

Parkman Historical Society Presents

Seth Ledyard Phelps

This is a “partial cut and paste” historical presentation of Parkman’s Seth Ledyard Phelps from Wikipedia – visit the link to read the whole story of this famous Parkman Veteran - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seth_Ledyard_Phelps

Seth Ledyard Phelps

Born - January 13, 1824 in Parkman, Ohio, U.S.

Died - June 24, 1885 (aged 61) Lima, Peru

Resting place - Oak Hill Cemetery Washington, D.C., U.S.

Spouse - Elizabeth Maynadier (m. 1853)

Military service - United States Navy 1841–1864

Rank - Lieutenant commander

Unit- Mississippi River Squadron

Battles/Wars

Mexican–American War

Siege of Vera Cruz

American Civil War

Battle of Fort Donelson

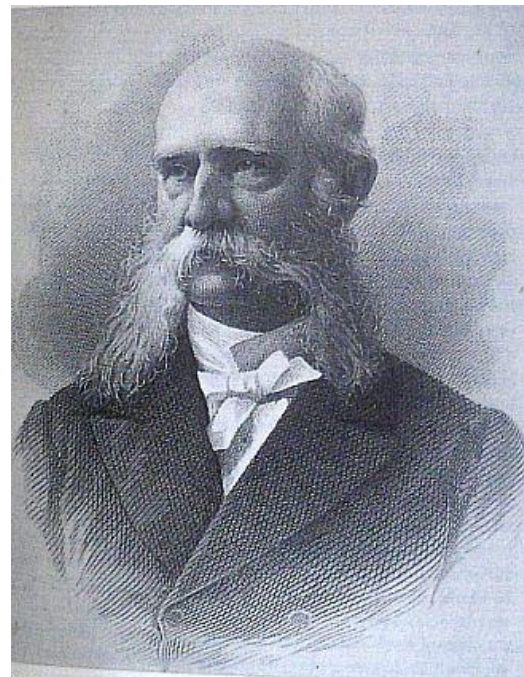
Battle of Island Number Ten

Fort Pillow naval battle

First Battle of Memphis

Battle of Vicksburg

Red River campaign



Seth Ledyard Phelps (January 13, 1824 – June 24, 1885) was an American naval officer, and in later life, a politician and diplomat. Phelps received his first commission in United States Navy as a midshipman aboard the famous USS Independence. He served patrolling the coast of West Africa guarding against slavers. During the Mexican–American War he served on gunboats, giving support to Winfield Scott’s army, and later served in the Mediterranean and Caribbean squadrons.

During the American Civil War Phelps advanced to the rank of lieutenant commander and served with distinction during the Mississippi River campaigns. He was noted for his familiarity of the river systems in the Western theater and conducted several reconnaissance missions, discovering the presence of Confederate Fort Donelson, in Tennessee. He commanded squadrons of gunboats on the Mississippi, Tennessee and Cumberland rivers and played key roles in the riverboat assaults during the various battles in the river campaigns, often supporting Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman and other Generals with their troop deployments on land. For his service Phelps received much praise in various prominent newspapers. As a young commander, Phelps was an outspoken critic of the Navy’s method of promotion that favored seniority over military experience and capability. As Phelps served with every flag officer and fleet commander on the Mississippi and Tennessee Rivers during the Civil War, his biography provides an almost continuous account of the naval engagements that occurred in the Trans-Mississippi Theater during that war. In later life Phelps was on the board of commissioners and was its first president, and later, U.S. Minister to Peru.

Early life

Seth Phelps was named after his grandfather, who served in the American Revolutionary War and at times with George Washington and was present at Valley Forge. The senior Seth was later promoted to captain and became an aide to General Washington. Seth Ledyard’s father’s name was Alfred Phelps, who served in the War of 1812 under Winfield Scott in the Battle of Queenston Heights in Ontario. After the war Alfred returned home, started a law practice, and then met and married Ann B. Towsley on July 1, 1820. Shortly thereafter

Seth was born on January 13, 1824, in Parkman, Ohio, the eldest of five siblings. His two younger brothers Alfred and Edwin soon followed. The Phelps family moved to Chardon, Ohio, and bought a farm just east of Cleveland, a short distance from Lake Erie. Later in life, Seth's father became active in Republican politics in Ohio. Seth grew up near the lake and listened along with his brothers to the stories of his father about his seafaring adventures, especially those of Oliver Hazard Perry. These stories are largely what inspired Seth to pursue a career in the navy. He married Elizabeth Maynadier (born July 21, 1833, died May 27, 1897), on July 1, 1853, whom he would affectionately refer to as "Lizzie". She was the daughter of Captain Maynadier, of the Ordnance Department, Washington D. C. During his naval service Phelps frequently wrote to her of his life in the military.

