



# Monuments & milestones

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## An Unexpected Guest in Nashville's City Cemetery: Admiral Paul Shirley

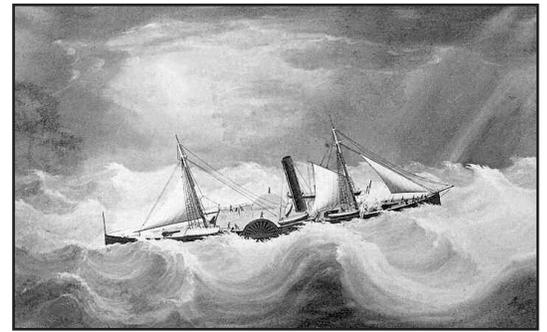
by John Allyn, Nashville City Cemetery President

Nashville is about as far as one can get from salt water – so why is City Cemetery the final resting place of a Civil War Federal naval officer? That officer is Admiral Paul Shirley, who is buried in Section 28.52, just across the path from Captain William Driver's monument.

Paul Shirley was born in Glasgow, Kentucky, on December 19, 1820, the son of transplanted Virginians Paul and Sarah Caperton Gibson Shirley, who later moved to Nashville, where the elder Mr. Shirley died on April 16, 1834, and was buried in City Cemetery.

At the age of 19 the younger Paul Shirley was appointed a midshipman in the United States Navy, the conventional route to becoming a naval officer in those days. (The Naval Academy was not established until 1845, six years later). Although promotions in the peacetime Navy came slowly, by 1863 Shirley had been promoted to Lieutenant Commander and was the commanding officer of the U.S.S. *Cyane*, a sloop-of-war based in San Francisco Bay, where he would play an important role in the capture of the Confederate privateer *J. M. Chapman*.

In late 1862 Confederate sympathizer Asbury Harpending had travelled from California to Richmond, Virginia, where he received a letter of marque, a license from the Confederate government to act as a privateer. When Harpending returned to San Francisco, he joined Alfred Rubery and Ridgley Greathouse in buying the 90-ton schooner *J. M.*



The U.S.S. *Monocacy*, sister ship to the U.S.S. *Suwannee*, which Commander Shirley sailed through the Straits of Magellan to the Pacific.

*Chapman* and outfitting her as a Confederate privateer.

They purchased guns, ammunition, and uniforms and packed them in cases labeled as oil, merchandise, machinery, and quicksilver. William C. Law, who had a somewhat erratic history as a packet captain, was hired to captain the *J. M. Chapman*, with its crew of sixteen.

The Confederates' plans were ambitious. First on their agenda was the capture of one of the Pacific Mail steamers sailing from California to Panama carrying gold bullion to finance the Federal war effort. After the successful capture of the steamer, they proposed to cruise across the Pacific to the China Sea and Indian Ocean, seizing American ships as they went.

The Federal authorities learned of the plan through an informer and set up a 24-hour watch on the *J. M. Chapman*. A nearby steam tug kept her steam up and fires banked, ready to

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**MEMORIAL DAY DASH**  
**MONDAY, MAY 30**  
**BEGINS AT 8:00 A.M. AT GREER STADIUM**  
**REGISTRATION FEE: \$25 (\$30 ON RACE DAY)**

Register online at <http://www.active.com> or at the stadium on race day. Prizes in many age categories. Runners and walkers are welcome. (More info on page 2, inside)

stop the privateer the moment she set sail. Not far away, the *Cyane* kept careful watch as well.

The *J. M. Chapman* raised anchor at dawn on March 15, 1863, and sailed slowly out from the wharf. Only two officers were visible on deck, and the vessel looked as innocent and harmless as any craft that ever left the port of San Francisco. When she was about 300 yards from the dock, however, two boatloads of armed seamen from the *Cyane* drew even with the schooner and boarded her without resistance. The steam tug had held back because the undependable Captain Law, having arrived too late to catch the ship after a night of drinking, was still on the wharf calling for the *J. M. Chapman* to come back for him.



