

The Antebellum Naval Career of Edward Sixtus Hutter

By: Timothy Elliott

Although he never officially resided at Sandusky, Edward Hutter was the half-brother of George Christian Hutter, a longtime owner of the Sandusky House. Born on September 6th, 1812, Edward Sixtus Hutter was the son of Christian Jacob Hutter, a military officer that served in the War of 1812. Like his older brother, George, and father before him, Edward was expected to serve in the United States military. At the age of 18, Edward was attending Mt. Airy College in Pennsylvania and, in January, 1831, his brother George began to write to Edward and pushed him to apply for a position at West Point. George insisted that Edward, “write to Governor Wolf to favour your application – I know he will do it if you ask him”.¹ Edward’s father wrote to him the following month and mentioned writing to House Representative Henry A. Muhlenberg to press Edward’s recommendation. Christian Jacob even wrote a sample paragraph for Edward on how to address and what to say to Governor George Wolf of Pennsylvania, but insisted that Edward did not need to do so because the governor promised he would write to the Secretary of War on Edward’s behalf.² Despite the works of his family, Edward was not accepted into West Point. However, Edward’s rejection from West Point did not stop his family from further attempts of getting him into the military.

Disappointed by his brother’s failure to get into West Point, George Christian wrote to Edward in May, 1831, saying, “Father surely cannot think and surely will not take you home at this time to lay about the house doing nothing...you know I filed an application in the Navy Department in your favour when I was in Washington and I feel confident”.³ George offered to aid Edward in any endeavor that Edward desired, but only if he failed in getting accepted into the Army or Navy. Nearly a year after his rejection from West Point, Edward Hutter received a letter from the Navy Department in February, 1832, appointing him as an Acting Midshipman, allowing him to earn a Warrant as a Midshipman if he provided six months of satisfactory sea service. However, as his desired ship, the U.S.S. Peacock was unavailable at the time of his entry, Edward’s journey to fulfill the expectations of his family was delayed until September 10th, 1832, when he received a letter ordering him to report for duty in New York to serve on the U.S. Schooner Porpoise.

¹ Historic Sandusky Collection, George C. Hutter to Edward Sixtus Hutter, January 2, 1831, Jefferson Barracks, Missouri.

² Christian J. Hutter to Edward Sixtus Hutter, February 7, 1831, Easton, Pennsylvania

³ George C. Hutter to Edward Sixtus Hutter, May 8, 1831, Jefferson Barracks, Missouri.

Edward's experiences out at sea as a Midshipman were both hard and rewarding. In a letter Edward wrote to his sister, Amalia, he mentioned that his only four hours on shore after more than a month on the ship were spent at a party on the Island of Faial that the officers of the Porpoise were invited to attend by the Consul of Faial. There, Edward was able to enjoy a good time and socialize with members of high class society. In the same letter, Edward also describes his duties as a Midshipman, which were to:

“...Keep watch, (in the vessel) every third watch, or what is the same thing walk about the deck For a number of hours, seeing the orders from the officers of the deck properly & quickly executed & Secondly he is to find send in in to the Captain every day, the course the ship has made good, The distance run, the difference of Lat., the departure, the Latitude and Longitude, the variations of the Compass & the bearing & distance of the next port...”⁴

It was duties such as these that often kept Edward from writing letters home to let his family know how he was doing, and being at sea, his family also had difficulties getting letters to him. It was not uncommon, as Edward complains in a letter to his brother-in-law, Andrew Reeder, for him to go months at a time without receiving any letters from his family. Edward wondered if it was truly a difficulty with the mail, or simply his family forgetting to write him as he tells Andrew Reeder, “it is a mystery to me to which I cannot discover the cause, why others can receive letters and papers weekly from Philadelphia, Trenton & while mine are all lost on the road, but this is always my luck.”⁵ A lack of communication mixed with being far away from home often made Edward feel dejected as he complained in many letters of feeling resigned to a fate of being ignored. Edward's father, Christian Jacob, remarried in 1833 and neglected to send Edward a letter informing him of the marriage. Instead, Edward learned of the marriage from a letter sent by Andrew Reeder. Edward's sister, Amalia, also mentioned having a daughter in letters to Edward, but she neglected to tell Edward, the child's own uncle, the name of the child. Edward wrote multiple letters in July, 1833, asking for the name of the child, but as there was a gap in communication, Edward did not know that the child had already died in June of illness.⁶

