

Union Gunboat Action on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, 1861-1864

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Prologue

Soon after shots were fired on Fort Sumpter in April 1861, the Union began sending army units to the trans Appalachian region and acquiring river gunboats and transports for use on the midwestern rivers. Use of these waterways would be essential in gaining control of the Confederate states west of the Appalachian Mountains. As soon as a few gunboats were available, patrols and reconnaissance missions were conducted to detect major Confederate defensive positions along the Mississippi River and its tributaries. There were only limited engagements with Confederate forces during 1861 as both sides began moving vessels and troops into the region.

In early 1862, Union forces in the west began operations to gain control of the rivers and supply lines so as to drive the Confederates from Kentucky and Tennessee. The initial focus was on capture of Confederate forts along the various rivers that prevented passage of river vessels. Control of the waterways was essential in the conduct of army campaigns against Confederate forces in the two states. The first objective was capture of Fort Henry on the Tennessee River by Naval Forces, Western Waters, under command of Flag Officer Andrew. H. Foote and the army of the District of Cairo (later the Army of Tennessee), under command of Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant. From there the Union captured Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River. In March and April, Union gunboats took part in the run-up to and the action during the battle of Shiloh (Pittsburg Landing) on the Tennessee River.

Once these forts were in Union hands, emphasis focused on clearing the Mississippi River. Battles for control of the Mississippi involved clearing Confederate fortifications moving upriver from the south and downriver from the north. By mid 1862 the river was open to the Union, except for the fortifications at Vicksburg. Vicksburg fell to the Union 4 July 1863, clearing the way for unhindered use of the Mississippi by Union warships and commerce.

Thereafter, major gunboat activities in the western rivers concentrated on providing artillery support for army actions along the river. When not engaged in these actions, the gunboats were assigned to convoy transports carrying freight and supplies to cities and army units, moving army troops up and down the rivers, disrupting Confederate army units and guerrilla actions along the river, preventing Confederate troops from crossing over the Tennessee River from the east, and moving prisoners downriver.

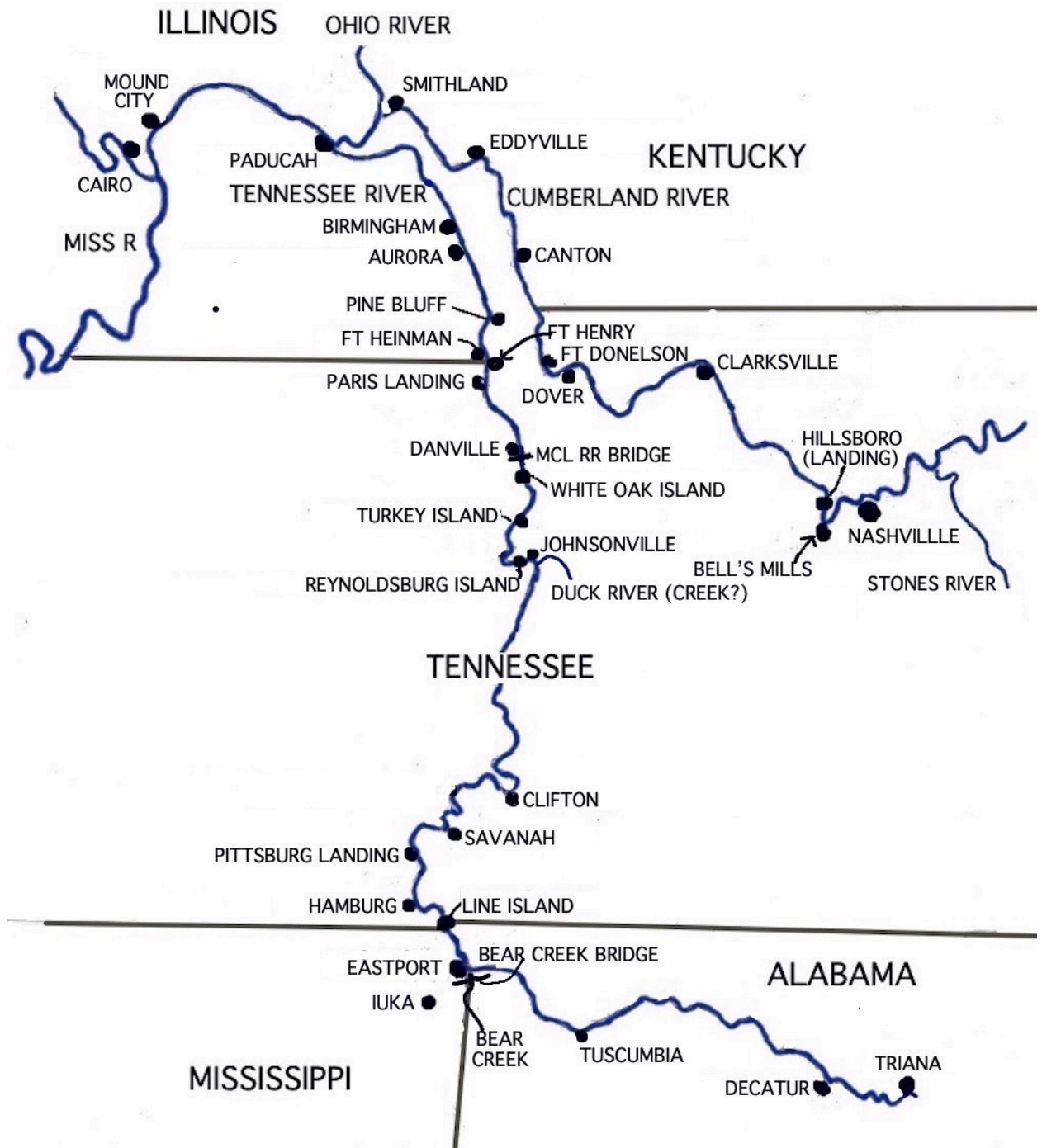
In this account, I describe only the major actions on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. On several occasions one or two gunboats were sent on expeditions, with limited engagements, or several gunboats sent out for short periods of time, also with limited action. I do not record these actions, nor do I attempt to explain how the gunboats arrived at the place from which they departed on each expedition. The purpose of this account is to record the details of the major engagements from early October 1861 through mid-December 1864.

