

### Tribute to Commander Michael Augustine Healy Born a slave in Georgia, this legendary commander of Alaskan waters is buried at Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma

By JEAN BARTLETT | THE WEEK OF 8-20-18-8-26-18 | STORY ORIGINALLY WRITTEN IN 2016



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**Commander Michael A. Healy, U.S. Revenue Cutter Service, 1880.**

*This story was originally written for "Roll Call ~ Reveille" – a book I wrote in 2016 for Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery in Colma. The book offers biographies on 55 individuals, now at rest at Holy Cross, who served in wars dating back to the U.S.-Mexican War and on through the Civil War, Spanish-American War, World War I and World War II.*



Captain Michael A. Healy commanded the U.S. Revenue Cutters Corwin and Bear from 1884 to 1895. Nicknamed "Hell Roaring Mike Healy," he retired in 1903 as the third highest-ranking officer from the Revenue Cutter Service. The Revenue Cutter Service is the precursor of today's U.S. Coast Guard.

*"The establishment of the Revenue Marine, or what is more familiarly known as the Revenue Cutter Service, antedates that of the present navy," writes Lieutenant Worth G. Ross, U.S.R.M., in a November 1886, Harper's New Monthly Magazine article. "That matchless organizer and master of details, Alexander Hamilton, first Secretary of the Treasury, as early as 1789, recommended the employment of boats for the security of the revenue against contraband, and in a bill which he afterward presented to Congress submitted a proposition for ten boats to be distributed along the seaboard as follows: two for the coast of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, one for Long Island Sound, one for New York, one for the Bay of Delaware, two for the Chesapeake and neighboring waters, and one each for North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia."*

The Lieutenant goes on to say that the corps grew in size and importance, and included among their duties was the suppression of piracy, which he noted had *"become common on account of the many adventurers attracted to American waters."*

During the Civil War, Michael Healy rose to the rank of officer on merchant vessels. In 1864, he applied and was subsequently appointed third lieutenant in the U.S. Revenue Marine on March 7, 1865. President Abraham Lincoln signed Healy's commission.

*"If the Revenue Service had known he was African American, there's no way they'd have let him be in command of white officers,"* said Dennis Noble, a retired Coast Guard senior chief in the 2009 published "Rescue Warriors – The U.S. Coast Guard, America's Forgotten Heroes" by David Helvarg.

Michael Healy was born in 1839 near Macon, Georgia. He was the fifth of ten children. His father, plantation owner Michael Morris Healy, was an Irish immigrant who came to Georgia to engage in cotton farming and was quite successful. His mother, Mary Eliza Smith Healy, was purchased by his father to work as a domestic slave. She was the daughter of a French-Spanish cotton baron and her mother was a slave from Mali. Healy's parents fell in love and married in Santo Domingo. Georgia did not recognize interracial marriages and all of their children by law were considered slaves and were not allowed to be educated in the South. At the age of 9 or 10, each child was sent North and the three oldest boys were sent to a Quaker school in Flushing, New York, and then on to Holy Cross College in Massachusetts.

In 1848, Healy was sent to join his older brothers at Holy Cross College. Two years later, both of his parents died within months of each other. James Augustine Healy, the eldest of the siblings who would go on to become the Bishop of Portland, Maine, realized that unlike the rest of the brothers and sisters, Michael was not interested in a formal education having run away from schools in Worcester, Montreal and Belgium. In 1855, James found his younger brother a spot as cabin boy aboard the clipper ship *Jumna*, bound for Calcutta from Boston. It was on this ship that Michael found his life's calling.

For the next 10 years, Healy, considered a "consummate seaman," sailed on merchant vessels, rising through the ranks. One year after he was appointed third lieutenant, he was promoted to second lieutenant and subsequently served as the junior officer on the Cutters: *Reliance*, *Vigilant*, *Moccasin* and *Active*. He made his first cruise to Alaska in 1868. In 1877 he obtained his first command of the Cutter *Chandler*, a command that lasted three years. In 1880 he was ordered to command the *Rush* and in 1884, he succeeded Captain C. L. Hooper as commander of the Cutter *Thomas Corwin*.

In 1886, Healy took command of the Cutter *Bear* covering the Territory of Alaska and the ship answered many needs. She served as court "where justice was dispensed swiftly but fairly." Her ship's surgeon provided medical care to all in the Territory – natives, prospectors, whalers, adventurers, missionaries. She carried mail, delivered supplies, transported Federal prisoners and other Territory "undesirables," while also conducting "soundings" to improve navigational charts of the region. To stop the ever-present plight of famine among the natives, Captain Healy imported reindeer from Siberia which he thought might also be used for clothing and transportation. Under Captain Healy's command his ship would be instrumental, many times, in saving the lives of commercial whalers trapped in the ice. Alaska natives called Healy's ship, "Healy's Fire Canoe."

Healy was legendary to all in the Territory for his unsurpassed knowledge of the Arctic, his extraordinary navigational skills, and his courage and readiness to get the job done. "Hell Roaring Mike Healy" was apparently also as brawling as the land and seas he covered. In June of 1896, Healy stood before a military court and was found guilty of seven charges, which included: conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman; tyrannous and abusive conduct to inferiors; conduct detrimental to discipline; placing a vessel in a perilous position while in an intoxicated condition, thereby endangering the lives and property under his command; drunkenness to the scandal of the Service.

By order of the Treasury Secretary, Healy was dropped to the bottom of the Captains' list and removed from the Service for a period of four years without pay. In 1900, he was given temporary command of the Cutter *McCulloch* and would follow that with commands of the Cutters *Golden Gate* and *Hartley*. In January of 1902, he was restored to his original position on the Captains' list and given command of the Cutter *Thetis*. After reaching the mandatory age of retirement at 64, Captain Healy retired from the service in September of 1903. The words he used to address his court-martial are still the words most used to define him.

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The United States Revenue Cutter Service officer died of a heart attack in San Francisco on August 30, 1904. He was survived by his wife, Mary Jane Roach Healy, and their son, Frederick A. Healy, a well-known newspaper man. He and his wife resided at the Occidental Hotel on Montgomery Street.

The USCGC Healy, the first polar icebreaker to be commissioned by the United States Coast Guard since 1978, was launched in November 1997 and delivered at the end of 1999. The ship was named *"in commemoration of Captain Michael A. Healy, a legendary figure of Alaskan Arctic history and Commanding Officer of the U.S. Revenue Cutters Corwin and Bear from 1884 to 1895."*

*This particular biography can be found in Jean Bartlett's 2016-released book, "Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma: Roll Call ~ Reveille," which offers 55 biographies on individuals, now at rest at Holy Cross, who served in wars dating back to the U.S.-Mexican War and on through the Civil War, Spanish-American War, World War I and World War II. The book is available at the reception desk at the main office of Holy Cross: 1500 Mission Road, Colma, CA 94014. Phone: 650-756-2060. All mail inquiries should be sent to: Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma, P.O. Box 1577, Colma, CA 94014.*



### A Bartlett's Biographies Headliner

Jean Bartlett is a longtime Bay Area features writer: Pacifica Tribune, Oakland Tribune, San Jose Mercury, San Mateo Times, Portraits & Roots, Marin Independent Journal, Twin City Times, Ross Valley Reporter, Peninsula Progress, Coastal Connections, Contra Costa County Times, Bay Area Business Woman and Catholic San Francisco.