Beyond feeling neglected and the constant work of a Midshipman, Edward's voyages on the waters were constantly filled with sickness. In a letter Edward wrote to Andrew Reeder after arriving in Pensacola Bay, Edward detailed accounts of Cholera outbreaks. He wrote that, when his ship departed from Havana, Cuba, Cholera broke out and roughly one hundred people died per day. When the U.S.S.

⁴ Edward Hutter to Amalia Hutter Reeder, December 5, 1832, U.S. Schooner Porpoise.

⁵ Edward Hutter to Andrew Reeder, April 15, 1833, Pensacola Bay, Florida.

⁶ Amalia and Andrew Reeder to Edward Hutter, June 2, 1834, Easton, Pennsylvania.

Porpoise arrived at Pensacola Bay, the crew decided to not tell the port authorities of the outbreak in Havana out of fear of being quarantined, a dangerous decision considering Pensacola was free of Cholera at the time of their arrival in the area. Edward, however, believed that Cholera would reach Pensacola anyway due to an outbreak in Mobile Bay, Alabama.⁷

In a following letter written on July 12th, 1833, from Pensacola Bay, Edward also detailed an outbreak of yellow fever onboard the Porpoise. The ship had departed from the bay on July 3rd, but was forced to return as the list of ill crew members grew longer. On the way back to Pensacola, a sailor died of yellow fever and his body was thrown overboard. When the ship re-anchored at Pensacola, crew members were forbidden from entering the city and several members were sent to receive care at the hospital. Edward included in his letter to his sister that she must not have the information of the yellow fever outbreak published because his captain did not want any officers discussing the matter until he could file an official report.⁸ Although Edward never caught the yellow fever or Cholera, he suffered from poor health quite often and was issued medical leave on several occasions throughout his Naval career, often for months at a time. However, he also established a good reputation by returning to service each time he recovered from his poor health, even if that was weeks before his medical leave term ended. The Porpoise once again left Pensacola after most crew members recovered from the yellow fever and orders were given to sail to Mexico to aid American merchants that claimed to feel endangered during the Mexican Revolution.

While in Mexico, Edward's father reached out and wrote a letter to House Representative Henry Muhlenberg. Christian Jacob sought to get Edward transferred to a larger vessel than the Porpoise upon Edward's return to Pensacola Bay, as he believed from Edward's letters that the Porpoise was too small for proper living conditions. By February 1834, Edward received his transfer to the U.S.S. Vandalia, which left the Bay on a voyage to Key West, Havana, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and a few other islands in the Caribbean. Edward was quite unwell at the time of departure, complaining to Andrew Reeder of blisters and swelling all over his face. The ship doctor insisted that he go to the hospital in town, but Edward declined because he was in debt and could not afford to stay on shore any longer.⁹ While on the voyage with the Vandalia, Edward sent a letter to Andrew Reeder from the Island of St. Thomas and mentioned a near death experience that occurred on the way to St. Thomas, but failed to detail it in the letter. He also noted that the Vandalia was set to return to Norfolk, Virginia in July, 1835, but he feared not being

⁷ Edward Hutter to Andrew Reeder, April 15, 1833, Pensacola Bay, Florida.

⁸ Edward Hutter to Amalia Reeder, July 12, 1833, Pensacola Bay, Florida.

⁹ Edward Hutter to Andrew Reeder, February 4, 1834, Pensacola Bay, Florida.

able to return home due to his debts that he still needed to pay. However, Edward was granted his Warrant as a Midshipman in May 1834, and was soon granted a three month leave from the U.S.S. *Vandalia*, allowing him to return home for a brief time.