I give the full rank and name of the gunboat commanders when first noted in each account. Thereafter, except for General and Flag officers, I refer to them only by their last name. Many of

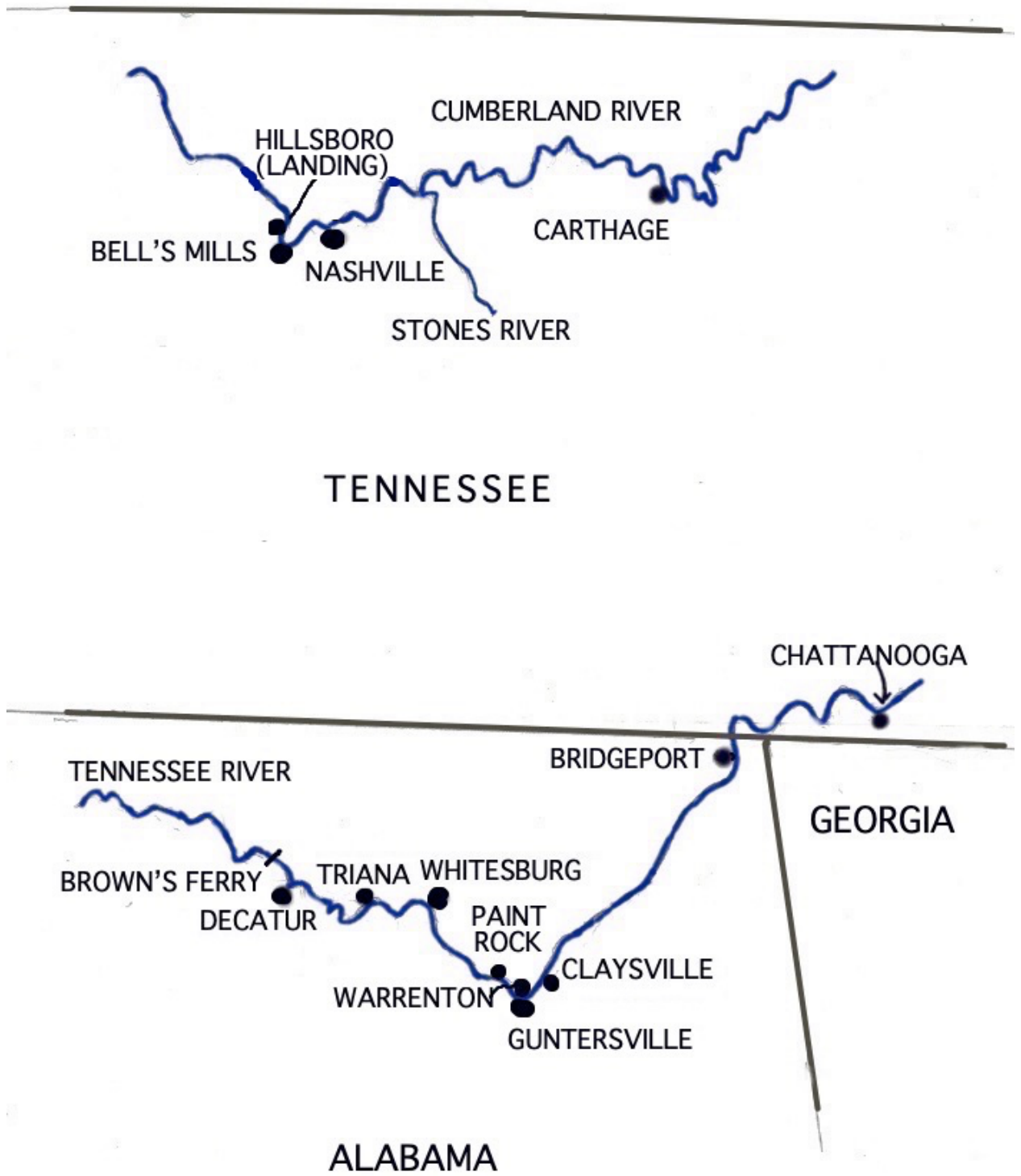
the ranks are so long (e.g., Acting Volunteer Lieutenant) as to be cumbersome if repeated each time the individual's name is used. The primary source for actions described in this account is the *Official Reports of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Government Printing Office, Series 1: Vol. 22 (1908), Vol. 23 (1910), Vol. 24 (1911), Vol. 25 (1912), Vol. 26 (1914)).

Maps

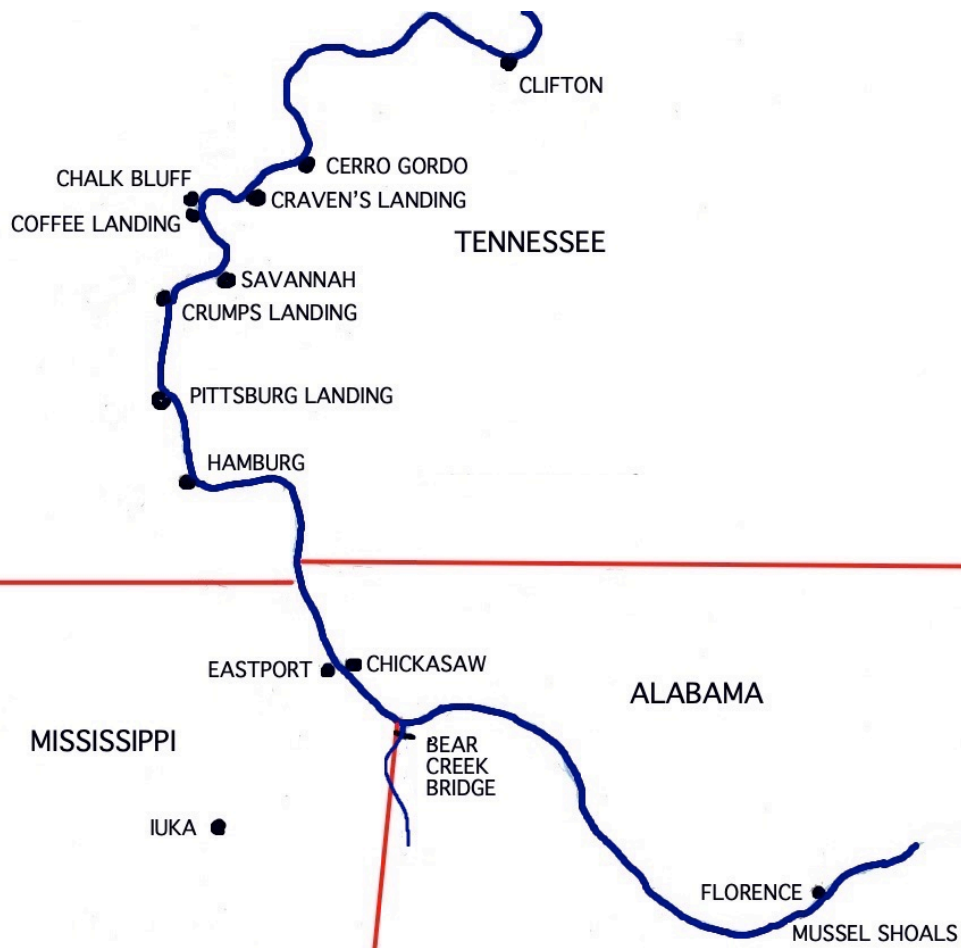
The below three maps show most of the locations mentioned in the reports. Some of the places referred to in the reports no longer exist or are recognized.