Early naval career

Phelps in midshipman's uniform

As a boy, inspired by his father's accounts of family history during the American Revolution and the War of 1812, Seth longed to join the Navy. Before going off to join, he bid farewell to his mother, who was apprehensive of his joining the navy, and to his proud father, who wholeheartedly supported Seth's aspirations, and set off for New York, arriving there in January 1842. Here Phelps saw for the first time many tall clipper ships and warships and was impressed with their huge masts and banners filling the skyline. He was assigned to the USS Independence, launched in 1814, a ship of the line, 190 feet long with 74 guns. At the time of Phelps' commission, the vessel had been converted to a 60-gun frigate.



Phelps was anxious to go out to sea, but the Independence remained in port for several months. On May 14, 1842, he finally got his first such orders, boarded the Independence and headed for Boston. Phelps found his first day at sea exhilarating; however, as the sea became rougher, the young Phelps had to deal with sea sickness by stomping on the deck while marching from stem to stern. As a midshipman, his visit to Boston marked the end of his probationary period, at which time his captain would decide if Phelps was fit to continue service, and Phelps was approved. When he learned that the USS Columbus needed midshipmen for its service in the Mediterranean, he wanted to transfer. To get past the six months' required service as midshipman for that position, he wrote to Ohio representative Elisha Whittlesey in Washington, D. C., for a transfer. Upon Whittlesey's recommendation, at age seventeen, Seth's appointment to midshipman was made on October 24, 1841. He transferred to Columbus, a ship of the line, and when his orders arrived he served the next three years with the Mediterranean Squadron, considered the choicest of the several active U.S. squadrons stationed about the globe. The Columbus was an old ship that had seen years of duty. When Phelps reported aboard he found the ship's rigging, sails and other fixtures in very poor condition. Before departing from Boston, Phelps and other crew members were given the task of replacing the ship's ropes and sails with new ones. After weeks of repairs, the Columbus finally departed Boston and on August 24, 1842, Phelps was at sea for the first time. While aboard, Midshipmen were required to continue their education, studying mathematics and schooled in the ways of navigation, weapons, along with knot-tying classes, where more than fifty knots, splices, and hitches had to be mastered.

After an uneventful voyage, the Columbus's first call was at Gibraltar. Stopping briefly, she then joined the USS Congress and set sail for Port Mahon in the Balearic Islands, where, upon arrival, they joined with the rest of the Mediterranean Squadron. That winter, after demonstrating that Phelps was a hard worker he was made Master-Mate of the Main Gun Deck. His promotion was the cause of resentment to a couple of Phelps's shipmates, who sometimes would resort to measures aimed at getting him into trouble, but which never succeeded. Writing to his father, Phelps maintained that there were times when they would attempt to provoke him to a duel, but reassuring his father, he said he abhorred the practice and always managed to avert the situation.

After a foiled smuggling attempt in Havana aboard the Robert Wilson, custody of the ship was given to the Americans. Phelps volunteered to help get the ship back home and was made midshipman. With the former crew under arrest, the ship departed on February 1, 1846, headed for Portsmouth, Virginia. Later he removed to Washington, D. C., where he lived for a brief period.

In June 1846 Phelps received his long-awaited orders to attend the naval school at Annapolis, Maryland. He was to report aboard the Bonita. In a June 15 letter to his father, he expressed his regrets that he could not visit with family, who were only 30 miles away D.C.

Mexican war

Phelps served aboard the Bonita and Jamestown during the Mexican–American War, giving naval support to Winfield Scott's Army during the Siege of Veracruz. Much of his time was also spent patrolling the Mexican coast on blockade duty. In little time Phelps had already developed strong opinions about how the war should be conducted, and was displeased that the Navy was lending much of their service protecting merchant ships while sailors were coming down with scurvy for want of provisions.

In 1857, after ten years of shore duty, Phelps was assigned to the USS Susquehanna, a side-wheel man-of-war and returned to serving at sea in the Mediterranean Squadron.