In February 1835, Edward was ordered to report to Commodore Ridgley and Captain Matthew C. Perry at the New York Naval Yard in March to begin service on the U.S. Sloop of War *Peacock*, the ship that Edward originally sought to begin service on when he entered the Navy.¹⁰ Unlike Edward's previous journeys, however, the *Peacock's* mission was to form diplomatic treaties with foreign nations, such as China and Muscat. Edward arrived for duty on *Peacock* on March 15th, 1835, and the *Peacock* was scheduled to leave the port on April 10th, but was pushed back due to slow preparations and poor weather. In a letter Edward wrote to his sister Amalia on April 15th, he noted the bitter cold and the snow fall in New York which was made worse by being on a ship.¹¹ The ship finally set sail soon after and arrived at its first destination, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in early June where the ship remained for a month. It was in Rio de Janeiro that the crew celebrated Independence Day, as the officers put together a party on the ship that Edward praised in a letter to his sister Amalia, saying that roughly fifty upper class ladies and twice as many gentlemen, mostly officers from the English, French, and Brazilian Navies attended the party. According to Edward, it was said to have cost \$1,000 to host, which was a hefty sum.¹²

From Rio de Janeiro, the *Peacock* set sail for Zanzibar, a stopping point on the way to Muscat. However, after leaving Zanzibar and being only 400 miles away from Muscat and off the coast of Masirah Island, the U.S.S. *Peacock* became grounded as it struck a coral reef late at night on September 21st, 1835. The crew was forced to throw half of the ship's guns overboard in an attempt to make the ship lighter, but were then confronted by Arab pirates that sought to take advantage of the situation. The crew of the *Peacock* managed to fend off the attackers and restore the ship to sailing waters on September 23rd. The sultan of Muscat, Said bin Sultan, recovered the guns that were thrown overboard and sent them back to the *Peacock*. The mission of the ship ultimately failed, however, as Edmund Roberts, the man assigned to the *Peacock* by President Jackson to negotiate with China, died of dysentery in June, 1836. The *Peacock* returned to the United States and anchored in Norfolk, Virginia in September, 1837.

¹⁰ Commandant Charles Ridgley to Edward Hutter, March 16, 1835, New York Naval Yard, New York.

¹¹ Edward Hutter to Amalia Reeder, April 15, 1835, U.S.S. *Peacock*, New York.

¹² Edward Hutter to Amalia Reeder, July 11, 1835, U.S.S. *Peacock*, Rio de Janeiro.

After finally returning to the United States, having been gone for two and a half years, Edward received a letter on December 6th, 1837 from the Navy Department permitting him to attend the Naval Academy in Norfolk.¹³ It was at the Naval Academy that Edward could begin to study for the examination to receive a promotion as a Passed Midshipman. While at the academy, Edward received a letter from his brother George, who insisted that Edward must meet a young girl from Poplar Forest, the summer home of late President Thomas Jefferson, named Emily Cobbs because he believed that he would like her. Edward previously had affections for another woman, Mary Smith, but his family insisted that he not advance a relationship with her. Similar to trying to influence Edward's career, they also attempted to influence his personal decisions. Edward's sister Amalia wrote a letter to him about Mary Smith saying, "I know she would not harmonize with you. You may think that I am not so competent to judge of this as yourself. For this I differ from you because you were blinded by feeling and I have been in the habit of seeing her in all the little matters of domestic life when her disposition has shown itself fully."¹⁴ Edward continued to pursue Mary Smith for a time from afar on his voyage through mail, but Mary Smith eventually moved out west to Missouri and Edward gave up.

While at the Naval Academy, Edward continued to express his desire to resign his position and leave the Navy to pursue a different career. Edward had expressed such desires as early as 1833, only one year after beginning service, but his brother George insisted that Edward must not resign his position as it would be, "very difficult for you to get another as honorable and as profitable".¹⁵ In August, 1837, Edward received a letter from his sister Amalia that mentioned that their father was thinking of selling his newspaper business, but she advised her father to wait to give Edward an opportunity to decide if he wanted to leave the Navy and take over their father's business.¹⁶ However, in January, 1838, George sent a letter to Edward and criticized him for the idea of operating a newspaper, saying, "If you take my advice, you will never take upon yourself the management of a printing establishment at Easton – If I were in your place I would undertake anything else, rather than conduct a political paper in Pennsylvania".¹⁷ George absolutely insisted that Edward forgo the idea of operating a newspaper business because it would not be profitable and once again convinced Edward to stay in the Navy.