Western reaches of the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers



Western reaches of the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers



Places reported in the Battle of Shiloh (Pittsburg Landing)

1861

On 12 October 1861, Captain Andrew H. Foote, Commander of the Union Naval Forces, Western Rivers, sent Lieutenant Seth L. Phelps and *Conestoga* on a reconnaissance mission up the Tennessee River to determine the status of Confederate fortifications at Fort Henry. Phelps stopped about two and a half miles downriver from Ft. Henry. Although there was no fire from the fort, *Conestoga* took small arms fire from the adjacent shore. The enemy troops were dispersed

by a round from *Conestoga*. After completing his observations, Phelps rounded to and steamed back to Paducha to report to Commander Foote.

On the 14th, Phelps and *Conestoga* were sent out on another patrol, this time 60 miles up the Cumberland River. At that point Phelps rounded to, moved back down to Eddyville and anchored *Conestoga* for the night. The next morning, he returned to Paducha, reporting his observations of enemy activity along the river. Brigadier General Charles F. Smith, Commander of the 2nd Division, District of Cairo, came aboard *Conestoga* the 16th, as Phelps conducted another reconnaissance mission, this time up the Tennessee River. They went as far as Chain of Rocks [Note. I could not find the location of Chain of Rocks. It was somewhere below Aurora, Kentucky.] before returning to Paducha. The next morning, the 17th, *Conestoga* again went back up the Tennessee, this time to Aurora, where he seized the steam ferry boat *Henry*. This accomplished, Phelps rounded to and returned downriver to Paducha.

Phelps and *Conestoga*, on the 26th of October, convoyed the steamer *Lake Erie, No. 2*, transporting three companies of the Ninth Illinois Regiment Under command of Major J. J. Phillips, up the Cumberland to attack a Confederate camp located at Saratoga Springs, four miles behind Eddyville. In order to avoid detection by Confederate observers, instead of proceeding directly up the Cumberland, *Lake Erie, No. 2* went up the Ohio River, followed an hour later by *Conestoga*, towing two heavy barges. Upon reaching *Lake Erie, No. 2*, *Conestoga* cut loose the barges and took her in tow, with all her lights out, fires screened and engines stopped. *Conestoga* made it back to and into the Cumberland without anyone suspecting she had *Lake Erie, No. 2* in tow.

After having moved a safe distance up the river, the two vessels proceeded under full power, arriving two miles below Eddyville at 3:30 AM the 27th, seven miles from the Confederate camp. Once the army troops had disembarked and begun marching toward the camp, *Lake Erie, No. 2* was moved closer to the town. Phelps moved *Conestoga* up to Eddyville, where he quietly dropped anchor off the main street.

When Phelps felt the troops were about to reach the Confederate camp, he put ashore a landing party and placed pickets around Eddyville to prevent enemy troops from the camp fleeing into the town. Major Phillips attacked the fort at daylight routing the Confederates. At 10:00 AM the Union army troops reached Eddyville, bringing with them prisoners, captured supplies and horses that were loaded onto *Lake Erie, No. 2*. One hundred army troops were placed aboard *Conestoga*, the rest were put on *Lake Erie, No. 2*, for the trip down to Paducha.

On 5 November, *Conestoga* left on yet another reconnaissance expedition up Cumberland River. Phelps proceeded upriver to within a few miles of Dover, Tennessee, where he anchored for the night. On the way up *Conestoga* passed over a barricade of sunken stone boats (aging boats filled with stones and sunk in the river to create barricades) at Ingram's Shoals, seven miles above Eddyville and another, two miles below the Tennessee state line. Phelps remained overnight below Dover, returning *Conestoga* to Paducha the next morning to report the results of his trip to Captain Foote.

The evening of 16 November found *Conestoga* again moving up the Cumberland River. When he reached the state line, Phelps anchored for the night. The next morning, *Conestoga* descended to Canton, where she was fired upon by an artillery piece, positioned 50 yards from the shore on the outskirts of the town. *Conestoga* rounded to and used her stern gun to return the fire, but the cannon had been moved into the protection of a small ravine. Canister shells from *Conestoga* cleared the woods from which musket fire was coming. The enemy soldiers retreated into the ravine before the musketry could be reduced sufficiently to put ashore a landing party. By

then, the cannon had been withdrawn half a mile back from the river. From there the Confederates began firing on *Conestoga*. Return fire drove the Confederates back over the hills. Unable to capture the artillery piece, Phelps withdrew *Conestoga* back to Paducha. The only damage to the vessel were holes through the chimneys and one of the chimney wires carried away.

1862

Tennessee River

On 1 January 1862, recently promoted Flag Officer Foote assigned *Lexington* (Lieutenant James W. Shirk) to join Phelps and *Conestoga* in patrolling the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers. Their first mission took place on 16 January. Early that morning, the two gunboats, along with the transport, *F. W. Wilson*, carrying 500 infantry troops and artillery, moved up the Tennessee River, stopping for the night near the Tennessee state line. The next morning the flotilla continued upriver, stopping just below Ft. Henry to unmask a possible Confederate battery of two rifled cannon. Shell fire into the site drew no response. The two vessels also fired at Ft. Henry, but were too far away for any effect. The flotilla then withdrew down to Aurora, where the troops disembarked. *F. W. Wilson* continued on downstream while *Conestoga* and *Lexington* returned to within three and a half miles of Ft. Henry, anchoring there for the night. The next morning the two vessels returned downstream to Paducha, capturing a barge loaded with firewood on the way down.

Lexington left Paducha at 7:00 PM 19 January to convoy *F. V. Wilson* with a cargo of commissary supplies up the Tennessee River for troops, under command of General Smith, encamped at Crown Point, just above Aurora. The two vessels stopped at 3:00 AM the 20th at Aurora. They remained there until noon the 21st, when the two vessels went on up to Crown Point Landing. At the request of General Smith, Shirk continued on up to Ft. Henry to check out a report that the fort had been evacuated.

