

**Captain Richard Holbrook Tucker Jr.**  
**1816-1895**

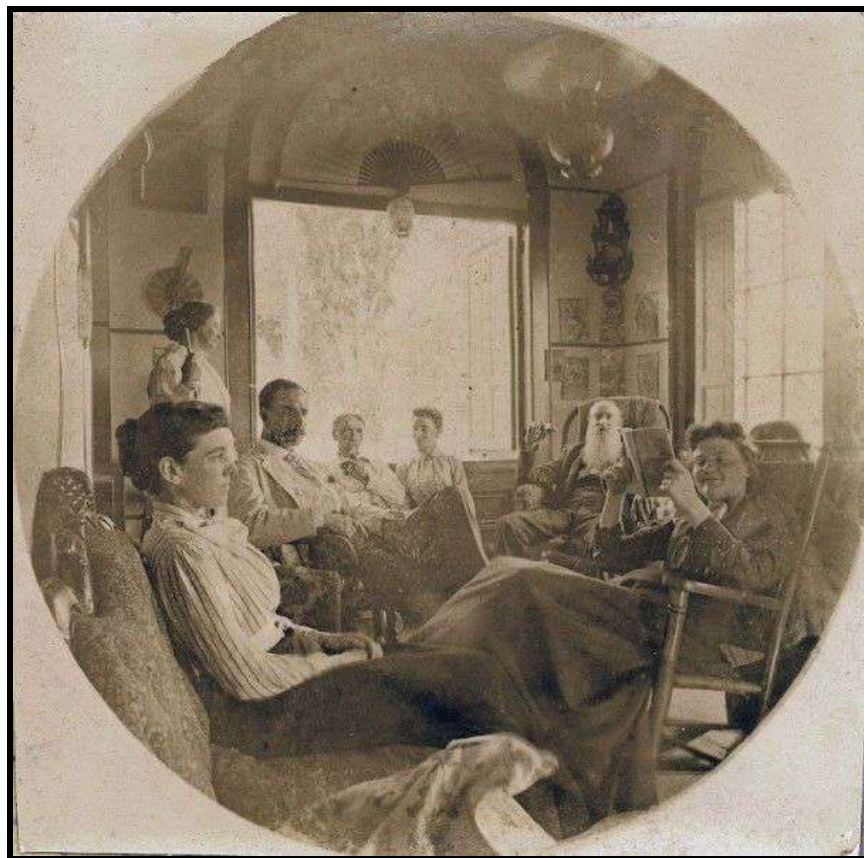


Figure 1. Captain Tucker seated one from the right at age 78 surrounded by his family.

By Genevieve Vogel

## **Prologue**

The heroic sea captain of novels and films is a devoted, brave, and courageous man, happiest venturing to the farthest stretches of the world by sea. However, these fine men leave little room for other realities. Captain Richard Holbrook Tucker was an actual man in the 1800's attempting to find himself a career that could make him wealthy and revered. I first learned about Captain Tucker from a guided tour at his former home, Castle Tucker, which he renovated from a country mansion to a fashionable home for his young family after retiring from the sea. The house, now a well preserved museum, tells the story of his eccentric family, but I was intrigued to know who he was before his family life. His story is important because it brings forth the profoundly unique perspective of a reluctant sea captain, who was able to facilitate his true passions through one of the most dangerous careers available.

## **Early Life**

Richard Holbrook Tucker was born May 13th, 1816 to Captain Richard Hawley and Joanna Tucker of Wiscasset.<sup>1</sup> In the early 1800's the village of Wiscasset was a bustling deep-harbour shipping port and ship building capital. Although the economy suffered from the brief, but brutal, embargo of 1807 and ill-avoided War of 1812, the small little village prospered once again in the late 1800's.<sup>2</sup> There were so many ships that it was said that a person could jump from deck to deck all the way across the harbour to the other side.<sup>3</sup> The notorious Tucker Family of Wiscasset followed the village into this prosperity. The family's transatlantic shipping business was headed by Captain Richard Hawley Tucker, and he therefore raised his two sons, Joseph Tucker and Richard Holbrook Tucker, to carry it on.<sup>4</sup>

For two years, Richard Jr. was a part of Bowdoin class of 1838.<sup>5</sup> While there, he was a member of the literary and debating Athenaeum Society.<sup>6</sup> He distinctly noted his dislike for biology and dissection at school noting that the feeling of crashing into another ship was similar to that he experienced “in the dissecting room at Bowd. College.” Later he would ponder over this time, “prospects for acquiring an independency are far better [at sea] than they would have been as a graduate of Bowd. College.” He chose to drop out in 1837 because he was “out of health and out of spirits” according to his personal diary. As a young college dropout, his father was likely eager to get his son steadily employed in the family business. For his first voyage in December of 1837, he went aboard the *Othello*, a ship owned by his father, as an apprentice to the captain.<sup>7</sup>

### Life At Sea



Figure 2. A portrait of Richard Tucker Jr. near the time of his wedding.

