

**Guide to the Benjamin F. Isherwood Letter, 1893
Catalog Number MS331**

The Library at The Mariners' Museum

Contact Information:
The Library at The Mariners' Museum
100 Museum Drive
Newport News, VA 23606
Phone: (757) 591-7782
Fax: (757) 591-7310
Email: library@mariner.org
URL: www.mariner.org/library

Processed by: Lisa Wilson, 2005

DESCRIPTIVE SUMMARY

Repository: The Library at The Mariners' Museum

Title: Benjamin F. Isherwood Letter, 1893

Catalog number: MS331

Accession number: CA1

Physical Characteristics: 4 page letter

Language(s): English

Creator(s): Benjamin F. Isherwood

SCOPE AND CONTENT

The recipient of the letter, F. H. Pierce, had written to Isherwood requesting a copy of an official Senate report on the destruction of “public property” at the Norfolk Navy Yard in 1861. Isherwood informed Pierce that he did not possess a copy and could not locate one. Therefore, he offered Pierce his own recollections of the events outlined in the Senate report. According to Isherwood, he was sent to the Norfolk Navy Yard by Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, to prepare the USS *Merrimack* for sea as quickly as possible. Isherwood asserts that he got the engines of the *Merrimack* in working order and requested Lt. James Alden to “dispatch” the vessel on once. This request, he states, was refused by Lt. Alden and Commodore Macauley. He was then ordered by Commodore Macauley to return to Washington, D.C. Throughout the letter, Isherwood asserts that the “incompetence” of Alden and Macauley led to the burning of the *Merrimack*, making possible for Confederate forces to covert her into the CSS *Virginia*. He also blames the subsequent sinking of the USS *Congress* and USS *Cumberland* by the *Virginia*.

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Accession number

CA1

Accession date

Restrictions

Collection is open to all researchers.

Publication Rights

Copies of any materials may not be reproduced, published, or distributed, in any form without written permission from The Mariners' Museum.

Preferred Citation

Benjamin F. Isherwood Letter, 1893: MS331

The Library at The Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia

Note to Users

Researchers are requested to handle the materials with caution and in accordance with proscribed archival practices. When using these materials, please preserve the original order of the collection.

BIOGRAPHICAL/HISTORICAL SKETCH

Benjamin Franklin Isherwood was born in New York City on October 6, 1822. Prior to joining the United States Navy in 1844, Isherwood worked for the Utica and Schenectady Railroad and on the Croton Aqueduct. He worked as an engineer on the Erie Canal and designed and constructed lighthouses for the Department of the Treasury. Isherwood was appointed First Assistant Engineer in the United States Navy on May 23, 1844. During the Mexican War, he served on the *Princeton* and later was an engineer on the *Spitfire*. At the close of the Mexican War, he was assigned to the Washington Navy Yard, assisting Charles Stuart in the design of ships and conducted experiments with steam propelled ships. Isherwood also served as Chief Engineer of the steam frigate *San Jacinto* for three years in the Asiatic Station.

At the outbreak of the Civil War, Isherwood was appointed Engineer-in-Chief of the Navy. Under his administration, the number of steam vessels in the United States Navy grew from 28 to about 600 vessels. In 1863 and 1865, Isherwood published the first and second volumes of *Experimental Researches in Steam Engineering*. These two volumes were translated into six languages and became a standard engineering text upon which future steam experimentation was based. Isherwood was removed as Engineer-in-Chief of the Navy in 1869 by the Grant administration.

From 1870 and 1871, Isherwood conducted experiments resulting in a propeller used by the United States Navy for the next 27 years. Against strong opposition within the United States Navy, He was a pioneer in the creation and production of swift cruisers. Following a tour of European shipyards and docks, he became president of the Experimental Board under the Bureau of Steam Engineering until his retirement on October 6, 1884. Isherwood died on June 19, 1915 in New York City.

FOLDER LISTING

Folder 1 Correspondence, 1893

November 1, 1893: New York City

Four-page letter from Benjamin F. Isherwood to F. H. Pierce. Isherwood informs Pierce that he does not have a copy of a U.S. Senate report on the destruction of government property at the Norfolk Navy Yard in 1861. According to Isherwood, he was sent to the Norfolk Navy Yard by Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, to prepare the *Merrimack* for sea as quickly as possible. Isherwood asserts that he got the engines of the *Merrimack* in working order and requested Lt. James Alden to “dispatch” the vessel on once and states the Commodore Macauley refused to allow the ship to leave. Commodore Macauley then ordered him back to Washington, D.C. In this letter, Isherwood asserts that the “incompetence” of Alden and Macauley led to the destruction of the *Merrimack* and the subsequent sinking of the USS *Congress* and USS *Cumberland*.

MATERIALS REMOVED

None

SOURCES CONSULTED**SUBJECTS**

CSS *Virginia* (Ironclad ; 1862)

Isherwood, Benjamin Franklin

USS *Merrimack* (Screw Frigate ; 1856)

[United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865 -- Personal narratives.](#)