

BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR

OF

JOHN RODGERS.

1812-1882.

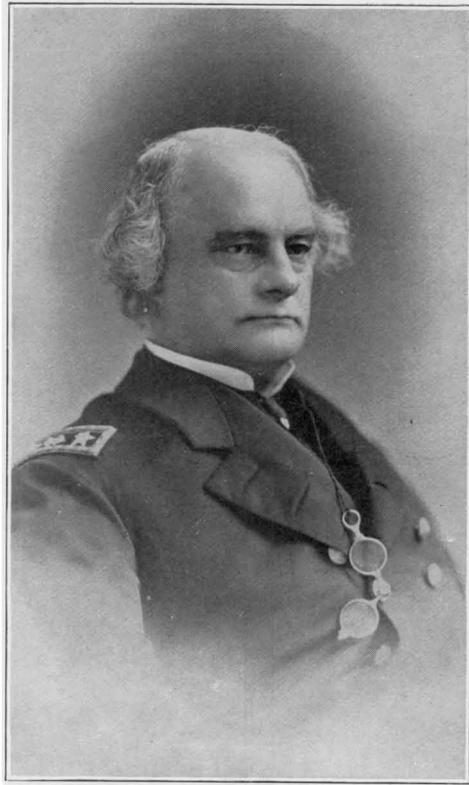
BY

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Very truly yours  
John M. Redman

## BIOGRAPHICAL MEMOIR OF JOHN RODGERS.

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Rear Admiral JOHN RODGERS was one of the original members of the National Academy of Sciences. At the time of the organization of the Academy he was fifty-one years old and had acquired a reputation as a navigator, explorer, and surveyor.

John Rodgers was born August 8, 1812, at his mother's home, Sion Hill, near Havre de Grace, Maryland. He came from a family that had distinguished itself in our wars for independence. This family sent forth soldiers and sailors to serve our country in times of need, and it is well to recall some of its history in order to see the stuff of which our forefathers were made.

The immigrant, John Rodgers, came from Glasgow, Scotland, about 1750, and settled in Harford County, Maryland, where he became the owner of a large farm. His wife was Eliza Reynolds, of Delaware. This John Rodgers served in the Revolutionary War and was colonel of a regiment in the Maryland line. He was a highly esteemed citizen of Harford County. In the family of the immigrant there were eight children, all of them remarkable for physical strength and good looks. The oldest son, the second John Rodgers, ran away to sea, entered the navy, and was distinguished in the War of 1812. He became the senior officer of the navy, and died in 1837. A younger brother, George Rodgers, also entered the navy and died a commodore.

The wife of the second John Rodgers was Minerva Denison, of Havre de Grace. Her father, Gideon Denison, came from Connecticut, where he was noted as an Indian fighter. Denison was a land speculator and bought a large tract of land near the mouth of the Susquehanna River, where it was thought the capitol of the country would be located. This estate included Sion Hill, five miles from Havre de Grace, which became the home of the Rodgers family.

John Rodgers and his wife Minerva had eleven children, of whom ten grew up. Rear Admiral John Rodgers was the fourth child. The oldest brother, Robert Rodgers, served in the Civil War as colonel of a Maryland regiment. Two other brothers,

Frederick and Henry, lost their lives in the naval service. The youngest and only surviving brother, Augustus F. Rodgers, is the head of the U. S. Coast Survey in California.

In November, 1857, Rear Admiral John Rodgers married Ann Elizabeth Hodge, daughter of William Ledyard Hodge, of Philadelphia, and granddaughter of Andrew Bayard, of that city. This marriage was a happy one. Three children were born—a son, now Commander William Ledyard Rodgers, U. S. Navy, and two daughters, Frederica, now Mrs. Robert Giles, and Miss Helen Rodgers.

John Rodgers entered the navy as a midshipman in 1828, when in his sixteenth year. He served three and a half years at sea, in the Mediterranean and on home stations. After a short rest from sea duty he entered the Naval School at Norfolk, Virginia, where he spent a year. He then entered the University of Virginia for more general study, and spent a year in that university. He was then ordered to sea, and was employed three years on the South American station.

From 1839 to 1842 Rodgers was engaged in the survey of the coast of Florida and in fighting the Seminole Indians. His robust constitution carried him through this tedious work without loss of health. After a short period of duty on shore, Rodgers served three years in the Mediterranean and on the coast of Africa.

In 1849 he was again ordered to duty on the Coast Survey, and returned to the coast of Florida. There his vessel was wrecked and badly damaged, but by persevering work in beaching and caulking, the vessel was brought into Key West, a distance of over 300 miles. It was while lying at Key West in command of a small schooner of one gun, the *Petrel*, that Rodgers prevented the capture of the Cuban insurgent, Lopez, who was pursued by the *Pizarro*, a Spanish sloop-of-war.