Richard Jr. initially thought he would “find business in Savannah”, but he was disappointed and wrote in his diary that “business was at its lowest and I saw no prospect here.” Within eighteen months he was in command of the *Othello* and spent the next decade as a ship's captain. In the beginning he took an immediate dislike to sea life, stating “I loathed and detested everything belonging to a ship.” However, after a handful of months his attitude had become more positive towards the profession his father had “recommended” to him. He acknowledged that becoming a ship captain would provide “honorable and lucrative employment.” He even

went as far as to hope to soon become the captain of the ship itself. On August 15th of 1838, he noted that he felt more confident in himself and that he felt quite at home aboard the ship.<sup>8</sup>

In 1839, Captain Richard Holbrook Tucker took his first command as captain of the *Othello*.<sup>9</sup> The ship was built in Portsmouth, New Hampshire by the company of Tobey & Littlefield, one of the finest shipbuilders in the world.<sup>10</sup> She was the first ship his father had ever owned and the ship that started their business in the 1830's, and therefore it was quite symbolic for it to be Captain Tucker's first ship to command. His first route was between Le Havre, France and Savannah, Georgia. The dependence of Europe on southern cotton is what fueled the Tucker Family business for years as an intermediary between the two markets. Altogether, the family controlled around 25 ships in total from the 1830's to the 1870's.<sup>11</sup>

In 1839, the *Othello* and Captain Tucker completed many passages from Le Havre for Savannah.<sup>12</sup> On one of his first passages to Le Havre, France, he arrived on September 11th 1839 with a cargo of 6,000 five frank pieces.<sup>13</sup> In December of the same year, he was recorded twice in the papers for a short passage from Wiscasset to Savannah, which had the *Othello* arriving in Savannah on December 2nd.<sup>14</sup> The passage from Le Havre to a North American port was around a month, as illustrated by one of Captain Tucker's last passages on the *Othello*, taken in 1841 which arrived in Boston after 27 days at sea on June 22nd.<sup>15</sup> Only a few days later on June 26th, the New York "Weekly Herald" announced the arrival of the *Othello* with a Captain Benson.<sup>16</sup> The ship was still owned by the senior Richard Tucker but had been assigned to a different captain, and again another captain by that December. The second captain after Captain Tucker took a similar route to the former, stopping in Boston on way from Wiscasset for Savannah.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 3. A watercolor painting of ship *Alliance* in 1846.



Figure 4. *Othello*.

In April of 1842, Captain Tucker found himself in command of another of his father's ships: the *Alliance*. It had been built in 1836 in Kittery, Maine and was purchased in 1841. In this command position, Captain Tucker made several passages, taking port in places such as Wiscasset, Maine; Boston, Massachusetts; New York, New York; Charleston, South Carolina; Savannah, Georgia; Liverpool, England; and Le Havre, France. Although he was sailing the same waters as with the *Othello*, the *Alliance* was a heftier ship at 524.69 tons compared to the *Othello*'s 360 tons.<sup>18</sup> On this ship, the passages seem to have grown longer, taking 40 days from Le Havre to Bulls, South Carolina on route to Savannah. It appears Captain Tucker had moved his way up the ladder in command of a ship in his father's fleet. Soon Captain Tucker was given the opportunity to prove his ability in his rescue of the crew of the schooner *Confidence*. The schooner, having left New York for Philadelphia, was blown off the coast and given up for lost by those on land. The ship was in reality wrecked near the Western Islands where the crew spent 12 days hoping to be rescued, seven of which they were out of drinking water. Thankfully, they were saved "with great difficulty by Capt. Tucker of the ship *Alliance* from savannah bound for liverpool" as proclaimed in a Philadelphia paper detailing the dramatic rescue.<sup>19</sup> Captain

Tucker's name once again appeared in the newspaper almost a year after for another act of heroism.

“Captain Moore, of the brig J Cohen Jr., at Providence, returns his most sincere thanks to Captain Tucker, of the ship *Alliance*, for his kind attentions and liberal supply of provisions...Captain Tucker's conduct is worthy of great praise, and we hope he may never be placed in a situation requiring the same succor, but should he be unfortunate, we trust he will fall in with as human and gentlemanly a captain as he has proved himself to be.”<sup>20</sup>



Figure 5. Tucker's quadrant.

This glowing portrayal demonstrates his fine character that he was continually known for throughout his life, especially in his later public service career in Wiscasset.