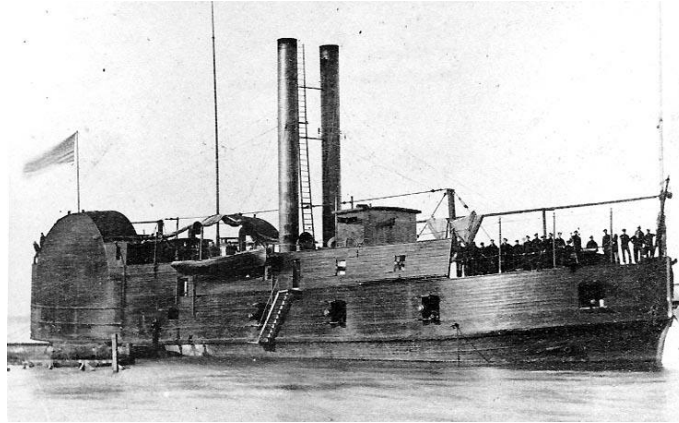
Service in the Civil War

Seth L. Phelps played a major role in the many naval operations in the Western Theater of the Civil War, and commanded various gunboats that were part of the Mississippi River Squadron which were active on the Mississippi, Ohio, Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. Created on May 16, 1861, it was controlled by the Union Army until September 30, 1862. John Rodgers was the first commander of the squadron and was responsible for the construction and organization of the fleet. He obtained the service of three experienced men, Phelps, Strembel and Bishop to assist him with the huge task of converting riverboats into gunboats. Admiral Foote encouraged Major General Henry W. Halleck and General Ulysses S. Grant, to move against key positions held by the Confederates on the several rivers that controlled vital river access to the south. During this time Phelps worked closely with Admiral Foote and General Grant in the various battles that opened up the South to the Union Army and Navy. When Foote assumed command of the squadron it consisted of three timberclad (wooden) vessels that had been converted to gun-boats by Commander Rodgers, nine iron-clad gun-boats and thirty-eight mortar-boats, some of which were still being built.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Phelps was a lieutenant and was given command of a small fleet of three vessels: The USS Conestoga, USS Tyler and USS Lexington. Before their commissioning he was disappointed to find the ships in dire need of repairs and that they were grounded in shallow water on the Ohio River. None of the vessels had any armament aboard yet and were in need of other equipment. Phelps had to board the Conestoga, the smallest of the three vessels, through a gun-port, as there was no gangplank available at the time. He was greeted by Captain S. L. Shirley, who was the president of the Louisville & Cincinnati Mail Boat Line. On June 30 Phelps hired three dredge boats and attempted to clear a deep enough passage to free up the vessels, but during the summer months the Ohio River became increasingly shallow, preventing the operations to free the vessels. In the meantime Phelps wrote to Commander John Rodgers of the situation. Rodgers was working with General Grant to coordinate naval operations with those of the Union Army in the Western theater. In the meantime, having to wait several weeks for the river to rise, Phelps proceeded with repairs and the conversion of the vessels into gunboats. After repeated efforts to get the vessels down river, Rodgers arrived at Cairo, Illinois, where the vessels underwent further fitting out. He had managed to enlist three naval lieutenants to command the individual vessels along with some 1000 fishermen from the east coast, but was still short of the manpower needed to effectively use the vessels in combat. Phelps was finally given command of the converted gunboats, with orders to proceed to Fort Henry, under the command of Brig. Gen. Lloyd Tilghman, on the Tennessee River and assist General Ulysses S. Grant in the eventual siege and capture of two riverfront forts he proved instrumental in the ensuing Union victory at the Battle of Fort Henry and Battle of Fort Donelson during the spring of 1862. Having much experience navigating and scouting the Ohio, Tennessee and Cumberland rivers, Phelps was considered the most knowledgeable about running gunboats along these rivers.

Foote, commander at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, was promoted to captain in July 1861 and in August was ordered to take command of the Western Rivers Fleet. On September 5 he reported to General Frémont, and by September 9 arrived in Cairo to relieve Commander Rodgers. After internal conflicts between Admiral Rodgers and General John Fremont, the Navy Secretary, Gideon Wells, ordered Rodgers to relinquish command of the squadron to Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote, who assumed command of the squadron on September 6, 1861. Foote invited him to remain on, but Rodgers, eager to get back to sea duty, declined, requesting instead a transfer to the Atlantic fleet. By this time warfare on the rivers had already commenced. On September 4 a Confederate gunboat CSS Jackson had already fired on timberclads USS Tyler and USS Lexington while they were performing reconnaissance on the Mississippi River below Cairo. Along with the Conestoga these vessels had escorted General Grant's transports to Paducah and on the 10th were sent down to give support to Union troop movement from Norfolk, Missouri. Phelps, commanding the Conestoga, wrote of the account in his report to Captain Foote. Four days after Foote arrived in Cairo he received orders from Frémont to proceed with the fleet's mission on the Mississippi.