When within three miles of Ft. Henry, Shirk saw the Confederate gunboat, *Dunbar* steaming a mile and three quarters upstream. *Lexington* fired a 6-inch shot astern of her as she was rounding an island in the river. Shirk proceeded up to the foot of the island, where he again saw *Dunbar* and another steamer [reportedly thought to be the gunboat *Eastport*, but *Eastport* never served as a Confederate gun boat] at Ft. Henry. He stopped *Lexington* and threw several shells into the site she and *Conestoga* had fired into 17th. Again, no response. *Lexington* also fired into an encampment near the fort. Shirk waited a half hour in sight of the fort. Although the fort appeared to be occupied there was no response. Shirk then moved back downriver to report to General Smith.

The 22nd, General Smith and two of his staff came aboard *Lexington* and steamed with her up to within sight of Ft. Henry. There the vessel fired several shots and shells into the fort. Only one 32-pound shell was fired in response and it fell half a mile short. *Conestoga* moved on to within two miles of the fort, drawing a few shells from the fort and returning one. *Lexington* was not hit by fire from the fort. She then withdrew back to the Union camp at Crown Point, remaining there until 8:30 AM the 24th, before returning to Paducha.

Fort Henry

On 3 February 1862, Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote left Paducha, Kentucky, with four new ironclad gunboats, *Essex* (Commander David D. Porter), *Carondelet* (Commander Henry Walke), *Cincinnati* (Commander R. N. Stembel), and *St. Louis* (Lieutenant Leonard Paulding), along with three older wooden boats, *Tyler* (Lieutenant William Gwin), *Conestoga* (Lieutenant Seth L. Phelps) and *Lexington* (Lieutenant James W. Shirk) proceeded 65 miles up the Tennessee River as far as Pine Bluff, arriving there the same day, to assist in the anticipated attack on Ft. Henry. The older boats were under the command of Phelps. The flotilla accompanied seven transports carrying army troops for the ground attack on the fort. Flag Officer Foote went upriver on *Tyler*; upon arriving at Pine Bluff, he transferred his flag to *Cincinnati*. The gunboats remained there, ten miles below Ft. Henry, until the battle began.

At 12:30 PM the 6th, the gunboats moved to Ft. Henry and began firing on the fort. *Cincinnati*, *Essex*, *Carondelet*, and *St. Louis* fired from the middle of the river, *Conestoga*, *Tyler* and *Lexington*, astern and inshore of the armored boats. The boats opened fire when 1,700 yards out, continued firing, under slow steam, until within 600 yards of the fort. Fire from the gunboats and the eleven heavy guns of the fort increased in rapidity and accuracy as the range closed.

A rifled cannon shell burst near one of the Confederate guns, killing three men and disabling a number of others. One of the 32-pounder guns was struck by a heavy shell passing through the embrasure, disabling all the gunners and taking out the gun. A premature discharge of a 42-pounder gun killed three of the gunners and seriously injured the rest of the crew. Shortly afterwards the priming wire of a 10-inch Columbiad became jammed and broken in the vent. In spite of daring labor, under heavy Union fire, by a blacksmith, the wire could not be extracted from the vent, the gun remaining inoperable.

The Confederate gunners, seeing two of their eleven guns disabled, and their guns too light to inflict serious damage to the Union gunboats, ceased firing and began abandoning their posts. The fort commander, Brigadier General Lloyd Tilghman, rallied the men back to their guns.

Essex took a shell in her boilers, resulting in the scalding of 29 officers and crew, including Porter. *Essex*, unable to continue, dropped out of the line, astern. The other gunboats continued to receive counter fire as they approached closer to the fort. After an hour and a quarter of severe, closely contested action, five more Confederate guns were disabled. With only four guns left the fort's flag was struck at 2:30 PM and General Tilghman surrendered Ft. Henry to Flag Officer Foote. A report by a Ft. Henry gunner stated that fire from *Carondelet* caused more damage to their gun emplacements than all the other Union gunboats, combined.

The Union army troops were frustrated in their planned attack from the rear of Ft. Henry by extremely muddy roads and the high stage of the river, preventing their arrival until after the fort had surrendered to the navy. *Cincinnati*, along with the other three ironclads, *Essex* undertow by the transport *Alps*, left Ft. Henry the evening of the 6th, returning to Cairo, Illinois, arriving there the morning of the 7th.

Cincinnati was struck 31 times during the encounter, *Essex* 15 times, *St. Louis*, 7, and *Carondelet*, 9 or 10. The latter was struck five times on the plating of the bow, four within eight inches of the ports; once upon the bow, under water; once on the port broadside, cutting the timbers and planking; one taking away the port hammock nettings; one taking away a portion of the port awning stanchion; another cutting away the gig's falls. The other three boats were not hit by the Confederate guns.

One crewman on *Cincinnati* was killed, 8 wounded. Five of the 29 crewmen scalded on *Essex* succumbed to their injuries; three were reported missing. An additional nine army troops,

assisting in manning *Essex*, were scalded, four of them fatally. There was no casualty on the other five boats.

After Ft. Henry surrendered, Phelps, at 5:00 PM, the 6th was ordered by Flag Officer Foote to continue with *Conestoga*, *Tyler* and *Lexington* on up to the Memphis, Clarksville and Louisville Railroad bridge, 25 miles above the fort. The gunboats took musket fire from the shore at 7:00 PM, returning the fire as they steamed by. Arriving at the bridge, Phelps found it closed and the machinery for turning it disabled. A party was put ashore and within an hour was able to open the bridge. Phelps left *Tyler* at the bridge, telling Gwin to put a party ashore and destroy a portion of the railroad track and part of the trestlework. *Conestoga* and *Lexington* continued on upriver in pursuit of several Confederate steamers attempting to escape upstream. The Confederates burned three of them to prevent their capture.

Phelps' two gunboats continued on upriver, arriving at the landing at Cerro Gordo, Tennessee the night of the 7th. There, he captured the half-built gunboat, *Eastport*. Leaving *Tyler*, which had caught up with the other two vessels, to guard *Eastport*, *Conestoga* and *Lexington* moved on, passing Eastport, Mississippi soon after daylight the 8th. He seized two steamers, *Sallie Wood* and *Muscle*, near the state line, at Chickasaw, Alabama, and continued to Florence, Alabama, at the foot of Mussel Shoals. So as to avoid their capture, the Confederates were forced to burn three more of their transport steamers, loaded with military supplies. A landing force was put ashore to take on some of the enemy supplies it found there. What they could not take, were destroyed. In addition, the abandoned winter quarters of a Confederate regiment were burned.

