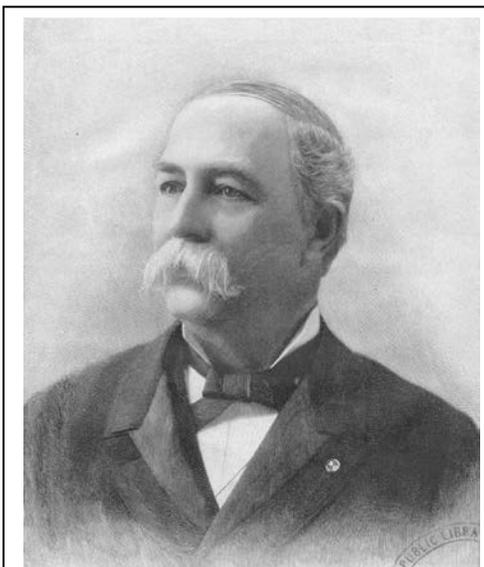


# Charles Boutelle Got a Stern-wheeler for Fighting an Ironclad

By Brian Swartz



*Charles A. Boutelle.* Charles Addison Boutelle lived in Brunswick for several years in his youth. Going to sea with his ship-captain father circa 1854, he did not come ashore until spring 1866, when he married the daughter of Maine Adjutant General John L. Hodsdon. (Courtesy Bangor Public Library)

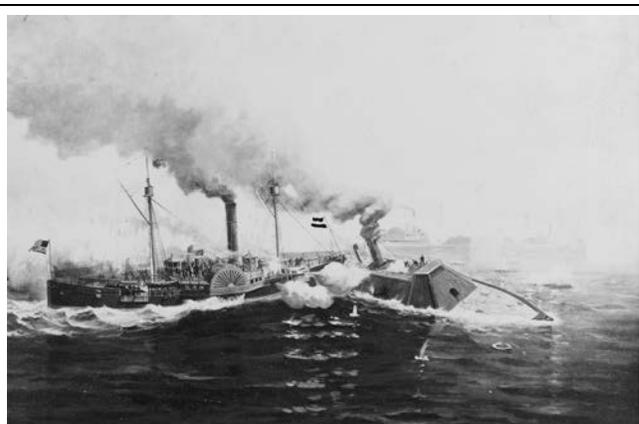
For his “gallant conduct” during a slam-bang sea fight with a Confederate ironclad, the Navy promoted Charles Addison Boutelle and gave him a 203-ton tinclad to command.

Born in Damariscotta in February 1839 to ship’s Captain Charles and Lucy (Curtis) Boutelle, Charles Boutelle moved with his parents to Brunswick in 1848. He lived there approximately six years, attended local schools and North Yarmouth Academy, and went to sea at age 15 with his father.

Boutelle would not come ashore for another 12 years.

Away on a sea voyage in 1861, Boutelle returned home and joined the Navy as an acting master in spring 1862. He served aboard the USS *Paul Jones* in the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron before joining the new side-wheel USS *Sassacus* (14 guns) in autumn 1863.

Assigned to blockading duties in North Carolina’s Albemarle Sound, the *Sassacus* and other warships battled the ironclad CSS *Albemarle* on May 5, 1864. The *Sassacus* rammed the ironclad and exchanged almost muzzle-to-muzzle broadsides that cost the Yankee ship a destroyed boiler and 20 casualties.



USS *Sassacus* rams the CSS *Albemarle* on May 5, 1864. With Maine sailor Charles A. Boutelle aboard as acting master and navigating officer, the USS *Sassacus* rams the starboard quarter of the CSS *Albemarle* during a May 5, 1864 sea battle on Albemarle Sound in North Carolina. The *Sassacus* did little damage to the ironclad, which put a shot through the Yankee’s starboard boiler. A steam cloud filled the lower decks and rose topside; scalding steam killed several sailors, and the *Sassacus* ultimately suffered 20 casualties. (Courtesy Bangor Public Library)

Boutelle wrote a lengthy after-action report later published in *Volume 9, Series 1, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies during the War Between the States*.



*Samuel Benjamin Washburn*. Assuming command of the USS *Nyanza* on October 4, 1864, Charles Boutelle took over from the cocky and critical Acting Lt. Samuel Benjamin Washburn, a younger brother of Elihu Washburne and former Maine Governor Israel Washburn Jr. (Courtesy Norlands)

Navy Secretary Gideon Welles promoted Boutelle to acting lieutenant and sent him to command the USS *Nyanza* in the West Gulf Blockading Squadron.