After 1843, a more uneventful few years followed of continuous passages from North America to Europe. In 1845, however, a VIP passenger was welcomed onto the ship. William Stiles, the Charge d'Affaires for the United States to the Austrian Empire, took the *Alliance* from Savannah to Liverpool in June of 1845.<sup>21</sup> Overall, the *Alliance* was not bound on a path for much excitement as she was steadily being run out of the sea trade by faster steamers. An article entitled “A sailing ship among steamers!” mentioned Captain Tucker in relation to the little amount of European news and mail he was transporting. In October of 1846 he brought just one package back to Charleston from his sail to Liverpool.<sup>22</sup> Steam ships were becoming the preferred way of export not just for mail and news, but for products. Ten years into captaining, the last reported passage of *Alliance* with Captain Tucker was in July of 1847, which arrived



after 31 days at sea from Le Havre, in Philadelphia with 210 steerage passengers.<sup>23</sup> By October of 1847, the *Alliance* was sailing with a new captain.<sup>24</sup>

### Later Years

Instead of continuing as a ship captain, Captain Tucker became the agent for the Tucker vessels, as well as organizing an agency for a line of packet ships, and participated in a number of other enterprises. The basing of operations in Charleston, South Carolina was an unusual choice since Charleston was “the least industrialized major city in the United States in the late antebellum years.”<sup>25</sup> Unique to the Tucker fleet was that in the age of steam, they continued to only use sailing ships, which depended on winds that made direct passage to the northern states from Europe difficult. The following years 1854 and 1857 are vaguely recorded as Captain Tucker explored various business ventures independently, and for his father. The family did in these years wisely switch their base of operations away back to Wiscasset as the Civil War loomed.



Figure 6.

In 1857, Captain Tucker met and married sixteen year old Mary Geraldine Armstrong in Chicago, who he took back to Wiscasset to start their family. To establish the second chapter of his life he bought “Elm Lawn” in Wiscasset, a country mansion in foreclosure.



Figure 7. Castle Tucker's piazza.      Figure 8. The 1866 expansion.

Richard and Mary had six children, five who lived to adulthood. They were raised in the house, which went through various renovations during their youth. Captain Tucker's investments in the Nova Scotia Gold Rush paid for the building of the piazza and the 1866 expansion. During this same period, Captain Tucker began his brick company. By 1875 it was the largest brickyard in the county, with a kiln able to hold over one million bricks.<sup>26</sup> Although not a profitable venture, Captain Tucker pursued vehemently the patenting of his surfboat invention. His childhood fantasies were fulfilled in its success and thereafter recognition. The boat did not make a wake, was around fifteen feet in diameter, and could go up to five miles per hour with its steam engine.<sup>27</sup> It was built for the Erie Canal Company contest for a boat that would not erode the embankments of the canal.<sup>28</sup>



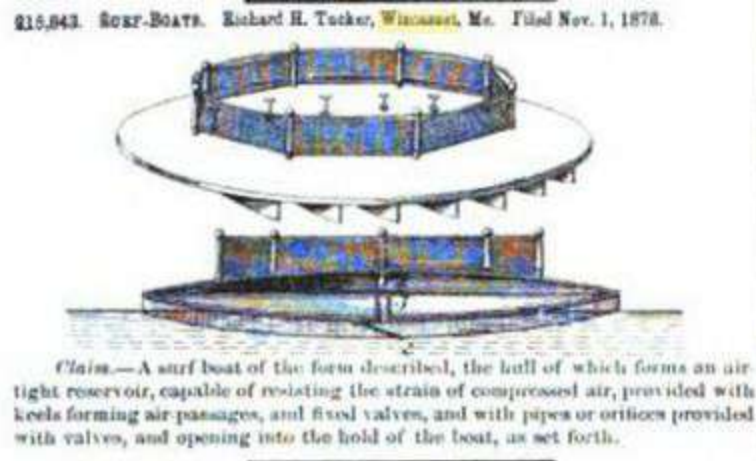


Figure 9. Surfboat invention.

Captain Tucker also devoted his time to the Wiscasset community and Maine government, using his sea captain prestige to create a chair at the table. In 1862 he joined the Maine State Senate and the Maine House in 1885 through 1886 as a Democrat. During the Civil War, he both supported the war effort and advocated for his town. As chairman of the Wiscasset Board of Selectmen, he wrote a letter to Governor Washburn urging him to transport Maine's 1st Cavalry on ships from Wiscasset.<sup>29</sup> For his deed he was awarded an AM degree from Bowdoin in 1868.<sup>30</sup> He was also an active member of the Wiscasset Fire Society into his final years. It was both a gentlemen's club and fire brigade. On the 2nd of April 1895, at one of these meetings, according to family story, Captain Tucker rose to give a toast, collapsed, and died.<sup>31</sup> The official cause of death is listed as heart disease and he likely collapsed from a heart attack due to this condition.<sup>32</sup> With him died the last generation of Tucker mariners. None of his his sons pursue a life at sea, and the family fortune took an unfortunate downturn, dwindling into the 20th century.

# Endnotes

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