The two gunboats returned to Cerro Gordo the night of the 8th, taking with them the two captured steamers. Leaving *Conestoga* to guard the captured vessels, *Tyler* and *Lexington* steamed back up to Savannah the 9th to destroy a Confederate encampment. Finding it had been abandoned the night before, a party was put ashore to burn the huts. The party back aboard, *Tyler* and *Lexington* rejoined *Conestoga* at Cerro Gordo. The three gunboats took under tow *Eastport*, *Sallie Wood* and *Muscle* and began the trip back downriver early morning the 10th. *Muscle* sprang a leak as they approached the Memphis, Clarksville and Louisville Railroad bridge at 12:15 PM, and had to be abandoned, along with her load of lumber. The boats passed Ft. Henry at 3:00 PM the 11th, passing Birmingham at 6:00 PM and arriving at Paducah later in the night.

Shiloh (Pittsburg Landing)

In late February, 1862 Gwin took *Tyler* on a reconnaissance mission up the Tennessee River as far as Eastport, Mississippi. He returned to Cairo 23 February, having confiscated a number of supplies, but was unable to destroy the Bear Creek railroad bridge because of nearby Confederate forces.

Tyler and *Lexington* were sent up again a week later. Upon passing Savannah at 12:00 midnight, 1 March, Gwin and Shirk learned that the Confederates had fortified the right bank of the river at Pittsburg Landing, nine miles above Savannah. The two officers moved their gunboats on up to attack the position. When within 1,200 yards of the landing, *Tyler* and *Lexington* were fired upon by six or eight field pieces. As the two gunboats came within 1,000 yards of the enemy position, they returned the fire, silencing the batteries. Two armed boats from each vessel landed sailors, along with army troops quartered on each of the gunboats, to determine the strength of the Confederate forces.

The landing force encountered heavy musket fire, resulting in a number of casualties: killed, 1 seaman and 2 soldiers; wounded, 5 seamen and 1 soldier; missing, 2 seamen and 1 soldier.

From the breastworks being constructed, it was obvious the Confederates were preparing a strong position at that point. Upon discovering that, in addition to the artillery, there were at least two Confederate infantry regiments and one cavalry regiment in the vicinity, the landing force returned to their boats. Gwin then sent Shirk and *Lexington*, along with the transport, *Izetta*, back to Cairo, while he remained at Savannah with *Tyler*. Gwin patrolled the upper river for next few days making observations of Confederate activities.

Rejoined by *Lexington*, below Savannah, the two vessels again began moving up the Tennessee River on 4 March, arriving at Savannah the 5th. The boats departed upriver early the next morning, coming within sight of Pittsburg Landing at 11:05 AM. After Gwin, under a flag of truce, received a written communication from the shore regarding exchange of prisoners, the boats rounded about and headed back downriver at 11:45. They reached Savannah at 12:00 noon, stopping for the night. *Tyler* went back to Danville, Tennessee to await arrival of General Grant's transports that would move the army up to Pittsburg Landing. *Lexington* moved on to Craven's Landing the morning of the 7th, remaining there the nights of the 7th and 8th, providing protection of Union forces from Confederate cavalry in the area. She ferried Union refugees from Craven's Landing and Chalk Bluff to Savannah the 8th and 9th.

Lexington moved back upriver to Pittsburg Landing the 9th of March. There, she fired into Confederate positions from 2:30 to 2:45 PM. Receiving no return fire, the gunboat, turned and steamed downriver, to tie up for the night. At 10:20 AM the 10th, she moved on to Craven's Landing, remaining there a few hours, before returning back to Savannah. Later in the day *Lexington* steamed down to Chalk Bluff to pick up ammunition, returning back to Savannah that evening.

Forty troop transports arrived at Danville the morning of 11 March and were convoyed upriver by *Tyler*, reaching Savannah that evening. At 11:45 PM the same night, *Tyler* and *Lexington* departed Savannah so as to arrive at Eastport by daylight to check out a reported Confederate battery erected across the river at Chickasaw. As the gunboats passed Pittsburg Landing at 1:50 AM the 12th, they fired into the enemy positions, but there was no return fire. When *Lexington* and *Tyler* arrived at Chickasaw, Alabama at 7:20 AM the 12th, they began firing on the enemy works, with the Confederates returning fire. The gunboats kept up the attack until the captains determined the strength of the battery—five guns (three rifled), of which four were at least 32-pounders.

At 8:30 AM, the gunboats turned and steamed down to Savannah, reaching there at 11:30 AM. The boats then moved to Crump's Landing, remaining there until the 15th. The morning of the 15th the two gunboats, once again, went up past Pittsburg Landing, rounding to and moving back down to Crumps Landing, firing into the Confederate position as they passed on the way up and down. *Tyler* remained at Crumps Landing guarding transports. *Lexington* left the morning of the 19th, to convoy transports to the mouth of the Tennessee River, arriving there the morning of the 22nd. As she went downriver, *Lexington* burned three ferries. She returned to Crump's Landing the 24th. From the 24th through the 5th of April, *Lexington* and *Tyler* continued moving up and down the river firing as they went in an attempt to develop Confederate positions.

The Confederates attacked Union forces at Pittsburg Landing early morning of 6 April. The Battle of Shiloh had begun. Leaving Crump's Landing at 9:25 AM the 6th, Gwin steamed *Tyler* one mile above Pittsburg Landing to support Union troops under command of Brigadier General Lewis Wallace, should they be forced back to the river. At 10:15 Shirk and *Lexington* joined him. With no word from General Wallace by 1:25 PM, all the while receiving cannon fire from the shore, Gwin sent an officer to Brigadier General Stephen A. Hurlbut, commanding troops

to the left, requesting permission to begin firing in support of his troops. The general sent back directions on how to fire so as to avoid hitting army positions. Both gunboats began firing at 2:50, silencing the Confederate batteries. The gunboats ceased firing at 3:50 PM and dropped back opposite Pittsburg Landing. Gwin sent a gunner ashore to get instructions from (now Major General) Grant as how best to support the adjacent army troops. General Grant told Gwin to use his best judgement. Gwin moved *Tyler* and *Lexington* three fourths of a mile above Pittsburg Landing and opened fire on Confederate artillery batteries on their right, that were firing on the gunboats. After 30 minutes of heavy fire, the enemy batteries were silenced. At 5:35 PM, the Confederate troops were moving back the left of the Union line, a half mile from the river. Both vessels opened fire with heavy, well-directed fire, silencing the supporting Confederate artillery fire and driving back the enemy troops. Beginning at 6:00 PM, *Tyler* fired into the enemy's right wing for 25 minutes.