The surveys and charts of the coast of Florida have been of great service.

In 1852 Rodgers was ordered to duty on the North Pacific Exploring and Surveying Expedition, and was placed in command of the steamer *John Hancock*. The squadron, in command of Commander Ringgold, left Hampton Roads in June, 1853, for the Indian Ocean. Several months were occupied in

surveying some of the islands southeast of Asia, the squadron arriving at Hongkong in May, 1854. Here Commander Ringgold was obliged to give up the command, on account of ill health, and Rodgers succeeded him.

The squadron proceeded to the survey of the Bonin Islands, south of Japan, and afterwards to the coast of Japan. In crossing the China Sea a vessel of the squadron, the *Porpoise*, with all hands, was lost in a typhoon. Search was made for the missing vessel, but nothing could be found.

It was in the *Vincennes*, under the command of Rodgers, that Lieutenant John M. Brooke first applied his apparatus for deep-sea sounding, from which such valuable results were obtained.

At the end of June the squadron sailed northward to Kamchatka and made a survey of the Sea of Okhotsk. At Glasse-nappe, an Indian village,  $65^{\circ}$  north,  $172^{\circ} 35'$  west, a house was built, and Lieutenant Brooke and party were left on shore to make observations and exploration. The *Vincennes* then went northward through Bering Strait. It was Rodgers' intention to verify the discovery of land in  $72^{\circ}$  north and  $175^{\circ}$  west, reported by natives and former explorers, and which had been placed on the sea charts. The ship went to  $72^{\circ} 5'$  north and  $174^{\circ} 37'$  west, which was farther than any previous explorer had reached. No land could be seen from the yards of the ship and the water was clear of ice. Rodgers returned to Herald Island and exploring parties were landed. The position of the southeast point of the island was found to be  $71^{\circ} 21'$  north and  $175^{\circ} 20'$  west. No land could be seen from this island with a clear horizon. The ice pack appeared the next day and the party was compelled to turn back without having seen Wrangel Land, though within ten miles of its supposed position. A week was spent in surveys about Bering Strait, and on the 6th of September Glassenappe was reached. Lieutenant Brooke and his party were taken on board, and the *Vincennes* proceeded to San Francisco, where she arrived October 13, 1855.

After a short rest the *Vincennes* put to sea for surveying and deep-sea explorations. The month of March was employed in surveying the harbor of Hilo, in the Sandwich Islands, and the adjacent coast. The month of April was spent in the Society Islands, in surveying the harbor of Papiete, in the island Tahiti.

On the 29th of April Rodgers started for home around Cape Horn. After a voyage of seventy-four days, during which no land was seen, the vessel reached New York, July 12, 1856. During his absence Rodgers had been commissioned a Commander.

On August 30 Commander Rodgers was ordered to duty in Washington to superintend the reduction of his observations. His surveys in the North Pacific made an epoch in our knowledge of those regions. Nearly forty sea charts were based on these surveys, which have been very useful to navigators.

The Exploring Expedition was provided with a naturalist, a botanist, an artist, and a draughtsman, and instructions and suggestions were given by scientific men and societies. A good deal of information of the fauna and flora of the regions traversed was obtained, but the reports were never published.

The cruise in the Arctic Ocean at the middle of August, in a sailing vessel, in unknown seas, and amid fogs, was a daring exploit.

At the outbreak of the Civil War Rodgers was sent to Cincinnati to prepare a gunboat fleet to operate in the western rivers. In conjunction with General McClellan, three steamers were bought, altered, and armed. Commodore Foote took command of the fleet, and on October 17, 1861, Rodgers was ordered to command the steamer *Flag* on our southern coast. To join his command he sailed as a passenger in the *Wabash*, Admiral Dupont's flagship, in the expedition against Port Royal. In the battle of November 7 Rodgers volunteered to act on the staff of the commander-in-chief. Of his services in that engagement Admiral Dupont says:

"It would be difficult for me to enumerate the duties he performed, they were so numerous and various; and he brought to them all an invincible energy and the highest order of professional knowledge and merit. I was glad to show my appreciation of his great service by allowing him the honor to hoist the first American flag on the rebellious soil of South Carolina."

In command of the steamer *Flag* and some gunboats, Rodgers was employed in surveying the channels at the mouth of the Savannah River, and in removing torpedoes and obstructions, in cooperation with the land forces. In March he was recalled, and in April was appointed to command the *Galena*, one of the new

ironclads. In May, with the *Galena*, the *Monitor*, and three wooden vessels, he was sent up the James River to open a passage to Richmond. At Drury's Bluff barriers had been placed across the river, which were protected by Fort Darling and fortifications on the banks. With the *Galena* and the *Monitor* Rodgers engaged the batteries, and the firing lasted three hours, or as long as the ammunition held out. The fire from the fort was very severe and well directed, and the passage could not be carried without the aid of land forces. The *Galena* proved not to be shot-proof; thirteen shot and shell penetrated her side, and many men were killed by splinters of her own iron.