Other published records for *Nyanza* claim that she was “a wooden side wheel steamer,” but the *OR* (Vol. 22) describe her “Class” as “stern wheel” and her status as “tinclad.”

The Navy acquired the shallow-draft *Nyanza* at Cincinnati in early November 1863 and commissioned her as a warship at Mound City, Illinois. Her first commander was Acting Volunteer Lt. Samuel Benjamin Washburn, younger brother of former Maine governor Israel Washburn Jr.

Sam Washburn had served aboard the USS *Galena* during the May 8, 1862, fight at Drewry’s Bluff.

Equipped with six 24-pounder howitzers, the shallow-draft *Nyanza* went down the Mississippi River and served in Louisiana, operating primarily near Brashear City. Small Confederate detachments harassed Union troops in the area and occasionally burned pro-Unionists’ property.

Essentially a floating gun battery, the *Nyanza* often fired upon Confederates flitting along the wooded shorelines. According to the ship’s abstract log, a

shell or two exploding amidst the muck and trees often silenced desultory enemy rifle fire.

In a dispatch dictated September 30 aboard the flagship USS *Hartford*, then anchored in Mobile Bay, Rear Adm. David G. Farragut informed Commodore J.S. Palmer, commanding the blockading squadron’s first division at New Orleans, that “Acting Volunteer Lieutenant Boutelle reports to you by this mail” to command the *Nyanza*.

Reaching the ship on Tuesday, October 4, “C.A. Boutelle took charge of this vessel at 4 p.m.,” noted the ship’s abstract log. A week later, Boutelle cast off to reconnoiter “up the lake” (probably Grand Lake); at 6:30 a.m. his crewmen landed “soldiers on shore in the cutter and gig.”

The boats returned at 7:30 a.m. with prisoners “Alfonso Gune (Jeune) and William Vining,” supposedly “rebel spies.” At 8:10 a.m. the *Nyanza* entered Belle River and spent the morning landing soldiers “to search a house” here and there.

The tinclad “made fast to the bank at Ivey’s plantation” at 11:40 a.m. on October 11.

The abstract log recorded only *Nyanza*’s highlights, not the day-to-day drudgery. At 10 a.m. on November 12, Boutelle ordered his ship to moor at “Fausse Point” so soldiers could scamper ashore and chase “the enemy’s pickets.”

The Yankees captured “a horse and saddle” and reboarded the *Nyanza*, which shelled the woods before casting off and steaming to Grand Lake.

Friday, November 18 saw Boutelle beating to quarters at 7:30 p.m. as his tinclad “entered

Potherd's Bayou." Confederates fired from shore; the *Nyanza* nosed into the bank and "at 7:55 [p.m.] landed all the troops of the Eleventh Wisconsin Regiment" (led by Major Jesse S. Miller) from the "transport *Cornie*."

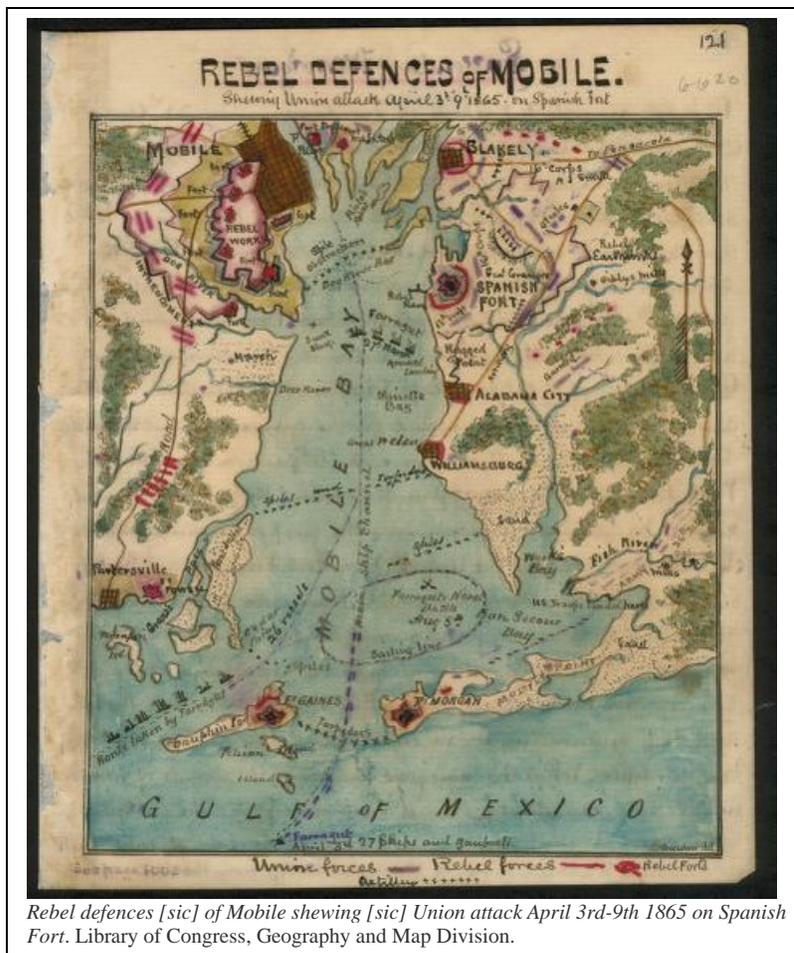
"We opened fire on the enemy with shrapnel, grape, and shell," and "sharp firing [occurred] on both sides," the ship's log noted. The enemy withdrew, Yankees burned "the enemy's quarters" and destroyed "some skiffs, and one flatboat," and the infantry reboarded with a Confederate prisoner at 10 p.m.

