

REALITY and the HISTORICAL RECORD

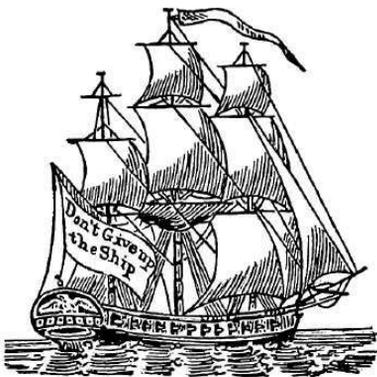
Or the Case of the Cashiered Lieutenant

IN JUNE, 1813, the United States frigate "Chesapeake," commanded by Captain James Lawrence, was captured off Boston harbor in a shattering eleven-minute battle with the British frigate "Shannon." Lawrence was mortally wounded in the action, and as he was carried below by a young officer and two sailors, he uttered the famous words, "Don't give up the ship!" — familiar to every American schoolboy for generations.

The ship was given up, however, by its two surviving lieutenants, and when they were returned to American soil the senior one accused the other of cowardice and desertion of duty. A court-martial was held, and public indignation over the humiliating defeat was somewhat soothed by the cashiering of Lieutenant William Sitgreaves Cox. The court could find no evidence of cowardice, and Cox claimed that he had been obeying Lawrence's order in leaving his post to carry the dying commander below. He did admit refusing to let a junior officer fire upon his own men as they fled in panic before the British. For these offenses he was found guilty of "neglect of duty" and "unofficerlike conduct."¹

Over the years historians differed in their interpretations of Cox's case, but the official view remained much the same as that carelessly expressed by Theodore Roosevelt in his account of *The Naval War of 1812*: "The third lieutenant, Mr. W. S. Cox, came on deck, but utterly demoralized by the aspect of affairs, he basely ran below without staying to rally the men, and was court-martialled afterward for so doing."²

The cashiered lieutenant enlisted in the army and served out the remainder of the war as a private. He then went into the drug business, studied medicine, and eventually moved with several of his children and



¹ Accounts of the court-martial may be found in William C. Pope, *William Sitgreaves Cox: Annals of a Quiet Life* (St. Paul? 1906); John M. Armstrong, "William Sitgreaves Cox," in *Minnesota Medicine*, 28:40-53 (January, 1945). President of the court was Captain Stephen Decatur, and its members included Lieutenant (later Commodore) Matthew C. Perry.

² Hermann Hagedorn, ed., *The Works of Theodore Roosevelt*, 6:154 (New York, 1926). The original edition appeared in 1882.

grandchildren to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he lived from 1856 until his death in 1874, a quiet, respected man and the head of a distinguished family. It remained for his devoted grandson, the Reverend William Cox Pope, to try and right what he considered a black injustice. In endless petitions, in letters both public and private, in newspaper articles, and finally in a book, Pope argued his grandfather's case and called attention to "the nation's perfidy."³

In July, 1911, he was told in a letter from Beekman Winthrop, acting secretary of the navy, that "The case of former Lieutenant William Sitgreaves Cox, U.S.N., has been gone into very carefully and thoroughly several times, and I regret to inform you that there is nothing in the record which would justify the Department in recommending to the President a reversal of the finding of the Court."⁴ Still determined, Pope turned to the Minnesota legislature, which in a resolution approved on March 31, 1913, memorialized Congress for the erection of a monument to Cox, citing the unjust verdict of the court-martial. At the same time Pope, who was a life member of the Minnesota Historical Society, persuaded the institution's executive council to make a study of his grandfather's case. A committee was charged with this task in May, 1913, and at the council's next regular meeting, on October 13, it recommended that the society second the legislature's petition.⁵

Accordingly the secretary, Warren Upham, drew up a resolution and sent copies to the vice-president, the speaker of the House, and all members of Minnesota's congressional delegation. In this document the society



William S. Cox

³ Pope, *William Sitgreaves Cox*, 10-27, 161-172; Armstrong, in *Minnesota Medicine*, 28:51; *St. Paul Globe*, August 28, 1904; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 14, 1952, p. 4.

⁴ Winthrop's letter is quoted in a resolution of the executive council of the Minnesota Historical Society. See Minnesota Historical Society Archives, Letterbooks, October 13, 1913.

⁵ Minnesota, *Laws*, 1913, p. 908; Minnesota Historical Society Executive Council, Minutes, May 12, October 13, 1913.

⁶ Minnesota Historical Society Archives, Letterbooks, October 13, 1913.

⁷ Davis to Upham, December 22, 1913 (enclosure), Minnesota Historical Society Archives, Correspondence.

⁸ *Congressional Record*, 82 Congress, 2 session, 3462; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, April 14, 1952, p. 4; C. S. Pope to Vernon Fairbanks, April 7, 1952 (copy); unidentified newspaper clippings, both in William C. Pope and Family Papers, in the Minnesota Historical Society.

THE ORIGINAL of the miniature reproduced above is owned by Cox's great-granddaughter, Mrs. Edward H. Eckel.

condemned the navy's refusal to amend its records and appealed to Congress "in the interest of historical righteousness."⁶

Congress took no action, but Representative Charles R. Davis of St. Peter prodded the Department of the Navy into going over the record once more. On October 29 he received a negative reply accompanied by a lengthy review of the facts from yet another acting secretary — this time Franklin D. Roosevelt. Davis sent the letter on to Upham, and it was duly filed in the society's archives.⁷

Cox's official rehabilitation was not achieved until another generation had taken up the family cause. In the 1940s a great-grandson, Electus D. Litchfield, and Pope's daughter, Mrs. Edward H. Eckel, became active. The navy never relented, but in April, 1952, the House armed services committee approved a resolution restoring Lieutenant Cox's commission after 138 years of disgrace.⁸

Whether the action had more than sentimental significance is open to question. In his letter of 1913 Franklin Roosevelt countered the efforts of the Minnesota Historical Society to amend history in the interest of righteousness with some penetrating comments on the nature of the historical record:

It is impossible to try or properly inquire into the case now because the actions for which Lieutenant Cox was cashiered from the Navy happened more than a hundred years ago, and all of the witnesses and President Madison, who approved the sentence, are dead. To reverse or cancel the record in the Navy Department would not alter the actual facts any more than canceling the record of the capture of the U. S. Frigate Chesapeake (on which Lieutenant Cox was serving) by the British Frigate Shannon would alter the fact that the Chesapeake was actually captured by the Shannon at that time.

The Department is of the opinion that the official records of the Navy Department, which have become historical, should remain inviolate and should not be changed or in any manner altered a hundred years after the events which they purport to record.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Franklin D. Roosevelt". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.



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