At 9:00 PM, *Tyler* again opened fire, shelling, the Confederate right wing at intervals of ten minutes until 1:00 AM the 7th. She was then relieved by *Lexington*, which continued firing at 15-minute intervals until 5:00 AM. At 7:00 AM, Gwin received word from General Grant to cease firing so as not to put in danger the attacking army troops. The gunboats remained silent the rest of the day. By 5:35 PM the Confederates were forced to retreat. The Battle of Shiloh was over, a Union victory.

Following the Battle of Shiloh, gunboat activity moved to the Mississippi River and its tributary rivers. *Tyler* and *Lexington* were left to patrol the Tennessee River, with the other boats being withdrawn for deployment elsewhere. On the 17th, the two boats were ordered back to Cairo. Because of enemy activity along the upper Tennessee, however, *Tyler* and *Lexington* remained on station. The two vessels patrolled upriver as far as Florence on the 21st. There they captured the Confederate transport, *Alfred Robb*. Given she was in very good condition, Gwin outfitted her as a gunboat, with a howitzer from *Lexington* and one captured at Florence. He put her in charge of Second Master Jason Goudy with a ten-man crew and sent her with dispatches, down to Cairo. Gwin also renamed her *Lady Foote* in honor of Flag Officer Foote and his wife. Embarrassed, Flag Officer Foote directed Gwin to restore her original name.

Tyler and *Lexington* continued to patrol on the Tennessee River until replacement gunboats became available. At the end of May, both boats returned to Cairo. After repairs, *Lexington* was assigned to duty with the Mississippi fleet. *Tyler* was sent to Mound City for repairs, but finishing construction of the captured *Eastport*, necessary to put her in fighting condition, had tied up the repair facility. *Tyler* was ordered up to St. Louis on 3 June for repairs.

When *Tyler* and *Lexington* left the Tennessee River, *Alfred Robb* along with *General Pillow* (which had been captured from the Confederates and fitted out with two small cannon), under command of Lt Commander LeRoy Fitch, were sent as replacements. The water was too low, however, and the boats could not get above Duck Creek and were withdrawn back to Paducah. *Alfred Robb* was sent back to Cairo for repairs.

Cumberland River

Fort Donelson

Flag Officer Foote moved up the Cumberland River the morning of 12 February, taking with him the ironclads, *St. Louis*, *Louisville*, *Carondelet* and *Pittsburg* (Lieutenant Egbert

Thompson) along with the wooden gunboats *Tyler*, and *Conestoga*. He sent Walke and *Carondelet* on ahead upriver to Ft. Donelson to reconnoiter the situation. *Carondelet* arrived at the fort around 11:20 AM. Not seeing anything of the Union army, Walke fired a few shells into the fort so that General Grant would know he had arrived. After doing so, he dropped *Carondelet* a few miles downriver and anchored for the night.

The next morning, Walke again moved *Carondelet* back up to Ft. Donelson. Once there, he received a dispatch from General Grant notifying Walke that he had arrived and was positioning his artillery and troops in preparation for attacking Ft. Donelson. General Grant asked that Walke begin shelling the fort at 10:00 AM to provide a diversion from the army movements. Walke complied by throwing 139 shells into the fort. The Confederates responded with fire from all their batteries. Most shells passed over the gunboat, but two struck *Carondelet*. A 28-pound solid shot passed through the port casement, forward, glanced over the barricade at the boilers and again over the steam drum, burst the steam heater and fell into the engine room. Splinters slightly wounded half a dozen of the crewmen. Walke dropped downriver out of range, but, hearing firing in the vicinity of the fort, moved back up, firing another 45 shells into the fort. Return fire from the enemy gunners did no further damage to his vessel. Walke dropped back downriver, awaiting orders from Flag Officer Foote.

The six Union gunboats began their attack on Ft. Donelson at 3:00 PM the 14th, the four ironclads ahead, in battle line, the wooden boats trailing some distance to the rear. The intense shelling, up to less than 400 yards from the fort, continued for an hour and a half. The Confederates returned fire from at least 20 guns, four light guns located in the river battery and 16 heavy cannons in the hill batteries. The four Union gunboats could fire from only 12 of their bow guns.

The wheel of *St. Louis* and the tiller of *Louisville* were shot away, rendering the boats unmanageable. *St. Louis* received 59 shots, four between the “wind and water”; one in the pilot house, mortally wounding the pilot. Both boats drifted downstream, leaving *Carondelet* and *Pittsburg* and the wooden boats to carry on the fight. *St. Louis* and *Louisville* soon were heavily damaged by Confederate fire. One rifled cannon on *Carondelet* burst at about 5:00 PM. The vessel was struck 35 times during the engagement, the most serious, a shell striking the wheelhouse, jamming the wheel. In addition, an 8-inch shell from *Tyler* exploded a short distance astern of *Carondelet*, penetrating her casemating, but causing no serious damage or injury.

Pittsburg received 30 hits, including two large holes “between wind and water”, a 128-pound shot through the pilot house (but not injuring any of the four pilots), and another shot that entered the middle bow port, passed out the stern, in the process of so doing went through the cabin, cutting its way through a stack of hammocks and coal bags, escape pipe, and wheelhouse, but not touching a man. A solid shot fragmented a cast-iron chock, wounding two crewmen. Other damage included: shattered after casement, broken deck and beams under starboard side of the pilot house, and the signal and after flagstaff shot away. Heavily damaged, *Carondelet* and *Pittsburg*, along with the wooden boats, moved downriver and out of range of the fort’s batteries, joining the other two ironclads.

Fifty-four Union gunboat casualties were incurred during the engagement--*St. Louis*: killed, 2; wounded, 8, including Flag Officer Foote [in the foot!]; *Carondelet*: killed, 5, wounded, 28; *Pittsburg*: wounded, 2; *Louisville*: killed, 4, wounded, 5.

Flag Officer Foote estimated that had he been able to sustain the bombardment for another 15 minutes, Ft. Donelson would have been captured by the navy. Perhaps wishful thinking. The Confederate river battery gunners were seen to be abandoning their guns just as the two boats were

disabled. Upon observing *St. Louis* and *Louisville* leaving their positions, the gunners returned to their weapons and began firing heavily on the remaining Union gunboats.

Flag Officer Foote returned to Cairo with *St. Louis* and *Louisville*, leaving *Carondelet* and *Pittsburg* and the wooden boats, *Tyler* and *Conestoga* to protect the transports.