One soldier from Co. A, 93rd USCT, was killed during the fight. Boutelle "cast off from the shore" at 10:15 p.m. and "started down" the bayou while "still firing shrapnel and grape and shell in the direction of the enemy."

December brought similar activity, with Boutelle landing "a company of colored troops" at Bayou Pigeon on December 7 and securing *Nyanza* against the bank until the soldiers returned "with five horses captured from the rebels."

Lingering overnight December 7 in Bayou Pigeon, Boutelle "proceeded up the bayou to Micheltre's plantation" the next morning and landed his on-board infantry.

They soon "returned, bringing four Confederate prisoners—one captain, two lieutenants, and one claiming to be a citizen."



Rebel defences [sic] of Mobile shewing [sic] Union attack April 3rd-9th 1865 on Spanish Fort. Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division.

On December 10 the *Nyanza* returned to Brashear City and "at 5:30 went alongside the wharf and landed soldiers, prisoners, and horses," then "cast off and went to our moorings," the ship's log indicated.

By March 1, 1865, Boutelle and the *Nyanza* were in Mobile Bay. Two last acts involved the ship.

On Thursday, April 6, she lay anchored "off Mobile" with 12 other warships, including ironclads. Although Mobile had surrendered, Union troops were then attacking Fort Blakeley and Spanish Fort across Mobile Bay.

Commanding the West Coast Blockading Squadron, Acting Rear Admiral Henry Knox Thatcher announced "to the squadron present before Mobile" that Union troops had captured Selma, Alabama and

defeated "General J.E. Johnston [at Bentonville] in North Carolina."

“In honor of these victories ... a salute of 100 guns (unshotted) will be fired at noon this day,” ordered Knox, born in Thomaston in May 1806. He set the sequence in which the ships would fire blank cartridges; Boutelle and the *Nyanza* went twelfth.

On Tuesday, May 11, Capt. Simpson steamed from Mobile Bay “up the Tombigbee River to Nanna Hubba Bluff” near Calvert aboard “the ironclad steamer *Cincinnati*.” As escorts came “the ironclad steamer *Chickasaw* and the tinclad *Nyanza*.”

At Nanna Hubba Bluff, Simpson accepted the surrender of four Confederate warships, a squadron commanded by Commore Ebenzer Farrand. He actually sent Lt. J. Myers aboard the *Cincinnati* for the official surrender, which included “112 [Confederate] officers, 285 enlisted men, and 24 marines.”

Other than commanding the *Nyanza*, Boutelle’s role in this event remains unclear. The Union ships soon stood down the Tombigbee with a few captured warships trailing along.

The downsizing navy sold the *Nyanza* at New Orleans in mid-August 1865. Discharged in early 1866, Charles Boutelle married Elizabeth Hodsdon (daughter of Maine Adjutant Gen. John L. Hodsdon) in Augusta in May and later settled in Bangor.

Sources: *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, Series 1, Vol. 22*, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1908, pp. 4, 12, 25, 39, ad infinitum; Rear Adm. David G. Farragut, OR, Series 1, Vol. 21, p. 666; Capt. E. Simpson, OR, Series 1, Vol. 22, p. 180; USS *Nyanza* abstract log, OR, Series 1, Vol. 21, pp. 845-845; Tombigbee expedition and *Nyanza* sold, OR, Series 1, Vol. 22, pp. 120, 253.

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