River reconnaissance



USS Conestoga, commanded by Phelps while conducting reconnaissance on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers

Before Phelps arrived it was uncertain as to the garrison strength of Fort Henry and the disposition of its defensive earthworks. Before Phelps's reconnaissance efforts, the existence of Fort Donelson was not known. Phelps was originally active with the Conestoga on the Ohio River working with General Charles F. Smith above Paducah, Kentucky. At the request of General Smith, Phelps began making reconnaissance missions on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, when autumn water levels allowed it. On October 11, 1861, Phelps, aboard the Conestoga, ascended the Tennessee River, and as the vessel approached Fort Henry the Confederates fired signal rockets into the sky, warning of its arrival. Phelps subsequently stopped and anchored for the night. The following morning he approached closer and anchored. With a spyglass he began studying the fort, noting that it was armed with heavy guns. Phelps ordered shore parties to venture further upstream where they discovered that the Confederates were busy converting steamers into gunboats, including the Eastman, later considered to be the fastest steamer in the Western theater.

The next morning, after completing his mission on the Tennessee River, Phelps ascended the Cumberland River for sixty miles to investigate reports of a fort (Donelson) being built above the town of Eddyville. Upon discovering that Confederate cavalry were harassing Unionists in town, he gave a stern warning to the townspeople to desist, or that he would return with force. Keeping his word, he returned twelve days later, on October 26, with three regiments from the Ninth Regiment of Illinois Volunteers, commanded by Major Jesse Phillips, all on board the Lake Erie No.2. In his report of October 28, Phelps reported to Foote that the Confederates had a system of communication between Eddyville and Smithland which employed the use of runners. Phelps reported, that under cover of darkness he slowly maneuvered his vessel to a point on the river near the town of Eddyville, where Phillips' companies disembarked, marched seven miles inland, and discovered a rebel encampment; Phillips' Union volunteers commenced firing upon the Confederates and then charged with bayonets, scattering the rebels in retreat. Phelps reported that in the meantime he deployed a line of picket-guards around the town to prevent any escape of messengers leaving with dispatches of warning, and to prevent any refugees from the rebel camp coming there to hide. After the battle there were only four Union volunteers wounded, with some horses perishing during the battle. Captured were twenty-four prisoners, seven negroes, two transport wagons, thirty-four horses, and a flatboat upon which the prisoners were transported. An assortment of other supplies were also seized. Phelps closed his report to Foote with praise and respect for Major Phillips and his volunteers.

Foote was enthusiastic about the prospect of using gunboats for reconnaissance, and promptly made preparations in January 1863 to further navigate the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. The idea of using gunboats for river reconnaissance was before this time a novel idea whose tactics were not thoroughly tested, and it was important to make careful reconnaissance trips, without arousing any suspicion of what was being planned. It was also uncertain how ironclads would fare against land-batteries at close range.

Another of these expeditions was conducted on January 7, which was logged and reported by Lieutenant Phelps of the Conestoga.

Yesterday I ascended the Tennessee River to the state line, returning in the night. The water was barely sufficient to float this boat, drawing five feet four inches, and in coming down we dragged heavily in places. The Cumberland is also too low above Eddyville. The rebels are industriously perfecting their means of defense both at Dover and Fort Henry. At Fort Donelson (near Dover) they have placed obstructions in the river, one and a half miles below their battery on the left bank

—S.L. Phelps

Later life

After the war, in 1875, General Grant (now President of the United States) nominated Phelps to serve on the temporary board of commissioners. When Congress made it official in 1878, Phelps was appointed the permanent board's first president. He served for one year, resigning on November 29, 1879.

Phelps Vocational School in Northeast DC is named for Phelps. Additionally, his home at 15 Logan Circle in Washington still stands and now houses the Old Korean Legation Museum.

In 1883, President Chester A. Arthur appointed Phelps Minister to Peru. He arrived in Lima, Peru, in 1883. Early in June 1885 Phelps embarked on a hunting trip into the Andes Mountains in Peru and contracted what looked like Oroya fever. He did not let it affect his work, but his condition worsened and while working at his desk he suddenly collapsed and died on June 24. Funeral ceremonies were conducted at the U.S. Legation which was followed by a procession of friends and members of Peru's cabinet and diplomats. His body was interred and soon sent to the United States aboard a mail steamer, City of Iowa, with a U.S. Navy escort aboard. He was buried in Washington at Oak Hill Cemetery. Phelps's epitaph simply reads that he served in the Mexican and Civil Wars, at that he was U.S. Minister in Peru. There are no Naval ships named in his honor to date.

In 1877 Phelps hired an architect, Thomas Plowman, and builder, Joseph Williams, to construct his retirement mansion located at 1500 13th Street, (also known as Logan Circle) at a cost of 5,500. Not long before his death, Phelps decided to build three large houses near his own home as rental investments.

This is just a quick “cut and paste” overview historical presentation of Parkman’s

Seth Ledyard Phelps

from Wikipedia – please visit the link below to read the whole story of this famous Parkman Veteran -

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seth_Ledyard_Phelps