Rodgers was promoted Captain in July, 1862, and in November was ordered to take command of the *Weehawken*, one of the new monitors. On her first cruise out of New York the *Weehawken* encountered a severe gale, and doubts were entertained of her ability to keep the sea. But Rodgers refused to put into a refuge near at hand, saying that he was there to test the sea-going qualities of the new class of vessels.

In the attack on Fort Sumter, April 7, 1863, Rodgers, in the *Weehawken*, was selected by Admiral Dupont to head the line. This vessel remained under the fire of the batteries two hours, when the signal was given to withdraw from action. The *Weehawken* was struck fifty-three times and many of the vessels were disabled.

On the 17th of June following the engagement occurred between the *Weehawken* and the *Atlanta* near the mouth of the Savannah River. The *Atlanta* was formerly an English steamer, and had been covered with four inches of armor and armed with two six-inch and two seven-inch rifles. The *Weehawken* fired five shots, four of which struck the *Atlanta*. The first shot that struck the *Atlanta* put more than forty of her men out of the fight. The loss of men and the injury on the *Atlanta* were so great that she surrendered. For this victory and for his conduct in the war Secretary Welles recommended that Rodgers be promoted to the rank of commodore, and that he be given the thanks of Congress. In his letter the Secretary said:

"Your early connection with the Mississippi flotilla, and your participation in the projection and construction of the first ironclads on the western waters; your heroic conduct in the attack

on Drury's Bluff; the high moral courage that led you to put to sea in the *Weehawken* upon the approach of a violent storm, in order to test the sea-going qualities of these new craft, at the time when a safe anchorage was close under your lee; the brave and daring manner in which you, with your associates, pressed the ironclads under the concentrated fire of the batteries in Charleston harbor, and there tested and proved the endurance and resisting power of these vessels; and your crowning successful achievement in the capture of the *Fingal*, alias *Atlanta*, are all proofs of a skill and courage and devotion to the country and the cause of the Union, regardless of self, that cannot be permitted to pass unrewarded. To your heroic daring and persistent moral courage, beyond that of any other individual, is the country indebted for the development, under trying and varied circumstances on the ocean, under enormous batteries on land, and in successful rencontre with a formidable floating antagonist, of the capabilities and qualities of attack and resistance of the Monitor class of vessels and their heavy armament. For these heroic and serviceable acts I have presented your name to the President, requesting him to recommend that Congress give you a vote of thanks, in order that you may be advanced to the grade of Commodore in the American Navy."

In the fall of 1863 Rodgers suffered a few months of illness, but in November he was in command of the *Dictator*.

At the close of the Civil War Rodgers was placed in command of the squadron to which the *Monadnock* was attached in her experimental voyage to San Francisco. On arriving at Valparaiso it was found that hostilities were in progress between Spain and the South American republics. The city was threatened with a bombardment by the Spanish admiral, and Rodgers took a cautious but firm part in protecting American interests. Of his conduct Secretary Welles said:

"The department had taken measures for reinforcing our squadron in the Pacific by sending thither a special force, consisting of the turreted ironclad *Monadnock* and the steamers *Vanderbilt*, *Tuscarora* and *Powhatan*, under the command of Commodore John Rodgers. This officer reached Valparaiso previous to the bombardment of that city and, apprehending the views of the department, remained on the station for the pro-

tection of our countrymen until the arrival of Rear Admiral Pearson. The appearance of so distinguished a commander, with a formidable squadron, on the eve of so important an occasion, and in the absence of Rear Admiral Pearson, was opportune and fortunate.

The course pursued by Commodore Rodgers in protecting American interests, in observing and preserving neutrality in the harbor, met with approval. Whatever may have been his opinions or feelings as regards the course which the Spanish admiral thought proper to pursue, he was not required to interpose his force against or for either party. As the armed representative of this government, which was on friendly terms with each of the belligerents, it became his duty, even while endeavoring to mitigate the harsh severities of war, to maintain a strict neutrality. His friendly offices in the cause of humanity were manifested so long as they could be effective; but the officers of other neutral powers having declined to unite in any decided steps to protect the city, no alternative remained for him to pursue, consistently with the position of his government towards the parties, than that which he adopted."

