and restiveness among the crew grew out of the sailing master's reprehensible talk. Burrows' scheme was justified by results, for the long nine, suspected as a defence in timorous flight, proved in the action a telling weapon of offense, by its raking fire, which possibly decided the battle.

At the time of my interview, Captain Barnes had passed the fourscore line, but had a clear mind and an alert memory, with forty-seven years of sea service to his credit. I stood by the shrouded form at the end, March 4, 1882, at the hour of silent final departure from his home. Probably then was starred the last remaining name on the list of the gallant crew who saw the Boxer's braggart nailed flag torn down. He had attained eighty-five years; was a native of Berwick. His share of the prize money, unless my pencil failed, was sixty-two dollars and fifty cents. I have also notes from business documents, believed authentic, showing the aggregate sales of the Boxer and equipment to be eleven thousand six hundred seventy-four dollars with expenses of five hundred fourteen dollars, and each seaman's share as fifty-five dollars and thirty-one cents. After her captain's death, Lieutenant David M'Creery took command.

Her capture was a bitter pill to British expectations and pride. Explanations and excuses were many. Grouchy individuals cast curses on the brig without cause. A Halifax writer said she belonged to a despicable class of vessels. A London publication declared it a mistake to send her to America; "not strong enough to fight, nor fleet enough to escape by flight; we do not believe she was calculated for any other service than taking coals for the coasting trade." Some minimized the size of the crew and salved the soreness of defeat. Much dispute was raised on the comparative size of the crews; it was maintained they were nearly equal; Commodore Hull believed by reckoning hammocks and similar fittings and other facts obtained, that the Boxer entered the fight with

about one hundred men, while the crew of the *Enterprise* numbered one hundred and two. Some recent writers believe they find evidence that the *Boxer's* roll was sixty-six. The British government was assailed in London because it never issued an official report.

Captain Barnes said the *Boxer's* crew, expectant of meeting and capturing the *Enterprise*, deridingly called her "Shingle Jack," but the Yankee crew when they learned that the vessel at anchor in the harbor was calling in by signal guns her boats ashore, returned the compliment, "Ah! we understand; chicken stealing,"—in allusion to foraging on farm houses.

A party from the *Boxer* had gone on Saturday to Monhegan; they were the surgeon, H. Anderson, two midshipmen, Nixon and Pile, and an army lieutenant on board for his health, J. A. Allen. The latter in a defensive statement wrote that the three accompanied the surgeon who had been invited to visit a crippled son of Josiah Starling, a prominent man of the island. A London sketch declared they went "pigeon shooting:"—both stories are probably true, for after the surgeon's half hour with the sick boy, he and his companions could seek their game.

As the *Boxer* sailed out from Pemaquid they expected to be taken off, and took a small boat to reach their ship. But Captain Blythe was so intent on the expected seizure of a prize that he drove on, seemingly without a thought that his surgeon might be needed, as was the desperate demand a few hours later. On the next day a party of armed men, as Allen asserted, came and took them prisoners. They sought to evade arrest by putting themselves under the protection of two men, Sampson and Thomas, agreeing to be taken by them anywhere in the United States. The trick availed nothing, and they were taken away to the same custody in Portland as the vanquished crew.

### III. Erroneous Geography

One mystifying word, surprisingly uninterpreted, has kept place from then till now in the chief histories of that naval action.

The officers of the *Enterprise* were strangers to the coast of Maine, except something learned from imperfect sea charts. In sighting the *Boxer* they fell directly upon a new word,—Pemaquid. How Captain Burrows wrote it in the log that morning we cannot

assert. Lieutenant McCall, a Carolinian, could know little of Maine geography, and how he wrote the new word in his report of the engagement, we cannot directly know, but some particulars, even if too minute, in respect to forwarding the report to Washington and giving the exciting intelligence to the public will not be amiss.

The two brigs, the victor and the prize, were brought into the lower harbor at Portland soon after noon, Monday, September 6th, and anchored under the guns of Fort Preble. At the startling cry, boats hastened down, and with their return reports and rumors from impatient crowds at the wharves flew abroad in the agitated city. At once Mr. Samuel Storer, the local naval agent, got the chief facts as best he could and by three o'clock dispatched a message by express to Captain—afterwards Commodore—Isaac Hull at Portsmouth, which was by him forwarded to Commodore Bainbridge at Boston. Mr. Storer, from the mixed stories rife in the streets, understood that the engagement took place between Cape Elizabeth and Seguin, and so asserted in his dispatch. This first report of the location of the combat was spread abroad by Boston and New York papers. At the time of writing, however, he had seen no one from the ships, which delayed on account of wind and tide, arrived at the city at five o'clock.

