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## NEWS

### **History Happened Here: Naval commander died fighting**

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Published:

Saturday, March 27, 2010 2:13 AM EDT

The blood red pirate flag whipped in the wind as dawn broke on the horizon Nov. 9, 1822 near Matanzas, Cuba.

The pirate schooner, the Revenge, turned and began firing on the small boats. Lt. William Howard Allen wasn't about to let the brigands escape capture and spurred the marines manning the oars forward.

Allen, 32 at the time, was not particularly tall, but was a commanding presence. He showed no fear in the face of danger, an attribute for which his men loved and obeyed him.

Allen's ship, the USS Alligator, stood nearby, unable to get closer due to the dangerous shoals separating his ship from the pirates. So there they were in the small armed boats, grapeshot raining down on them as they inched closer to the pirate's schooner.

The pirates soon abandoned the Revenge, escaping to a second vessel that had pulled along side.

Allen and his men gave chase to the second ship. That was when a musket ball struck Allen in the head. Blood pouring from the wound, he continued to urge his crew to push on. A second ball hit him in the chest, but still he spurred them forward before finally collapsing.

The chase ended. A number of pirates had escaped, but the navy had recaptured one ship, two brigs, and three schooners.

Allen's men brought him aboard the abandoned pirate ship and lay him on the deck. As the life poured out of him he called his officers to him.

"I hope my friends and country will be satisfied that I fought well," he allegedly remarked. "I die in peace with the world."

A few hours later he was dead.

His body was taken to Matanzas, Cuba and buried there.

Back in Hudson, the news that one of their own had died at the hands of pirates cast a pall of gloom on the city. On Dec. 5, 1822 a meeting, the largest the city had seen, was called at City Hall to honor Allen.

Congressman James Strong gave a eulogy that both decried the evils of piracy and extolled Allen's virtues.

"They should be taught, that justice, religion and law, bear the sway on earth," he said of the pirates, "and if it must be, the American eagle ... will teach them to respect the flag of the nation; or if they be too drunk with blood to learn, will pursue and exterminate them, be the hazard what it may."



A view of William Howard Allen's monument at the edge of the cemetery in Hudson. (David Lee/Hudson-Catskill Newspapers)

Allen was the first American commissioned officer to die at the hands of these "devils incarnate, who have renounced their God, and trampled underfoot the blood of the cross," said Strong.

"As a friend, he was open, sincere and faithful, sparing of censure, and tender of reputation," Strong said of Allen. "But it is as a son his character breaks in upon us in all its loveliness and splendor."

According to Strong, Allen doted on his sick mother and supported the family, which included several unmarried sisters.

Allen was born in Hudson on July 8, 1790. He had one year of schooling in London, England, but returned to Hudson where he attended the Hudson Academy, and later a school in Pennsylvania.

At 18 he became a midshipmen in the U.S. Navy.

During the War of 1812 he served as a second lieutenant on the Argus. It was on this ship during an engagement with the British sloop-of-war Pelican on Aug. 13, 1813, that he exhibited the courage that he would become known for.

Both his commanding officers were severely wounded in the battle and he took command of the ship. Outgunned and outsized, the Argus, under Allen's command, fought valiantly, but was eventually forced to surrender.

Allen spent time as a prisoner of war in England, returning to America 18 months after his capture.

In 1819 he was first lieutenant on the U.S. frigate Congress, the first American ship of her class to visit southeast Asia.

He returned to Hudson whenever his career allowed and after his death his remains would eventually find their way back home.

Hudson's Common Council asked the Navy to return Allen's body to Hudson and in 1827 Allen's remains were disinterred from their Cuban grave and shipped back to New York.

When Allen's body arrived by ship in New York City, Commodore Isaac Chauncey — the naval commander during the War of 1812 — and numerous other naval officers, along with New York City dignitaries and citizens, were there to escort the body to a steamship headed to Hudson.

In Hudson a large and somber funeral cortege wended its way through the city to the graveyard as bells tolled and minute guns were fired from Parade Hill.

Allen was buried near his mother's grave.

A few years later a monument was erected atop Allen's grave, which still stands, bearing witness to his bravery.

This isn't the only place memorializing Allen's actions.

Nine days after Allen's death, the Alligator ran aground in the Florida Keys near what is now known as Alligator Reef, named in honor of the vessel.

The crew, in order to keep the ship out of the hands of pirates, burned the ship, which then exploded.

In 2004 the underwater archaeology branch of the Naval Historical Center conducted a remote-sensing survey of a portion of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and were able to locate the ship's remains, which have been added to the National Register of Historic Places.

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