Secretary Folger says:

"But the tact with which he maintained amicable and even friendly relations with Chilians, Spanish, English, and French, at the same time the firmness and persistence with which he presented the requirements of humanity enforced by the text of international law; the calm courage with which he approached the very verge of an appeal to arms, and the prudence with which he kept within the requirements of neutrality, remain yet to be fully written; but enough of his methods have become known to add to his previous reputation, that of being an able negotiator and diplomatist. His efforts for the protection of American interests on this occasion, while observing and preserving neutrality in the harbor, met with the hearty approval of his government."

From 1866 to 1869 Rodgers was in command of the Boston Navy Yard.

In December, 1869, he was made rear admiral.

Early in 1870 he was ordered to the command of the Asiatic squadron. It had been decided that a treaty should be made

with Corea, if possible, which should prevent the outrage of American seamen shipwrecked on that coast. Admiral Rodgers went to Corea in the spring of 1871 with a squadron of five ships and with Mr. Low, our minister to China. The Coreans were treacherous, and fired on our boats from their forts. A force was landed and the five forts were taken and destroyed.

On his return in 1872 Rodgers was appointed President of the Naval Examining and Retiring Board. In June, 1873, he was appointed to command the Navy Yard at Mare Island, where he remained four years, when he was appointed Superintendent of the Naval Observatory. The Naval Observatory was built on Camp Hill, near the Potomac River, in 1844. It was an unfortunate site for an astronomical observatory on account of the malaria that prevailed there and which attacked those who performed duty at night. After a use of thirty years the buildings and grounds were in need of repair. At first Admiral Rodgers had plans and estimates made for a complete renovation of the buildings and grounds. The estimated cost was so great that it was thought best to seek a new site and build a new observatory in a better location. After a thorough examination of the country around Washington, in which Admiral Rodgers took an active part, the Barber place of 70 acres, on Georgetown Heights, was chosen, and bought in 1880.

Admiral Rodgers urged the immediate building of the new observatory, and a board was appointed to consider the advisability of doing so. This board consisted of President Barnard, of Columbia University, chairman, and six associates of the Academy. Some of the scientific men in Washington opposed the change. They said the old site was healthful, and that it was a mistake to move out of the city. The board called for information on this question from medical men, and the report of Dr. John S. Billings settled the matter. The board recommended the building of a new observatory. The building was begun under Secretary Whitney, by Captain Phythian, in 1888, and was finished in 1893. Richard M. Hunt, of New York, was the architect. After a delay of eight years, the plans of Admiral Rodgers were thus brought to completion, though he was no longer living.

## JOHN RODGERS.

An important work of Admiral Rodgers in connection with the Naval Observatory should be mentioned. The library of the observatory needed enriching with rare books. He obtained from Congress an appropriation of \$1,000 a year, and this has made the library one of the best astronomical and mathematical libraries in the country.

As Admiral Rodgers grew old his reputation and ability brought him many duties. These he performed faithfully, and his great physical strength enabled him to do a great amount of work. Probably he undertook too much. Besides being Superintendent of the Naval Observatory, he was President of the *Transit of Venus Commission*, of the *Naval Advisory Board*, of the *Jeanette Relief Board*, and chairman of the *Light-house Board*. Secretary Folger, of the Treasury Department, says of his services on the *Light-house Board*:

“The board has received valuable aid from his sage advice and his constant counsel. Notwithstanding his great age and consequent infirmities, and pressure of his many duties, the Admiral has visited many light-stations, and has personally superintended and taken part in numerous experiments, many in acoustics and optics, conducted on the sea or in the laboratory, and has so impressed his individuality on the service that his name will live with it, and add luster to his repute in the future.”

The Admiral was taken ill in the winter of 1881-'82, and the disease soon assumed a fatal character. He was removed to the Barber house, on the site of the new observatory, and died there May 5, 1882, at the age of seventy years.

I am indebted to the memoir of Professor J. Russell Soley, U. S. N., for the outline of the professional services of Admiral Rodgers.

It was my good fortune to become acquainted with Admiral Rodgers in 1877, when he became Superintendent of the Naval Observatory. My first contact with him was rude. He came near taking off my official head, because of a complaint presented to him that I had not done my duty. He was a man of action, but he said, “We will wait a day or two.” and in this time the accusation proved to be false. This led to a more intimate acquaintance. I found the Admiral one of the grandest men I have ever known. His character was open, frank, and noble. He

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went straight forward in the path of duty perfectly fearless. He was ready to hear opposing argument with patience—in fact, rather liked it—and made up his mind fairly.

During the Admiral's fifty-four years of service, there is a record of only a few months of illness, and very little time was taken for rest and recuperation. Here was a genial, happy life, filled with the performance of duty.

After the storms and dangers of exploration and war, the Admiral passed away peacefully.

MARCH 15, 1906.