The elating news reached Captain Hull in the evening, and on the next morning he hastened to Portland. On that forenoon, Tuesday the seventh, Lieutenant McCall wrote out his official report, which Captain Hull at once on arrival dispatched by the mail, just closing, to the Secretary of the Navy. Also on that day McCall prepared, or assisted the editor of the Eastern Argus of the city in writing, a detailed report which was printed on the morning of the eighth. It was very unlike the first; introduced entries of the log-book of the Enterprise, and noted the hours and occurrences in them from early morning to the beginning of the action. Boston and New York papers welcomed the first detailed statement of the naval victory.

On Tuesday the fourteenth, nine days after the event, the National Intelligencer of Washington published Lieutenant McCall's first report, which was copied by Niles Register at Baltimore on the eighteenth and also in New York. It is evident that the

Intelligencer obtained the report from the Navy Department, for only to the Secretary had it been transmitted. It is pertinent here to distinguish clearly between the first and second report.

The latter wrote "Pemquid" for the first espial of the two vessels. The former published at Washington had "Penguin" bay. Hence between McCall's pen at Portland and the printer's type at Washington a transformation in Maine geography occurred. Handwriting often assists in strange distortion of proper names. The undecipherable names of many public men do them no honor. One must believe that the officer had become acquainted with the name during the three days on the coast, without the aid of charts. The word has had variations; its second syllable, properly *a*, sometimes *e*, has been *i* and *o* or even *y*, and it has formerly a few times been written Pemquid and Pemquit. In ordinary usage now, its second syllable is obscure or lost; only careful enunciation saves it. Probably it came to McCall's ear as Pem-quid, and so probably he wrote it.

Easily the error could grow. Whatever his ordinary penmanship, finely legible or not, McCall could be pardoned that morning, oppressed by such new forced duties, if words or letters lacked nicety. Then also, over an utterly new word a copyist might be puzzled, and if the little pen strokes in *m*, *q*, and *d* were dim or imperfect, Pemquid could be read Pen-guin; even a copyist not nicely careful could lose *a* from Pemaquid also. If these seem to anyone only fanciful conjectures, if the explanation be inadequate, yet by whatever hasty pen of McCall, or by whatever mental process or obliquity of eye in copyist or printer, the transformation was effected: a new geographical term was born. The chief agency must reasonably be ascribed to the copyist in Washington, not to the Lieutenant in Portland. From the National Intelligencer's original phrase, "in the bay near Penguin point," various newspapers introduced the word to the public, Penguin Bay or Penguin Point. Several printed the second report also, but no one seems to have noticed the difference.

Whatever its parentage, the misshapen creation sprang into vigorous life; was adopted by writers of merit; has held its place against an opponent and has advanced, it seems unquestioned and unverified, retaining its vitality through that century and boldly

entering the present. Into what early periodicals it had admission cannot be stated. The earliest volume treating of naval events which I have discovered was published in Boston in 1816. It has Lieutenant McCall's report complete from date to signature, including "Penguin Point." The same appears in a similar work by William James, London, 1817, also in the work by J. Fenimore Cooper, 1839. Within a score of years past it has found entry as Penguin Bay or Penguin Point in narrations of the highest rank, by Maclay, Roosevelt, McMaster, Spears; also as late as 1910 by W. J. Abbot, and in a late historical essay, whose author's name is lost, and probably in others.

The original report, it is assumed, went soon to ashes when Washington was burnt. The few newspapers and books earliest in date which had full copies of the original seem to be the only source for later and recent students and writers. Hence it is believed that these first printed accounts showing by their form that they were the true transcriptions from the document sent to the Secretary of the Navy, were taken with full confidence, an assured basis for the historian. No one had a thought that a flaw could exist in such a source. However slight or extensive the acquaintance of these writers with Maine and its history, not a suspicion arose that the unknown name "Penguin" concealed ancient historic—(vainly by some held prehistoric)—Pemaquid.

The engagement of the Enterprise and Boxer appears to be one out of only two or three of that war fought in Atlantic waters near the land in sight of anxious people. A gold medal was ordered by Congress for relatives of Captain Burrows; also one for Lieutenant McCall. Yet omnipresent error was at hand and made the date September 4.

The flag of the Enterprise has been preserved, the same it is believed, carried through the day of combat. It wears the insignia of its honor,—fifty-nine musket ball holes. It is now in the custody of the Maine Historical Society and years ago was exhibited in the society's "Longfellow House."

These tales of naval warfare, thought stained by repellant bloodshed should not be erased from the pages of history, but satisfaction with results in securing a higher stage of independence previously gained at such cost, must rightly join with the hope and aim that complete amity without a cloud may continue henceforth.

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