1863

During 1863 the western rivers gunboat activities concentrated on support of the battle for Vicksburg. Most of the river boat action on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers in 1863 involved reconnaissance missions and escorting transports carrying supplies and troops up the river. There were isolated calls for shelling of Confederate positions by one or more gunboats. The major such action took place on the Cumberland River in February.

A flotilla consisting of a fleet of transports and the gunboats *Lexington* (Lt Commander LeRoy Fitch), *Fairplay* (Acting Master G. J. Groves), *St. Clair* (Acting Master George W. Fouty), *Brilliant* (Acting Volunteer Lieutenant Charles G. Perkins), *Alfred Robb* (Acting Ensign Robert Wilkinson), and *Silver Lake* (Acting Ensign J. C. Coyle), under command of Fitch, departed Smithland Kentucky 3 February 1863 to proceed up the Cumberland. Twenty-four miles below Dover they met the steamer, *Wild Cat*, with a message from Colonel A. C. Harding, commandant of the post at Dover, informing Fitch that he was under attack. Another steamer, a short distance below the city, told Fitch the post was completely surrounded.

As soon as they arrived at the post, the gunboats began shelling the Confederate troops. Caught by surprise, enemy troops and the gunners began retreating without firing a shot at the gunboats. With the main body of Confederate troops dispersed, Fitch stationed *Alfred Robb* and *Silver Lake* below Dover and to throw shells in the town to prevent the troops from returning to carry off their wounded. *Lexington*, *Fairplay*, *St. Clair*, and *Brilliant* moved above the town to shell roads leading out to the east to harass retreating troops, killing and wounding a number of them. Shelling ceased at 11:00 PM, when Harding reported the Confederates had disappeared. The gunboats remained on guard there the rest of the night. The next day, the flotilla continued on to Nashville. The transports safely delivered, the gunboats returned to Smithland.

On 18 February, Fitch took *Lexington*, *Fairplay*, *St. Clair*, *Brilliant*, and *Alfred Robb* up the Tennessee River to attack Confederate batteries at Savannah and Tuscumbia Landing. On the way up the gunboats supported army actions at Clifton, Tennessee and Tuscumbia, Alabama before proceeding on up to Florence. The flotilla then returned to the Ohio River and up to Smithland, arriving there the 24th.

1864

Following the fall of Atlanta, Georgia to the Union on 2 September 1864, Major General William T. Sherman decided to abandon his supply chain and live off the land in the march to the sea. Defending several hundred miles of supply lines running through Kentucky and Tennessee would require the diversion of too many troops and thousands of unnecessary casualties. General Sherman left Major General George H. Thomas to protect Tennessee and act as his rear guard. After his unsuccessful attempt to protect Atlanta, Confederate Lieutenant General John B. Hood had hoped to prevent General Sherman from continuing on to the sea, by luring him into battle with attacks on his supply line. Foiled at this, General Hood, with the cooperation of Major

General Nathaniel Bedford Forrest's Calvary Corps, planned a major offensive north into Tennessee, defeat General Thomas, capture Nashville, and proceed on through Kentucky to as far north as the Ohio River. There ensued a number of maneuvering and minor battles between the Union and Confederate armies, culminating in the Battle of Franklin, Tennessee on 30 November.

The following account describes river gunboat support of the Union army in its engagements against Confederate forces leading up to and following the Battle of Franklin, Tennessee, 30 November 1864. The gunboat action took place on the Tennessee River between Paducah, Kentucky and Bridgeport, Alabama and on the Cumberland up as far as Carthage, Tennessee.

Tennessee River

Undine (Acting Master John L. Bryant) and *Key West* (Acting Volunteer Lieutenant Edward M. King) departed Clifton, Tennessee for Eastport, Mississippi at 1:00 PM, 9 October 1864 to escort the 111th and 120th Illinois Regiments, the 61st Colored Regiment and Battery G of the Second Missouri Light Artillery, under over all command of Colonel George B. Hoge, aboard the transports *City of Pekin*, *Aurora* and *Kenton*. Hoge planned on disembarking at Eastport, capturing the city and moving to Iuka, Mississippi destroying railroad tracks on the way.

Because of fuel shortages on the transports, the flotilla stopped several times for wood. The boats arrived off Eastport at 1:30 PM the 10th. As the gunboats steamed past some islands ten miles below Eastport, *Key West* signaled *Undine* "Cannot be too cautious. Keep in close order." When approaching Eastport, there was no indication of enemy troops or artillery on the hills overlooking the landing. King waved the transports to land and moved *Key West* to an anchor that commanded the roads into the landing. The army troops immediately began to disembark.

While the troops were going ashore, Colonel Hoge went aboard *Key West* and told King he was immediately moving to Iuka. As the Colonel was returning to his transport, a hidden battery of six rifled guns on the hill at Eastport and three rifled guns from nearby Chickasaw opened fire on the Union vessels. Several shells hit the transports, exploding a caisson on both *Aurora* and *Kenton*, setting the boats on fire and causing considerable confusion among the army troops. Several troops were burned and the captain of *Aurora* mortally wounded. Many of the soldiers jumped overboard to avoid the fire. A company of skirmishers that had been sent out returned to their boat, while other troops that had been forming up on the bank, broke and ran down the river. The guns of the Light Artillery, that had been put ashore, were abandoned. The three transports cut their lines and drifted downstream. *Aurora* and *Kenton* were afire and disabled while *Pekin City* took several hits.

Key West and *Undine* were both struck twice by rifled shells. One shell passed down through the boiler deck of *Key West*, bursting in the bag rack "near after part of the boilers." Another passed through the stercage and went on out the port side. On *Undine* a shell cut the port wheel rope and bell wires, as well as shooting away the after steam-escape valve and hog-chain brace near the cook's galley. Another round entered the starboard side through the boiler deck, passing through the cabin, cutting the deck, causing splinters to fly in all directions.

The gunboats returned fire immediately, keeping it up for 30 minutes as the Confederate shells exploded all around them. It soon became evident the smooth bore cannons of the gunboats were no match for rifled artillery. King gave orders for the gunboats to drop downriver and out of range of the shore batteries. King ordered Bryant to steam *Undine* down river in search of the transports, that were now out of sight. *Key West* remain behind, covering *City of Pekin* as she was

picking up survivors from the water. When reaching the transports, Bryant found that although their crews had put out the fires, both vessels remained disabled. He took *Undine* back upriver to report this information to King.

