

Alexander Wyllly Habersham

24 March 1826 - 26 March 1883

By Samuel Stephenson

(Edited by Douglas Fix)

Alexander Wyllly Habersham was born on 24 March 1826 in New York City to Richard Wyllly (a lawyer and representative from Georgia in the 26th and 27th Congresses) and Sarah Elliott Habersham.(1) Alexander Habersham was educated primarily by private tutors when growing up, and was appointed to the United States Naval Academy of Georgia after having entered the navy as a midshipman in 1841. He married Jessie Steele of Annapolis, Maryland, a granddaughter of Francis Scott Key, while still relatively young, and they raised several children.(2)

Habersham became a passed midshipman in 1847, graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1848, and was assigned to the Pacific Squadron. From 1851 to 1852, Habersham was on duty with the Coast Survey, and was made acting lieutenant of the store ship *J. P. Kennedy* in 1853.(3) While aboard the *Kennedy*, he sailed with a United States surveying and exploring expedition to the North Pacific and China seas, and encountered aborigines when they landed on the east coast of Formosa in 1853 in search of the wrecked ship *Western*.(4) Habersham was then relocated to Hong Kong, where he was assigned as acting master of the *John Hancock* in 1854 and led another exploring expedition.(5)

After returning to San Francisco in October 1855, Habersham learned of his official promotion to the rank of lieutenant the previous month.(6) He was subsequently stationed at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, and in 1857 published a work chronicling his recent travels, *My Last Cruise*.(7)

In 1857, Habersham was assigned to the *Powhatan* of the East India Squadron, but on 30 May 1860 he resigned from the service in order to engage in business in Japan. He became involved in the tea industry and was responsible for one of the first(8) shipments of Japanese tea to be imported into the United States.(9)

Habersham's business career in Japan was rather short-lived, and he returned home to Baltimore in 1861. He was arrested in December of that year as a "Southern

sympathizer" and was imprisoned at Fort McHenry, Maryland for four to six months.(10) He had refused to take the oath of allegiance to the United States on the grounds that he owed his allegiance to the state of Georgia.(11)

At the close of the U. S. Civil War, Habersham became a partner in the Baltimore firm Habersham and Barrett (later Smoot, Habersham and Barrett), importers and dealers in teas and East Indian goods. He subsequently became a member of the firm Habersham, Kirby and Company, coffee brokers. In 1870 or 1871 he established a coffee and canned-goods brokerage business independent of his earlier partners, and was one of the best-known coffee merchants in the United States at the time of his death on 26 March 1883.(12)

Selected Publications:

The North Pacific surveying and exploring expedition; or, My last cruise. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1857.

Notes:

1. *A dictionary of North American authors deceased before 1950*, W. Stewart Wallace, comp. (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1951), p. 187; *Dictionary of American biography*, A. Johnson and D. Malone, eds. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1960), p. 68; *Who was who in America. Historical volume, 1607-1896* (Chicago: Marquis Who's Who, 1967), p. 294; O. Adams, *A dictionary of American authors* (Boston, New York: Houghton, Mifflin; Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1904), p. 162; D. Shavit, *The United States in Asia* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 209.

2. *Appletons' cyclopedia of American biography*, J.G. Wilson and J. Fiske, eds. (New York: D. Appleton, 1898), p. 22; *Who was who in America*, p. 294; *Dictionary of American biography*, p. 68.

3. *Dictionary of American biography*, p. 68; Shavit 1990, p. 209.

4. *Dictionary of American biography*, p. 68; *Who was who in America*, p. 294; Otness, Harold M., *One thousand westerners in Taiwan, to 1945: A biographical and bibliographical dictionary* ([Taipei]: Institute of Taiwan History, Preparatory Office, Academia Sinica, 1999), p. 69.

5. *Who was who in America*, p. 294; *Dictionary of American biography*, p. 68.

6. Ibid. In contrast, *Appletons' cyclopedia of American biography*, p. 22, states that Habersham was promoted to master on 14 September 1855 and lieutenant on the following day. However, it seems unlikely that Habersham would receive two promotions in two days. The sources employed by the two references quoted here appear more reliable: J. G. B. Bulloch, *A history and genealogy of the Habersham family*, 1901; U. S. Naval Academy Graduates' Association, *Register of Grads, 1846-1916*, 1916; E.

C. Marshall, *History of the U. S. Naval Academy*, 1862; Baltimore directories; and an obituary in the *Baltimore Sun* (March 28, 1883). In contrast, *Appletons' cyclopedia* fails to list a single source to support its unlikely claim.

7. *Dictionary of American biography*, p. 68; *Who was who in America*, p. 294.

8. If not the first; cf. *Appletons' cyclopedia of American biography*, p. 22.

9. *Dictionary of American biography*, p. 68; *Who was who in America*, p. 294; Adams 1904, p. 162; Shavit 1990, p. 209.

10. *Dictionary of American biography*, p. 68; *Who was who in America*, p. 294 and *Appletons' cyclopedia of American biography*, p. 22 present contradictory information, the former two sources claiming that Habersham was imprisoned for four months, while the latter text stated that he was imprisoned for six months.

11. *Dictionary of American Biography*, p. 68; *Who was who in America*, p. 294.

12. *Dictionary of American Biography*, p. 68; *A dictionary of North American authors deceased before 1950*, p. 187; *Who was who in America*, p. 294; *Dictionary of American biography*, p. 68; Adams 1904, p. 162; Shavit 1990, p. 209.