Gravestone of Admiral Paul Shirley, died 1876.

The Confederates, placed in solitary confinement at Alcatraz, were tried for treason before Judge Stephen J. Fields, later a U.S. Supreme Court Justice. The jury found Harpending, Greathouse, and Rubery guilty as charged, sentencing each to ten years in prison and a fine of \$10,000. The unreliable Captain Law and his crew were acquitted.

President Lincoln quickly pardoned Rubery based on his age, his citizenship, and a request for his release from pro-American British parliamentarian John Bright. Harpending and Greathouse were released in February 1864 after taking an oath of allegiance to the United States.

The *J. M. Chapman* was sold and the money divided between the U.S. government and the informer. Lt. Shirley and the crew of the U.S.S. *Cyane* objected and brought suit for a share of the prize money, contending that the *J. M. Chapman* was a pirate ship and thus a prize of war. However, the court ruled that the *J. M. Chapman* was not a pirate ship as defined by the laws of nations. The vessel was seized pursuant to the First Confiscation Act of 1861, which provided that any person who supplied information leading to the arrest and conviction of traitors would be entitled to share equally with the United States in any property so acquired. (This case was cited in a 2010 case dealing with Somali pirates.)

Lieutenant Commander Shirley was commended for his actions by the commander of the U. S. North Pacific Squadron. In 1863 he was promoted to Commander and given command of the U.S.S. *Paul Jones*. This ship served in the area of Ossabaw Island, Georgia, patrolling the Georgia littoral zone for smugglers

and blockade runners.

In the fall of 1864 Shirley was given command of the U.S.S. *Suwannee*, an ironside wheeler gunboat then under construction at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. Once commissioned, the *Suwannee* was ordered to find and destroy the the C.S.S. *Shenandoah*, currently wreaking havoc with American shipping in the South Atlantic. Informed that the *Shenandoah* was headed to the Pacific, Shirley sailed the *Suwannee* down the coast of South America and through the Straits of Magellan in pursuit.

The intelligence was half right: the *Shenandoah* was headed to the Pacific, but by a different route, around the Cape of Good Hope to Australia and thence to the whaling grounds in the Sea of Okhotsk, the Bering Sea, and the Arctic Ocean. The *Suwannee*, reaching Acapulco in July 1865, was ordered to find and destroy the *Shenandoah*. However, by that time the Confederate raider had learned that the Civil War was over, and that it might be treated as a pirate vessel if caught on the high seas. The *Shenandoah*, carrying a crew of Southern officers and British and Australian sailors, completed her circumnavigation of the globe without further landfall until she docked in Liverpool, England, in November 1865. The Southern Confederacy came to an end at the moment the *Shenandoah* lowered her flag.

Shirley remained in the Navy after the war and was promoted to Captain in



U.S.S. *Cyane*, later commanded by Lt. Cdr. Paul Shirley, bombarding a Central American fort, 1854.

1870. He died "as the result of a severe cold" on November 26, 1876, on a train from his home near Philadelphia to Memphis. According to his grave marker in City Cemetery, he had evidently been brevetted as an Admiral. Before his death he resided in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, with his wife, Margaretta Guinn Stanley.

In addition to the elder Paul Shirley, three other family members are buried in the Shirley plot. Paul's mother, Sarah C. Shirley (79), a resident of Kentucky, died in 1876 of "old age"; Paul's brother James Shirley, "a son of Temperance," died at 22 from diarrhea and was interred in 1847; and his sister Camilla J. Shirley, listed as a resident of Arkansas, died at 90 "of old age" in March 1918.

## coming up in future issues:

Learn about the partnership between the Nashville City Cemetery Association (NCCA) and Hands On Nashville.

Find out more about some of the volunteers and staff members who make the NCCA an effective organization.

Did you know that Nashville City Cemetery is the site of a new Civil War Trails marker?  
Go to: [civilwartraveler.com](http://civilwartraveler.com) for information about this fascinating historical program

Visit our website at [www.thenashvillecitycemetery.org](http://www.thenashvillecitycemetery.org)