¹³ M. Dickerson to Edward Hutter, December 6, 1837, U.S. Navy Department.

¹⁴ Amalia Reeder to Edward Hutter, April 12, 1835, Easton, Pennsylvania.

¹⁵ George Hutter to Edward Hutter, March 24, 1833, Easton, Pennsylvania.

¹⁶ Andrew and Amalia Reeder to Edward Hutter, August 6, 1837, Easton, Pennsylvania.

¹⁷ George Hutter to Edward Hutter, January 6, 1838, Lynchburg, Virginia.

After finishing at the Naval Academy, Edward went to Baltimore, Maryland and appeared before the Board of Examination in June, 1838 to be tested on commandship, navigation, and mathematics. Upon finishing the examination, Edward received a Warrant as a Passed Midshipman on June 28th, 1838.¹⁸ After earning his Warrant, Edward returned home for a short time and was able to meet Emily Cobbs, who he quickly developed feelings for. Edward was due to return to service by the end of 1838, but the condition of his health became unsuitable for life as a sailor and he was deemed unfit for service and given medical leave continually until he reported to be ready for service in October, 1839, almost a whole year later.¹⁹ Edward was ordered to report to a receiving ship at the Boston Naval Yard in Massachusetts, which is where he continued to write Emily Cobbs frequently. In November, 1839, Edward wrote to his father saying that he and Emily Cobbs had become engaged to be married in October, 1840.²⁰

True to his anxious personality, Edward often worried greatly whenever Emily went more than a week or two without writing to him. Edward's strong feelings for Emily and the anxiety he felt led his poor disposition of the Navy to worsen as he described the one month without receiving a letter from her while stationed in Boston as, "the longest month I have ever known, of the most intense and punitive anxiety".²¹ Edward also faced further worries that the distance between he and Emily would cause her to favor someone that was closer. In May, 1840, Harriet Hutter, the wife of George Hutter, wrote to Edward and mentioned another man attempting to earn Emily's affections, as well as Emily's "conquest" for a Baptist preacher, although Harriet insisted that Edward should not worry as Emily's mother fully approved of Edward.²² Despite what was seemingly doubts between the two, Edward and Emily married in October, 1840 while Edward was on medical leave from the Navy.

Edward continued to serve in the Navy until his resignation on September 22nd, 1841. Despite not having a love for the Navy, Edward maintained a good service record, serving for just over nine years from September 10th, 1832 to September 22nd, 1841 and serving on multiple ships, such as the Porpoise, Peacock, Shark, and Vandalia. Edward began to buy slaves in 1842 to operate a farm in Lynchburg, Virginia, but was unable to maintain a steady income from it. Edward and Emily eventually inherited the Poplar Forest estate from the Cobbs family, as the health of Emily's father began to decline, and lived at Poplar Forest until Edward's death at home on November 7th, 1875.

¹⁸ M. Dickerson to Edward Hutter, June 28, 1838, U.S. Navy Department.

¹⁹ J.K. Paulding to Edward Hutter, November 7, 1839, U.S. Navy Department.

²⁰ Christian J. Hutter to Edward Hutter, January 12, 1840, Easton, Pennsylvania.

²¹ Edward Hutter to Emily Cobbs, February 4, 1840, U.S.S. Columbus, Boston, Massachusetts.

²² Harriet Hutter to Edward Hutter, May 7, 1840, Lynchburg, Virginia.

About the Author:

Timothy Elliott graduated from Lynchburg College with a B.A. in American History in 2015 and is now a Historical Interpreter at Historic Sandusky in Lynchburg, Virginia. Timothy is actively working on several projects and is researching the history of the Hutter family, who owned Sandusky from 1841-1952. Sandusky was used by Union forces as headquarters under General David Hunter during the Battle of Lynchburg from June 17-18th, 1864 and is now a Civil War museum.