

# Naval Bookshelf

## *I Am Fighting for the Union: The Civil War Letters of Naval Officer Henry Willis Wells*

By Henry Willis Wells

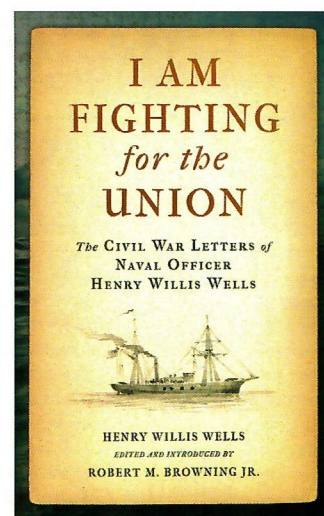
Edited and Introduced by Robert M. Browning Jr.

Reviewed By David Welker

**ACTING ENSIGN HENRY WILLIS WELLS** left later generations a priceless account of his Union Navy service in some 600 letters, which former U.S. Coast Guard Chief Historian Robert M. Browning Jr. has compiled and edited in this splendid addition to Civil War naval history.

Wells was born on July 4, 1841 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to a wealthy family that afforded Henry and his siblings—along with his cousin, author Louisa May Alcott—the best education available, including competent writing skills. Drawn to the sea at age 15, Henry signed aboard the first of four merchant ships on which he sailed, also studying seamanship in a Boston college. In August 1861, shortly after the war's start, Henry enlisted as an acting master's mate—the most junior officer grade, responsible for navigation—aboard *USS Cambridge*, a former commercial steamer converted into a warship to serve in the Union's naval blockade of the Confederacy. The war personally came home to Wells when he was captured during a risky raid on the North Carolina coast in November 1862, spending time in Richmond's Libby Prison until exchanged. Promoted in April 1863 to the grade of acting ensign, Wells served aboard ever-larger ships including *USS Ceres*, *USS Montgomery*, and *USS Gem of the Seas* before securing his first commands, the steam tenders *Rosalie* and *Annie*, his last posting of the war.

Wells communicated most frequently with his beloved mother and sisters, revealing himself in ways he simply could not to shipmates as a U.S. Navy officer. He offers unique insight into the life of commercial sailors who volunteered as acting master's mates, serving alongside the tight-knit U.S. Navy culture and struggling to fit in, despite often having more sea experience than higher-ranking officers. We also see the frustrations of service in the North Atlantic and West Gulf Blockading Squadrons—so great that Wells considered joining the army just to see action. His letters also reveal life aboard these small ships, with all its tensions, trials, and joys, as well as notable insights, including his less-than-flattering observations about Civil War naval hero William B. Cushing.



The University of Alabama Press ([uapress.ua.edu](http://uapress.ua.edu)), April 2023, 368 p, 6" x 9", Paperback, \$34.95, Hardcover, \$130.00, eBook, \$34.95

The book contains welcome introductory material, including a chronology and explanation of Wells's family members, as well as ten illustrations of several vessels on which he served and images of Wells in uniform. Browning included detailed notes that add vital context on everything from Wells's family and friends to the officers he served under and alongside, and details of ships he served aboard and encountered. The reader would have benefited by having those valuable notes located at each letter's conclusion or even as footnotes, rather than at the end, to avoid frequently flipping back and forth. Nonetheless, this enjoyable book should be required reading for serious students and novice readers of U.S. naval history during the Civil War.



David Welker is U.S. Government historian and has authored several Civil War books: *The Cornfield: Antietam's Bloody Turning Point* (Havertown, PA: Casemate Publishers, 2020), *Tempest at Ox Hill: The Battle of Chantilly* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), and *A Keystone Rebel: The Civil War Diary of Joseph Garey, Hudson's Battery, Mississippi Volunteers* (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 1996). Mr. Welker and his wife reside in Centreville, VA.

Cutting Out of USS *Water Witch*

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The Magazine

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