

Basic Detail Report



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Title

Captain Charles Wilkes

Date

c 1860

Medium

Photographic print on paper.

Dimensions

Mount: 148 x 114 mm Image: 86 x 55 mm

Name

Carte-de-visite

History

Captain Charles Wilkes was born in New York and entered naval service after completing his education at Columbia University in 1818. He became a lieutenant in 1826 and focused on survey and oceanographic work in North

American waters. Due to this experience, Wilkes was appointed to the Navy's Department of Charts and Instruments. In 1838 he was appointed Commander of the United States Exploring Expedition. With 5 ships, Wilkes left Virginia in March 1838 and headed down the east coast of South America, calling into Rio de Janeiro. He rounded Cape Horn and crossed the Pacific and called into Samoa and Sydney before turning south to explore Antarctica. Wilkes was the first explorer to ascertain that Antarctica was a separate continent and he mapped a large part of the eastern coastline. He then headed north to Fiji and Hawaii. In 1841 he explored the west coast of North America before crossing the Pacific again and returned to New York via the Cape of Good Hope. During the course of the voyage, Wilkes lost 2 ships and 28 men and was court-martialed upon his return. Although absolved for the loss of the ships and men, Wilkes was reprimanded for the harsh treatment of subordinates and for handing out illegal punishments. He undertook some more survey work but was mainly involved with writing the report of the voyage until 1861. At the outbreak of the American civil war in 1861, Wilkes was assigned the Union ship SAN JACINTO to search for the Confederate destroyer SUMTER. Whilst tailing the ship in November 1861 near Cuba, Wilkes forcibly removed two Confederate envoys bound for England from the British mail ship TRENT and took them to Boston. This action was initially commended by Congress but it strained Union relations with Britain, almost to the point of war between the two nations as Britain felt her sovereignty had been violated. Eventually the two envoys were released and allowed to continue their journey to Britain and diplomatic tensions were eased. Additionally, in 1862 Wilkes blockaded a port in Bermuda that was being used by the Confederates. Wilkes remained in port over a week, not allowing any ships to leave and

ordering his gunboats to fire on a British mail ship. His actions again strained tensions with Britain. Wilkes was promoted to Commander in 1864 but was again court-martialed that same year for insubordination, due to his falling out with Secretary of the Navy over the promotion. He was suspended for three years and reprimanded; however, President Lincoln reduced the suspension to one year. Wilkes was placed on the retired list in 1866 as a rear admiral.