It was now near sundown. *Key West* began moving downstream, signaling to the other two vessels, "Follow the senior officer's movements.", which they did. The three vessels encountered the two transports drifting in the chute at Line Island. The crew of *Kenton* had temporarily repaired her steam pipe and had taken *Aurora* in tow. *Key West* dropped anchor and *Undine* came alongside. Colonel Hoge came aboard and requested King to convoy the transports to Hamburg. *City of Peking* took *Aurora* in tow and the flotilla departed downriver at 6:15 PM,

At Boyd's Landing, two houses were on fire, illuminating the river for some distance. Concerned something was not right, King ordered the other vessels to halt while he went ahead to shell the woods. Receiving no return fire, he signaled the others to proceed on. At Hamburg, King asked Colonel Hoge if he wanted to stop there. He replied, "proceed down the river as fast as possible."

At 10:20 PM, the boats passed Savannah, but 15 minutes later the fog became too dense to proceed safely. All the boats, except *Aurora*, anchored above Coffee Landing. *Aurora* tied up to the bank. The flotilla was underway again at 8:00 AM the 11th. The crew of *Aurora* had temporarily repaired her steam pipe during the night. She moved out with the other vessels on her own, under low steam.

At noon, the flotilla stopped for a short time at Clifton, before moving on downriver. The boats reached Johnsonville at 7:00 PM, where they anchored for the night. They left again at 9:00 AM the 12th, arriving off Paducah at sundown.

General Sherman, on 17 October, ordered another attempt to capture Eastport, Mississippi and requested Admiral Porter to supply an ironclad to support the operation. The river being too shallow for an ironclad, Admiral Porter asked that three shallow draft boats from Lt Commander James A. Greer's gunboat fleet---*General Thomas* (Acting Master Gilbert Morton), *General Grant* (Acting Master Joseph Watson), *General Burnside* (Lieutenant Commander Moreau Forrest)--- to patrol the Tennessee River as far up as Eastport and *Reindeer* (Acting Volunteer Lieutenant H. A. Glassford), daily between Bridgeport and Decatur, Alabama.

However, Greer's three gunboats already were upriver in the vicinity of Bridgeport and could not steam below Whitesburg because of low water over shoals at that point of the Tennessee River. These gunboats patrolled the river between Whitesburg and Bridgeport for the next ten days, to defend against Confederate attempts to ford the river at Claysville, Warrenton and Guntersville. The army gunboat, *Stone River* (captained by Naylor, rank and first name not recorded) patrolled from Decatur to Whitesburg.

A 12:00 AM the 28th, Brigadier General Robert S. Granger, Commander of the District of Tennessee, ordered Naylor to run the enemy battery at Brown's Ferry and engage the enemy batteries, at long range, from the rear. This Naylor did without any damage to his vessel. On the same day, *General Thomas* picked up rails at Paint Rock and Limestone, then headed downriver, with her crew at quarters. By this time the water at Whitesburg had risen sufficiently that *General Thomas*, with the aid of *General Grant*, was able pass on downriver. When she came along side *Stone River*, the two boats fired on the Confederate battery. The return fire did no damage because fire from nearby Union artillery caused severe damage and casualties among the Confederate works, causing fire on the gunboats to be wild.

When abreast of the battery, the two boats brought broadsides to bear on the battery, inflicting additional heavy losses. One shell from *Stone River* exploded a caisson, killing 17 men.

The onslaught of cannon fire on the Confederate positions was more than the artillery men could withstand. They abandoned their guns, some retreating to the main line of their army, others sought protection in the trees at the water's edge. The two gunboats, guns double-shotted with canister, fired into the woods from a distance of only 300 yards. Although the engagement lasted only half an hour, Confederate losses were heavy.

Damage to the Union boats was minimal. One shot went through the hull of *General Thomas*, another through the wheelhouse and two through the cabin, wounding three crewmen, one mortally. Total casualties for the two boats were two killed and eleven wounded. When the engagement was over, the gunboats passed on by the battery, anchoring at Decatur. Occasional picket firing at the gunboats continued during the night.

Sometime during the night, the Confederates removed their guns from the bank of the river, but musket fire continued from 4:00 to 8:00 AM the 29th. *General Thomas* left Decatur at 11:30 AM, patrolling upstream, returning to Decatur at 5:00 PM, once more heading back upriver at 7:45 PM. At 12:05 AM the 30th, off Triana, *General Thomas* was fired on by Confederate cavalry. The crew went to quarters and returned the fire. At 5:45 AM, she weighed anchor and started upstream, reaching Whitesburg at 7:30 PM. *General Thomas* departed Whitesburg at 2:45 AM, the 31st moving upriver until 11:30AM, then turned back downriver. On the way down, she stopped briefly at Triana, arriving back at Decatur at 10:15 PM.

While *Undine* was patrolling the Tennessee River near Johnsonville, on the morning of 30 October, Bryant was asked by the captain of the transport, *Ana*, to convoy her from Johnsonville downriver to below the Memphis, Clarksburg and Louisville Railroad bridge below Sandy Island. After completing the mission, *Undine* rounded about to return upstream to Johnsonville. As *Undine* arrived at the foot of Sandy Island, firing was heard downriver. Bryant rounded *Undine* to, returning downriver, clearing the boat for action. When *Undine* had continued as far as Paris Landing, a man on the shore hailed "Hallo, there, gunboat." Bryant stopped engines to respond. Immediately *Undine* came under fire from heavy artillery and infantry about 50 yards from the shore. *Undine* returned the fire and headed for the batteries, firing on them for 55 minutes at a range as close as 700 yards.

One of the Confederate shells shot off the escape pipe. Another passed in through the furnaces, knocking out the fire. Four shots went through the forward casements, killing two crewmen outright and mortally wounding two others. Bryant dropped farther down, out of range of the upper battery. She came to and the escape pipe was repaired by Acting Third Assistant Engineer J. W. Morton. While the repair was underway, Bryant warned transports who might be coming downriver of the enemy battery. *Undine* had not been at anchor more than ten minutes when she came under heavy musket fire from the west bank. This was returned by shrapnel shells from her broadsides.

While this action was taking place, the transport, *Venus*, came downriver. Bryant warned her by signals to keep out of danger, but she ignored them, continuing on. The upper battery and musketry open fire on *Venus* as she passed by. The boat incurred little damage, but her captain was killed. *Venus* came to anchor under cover of *Undine*. A request from *Venus* for a surgeon was turned down by Bryant because of the "incessant fire by musketry." Likewise, a request for cannon shells could not be met, because *Undine* did not have shells of the same caliber of *Venus'* guns. Bryant did send over 18 muskets and a box of ammunition he was unable to use for being short-handed.

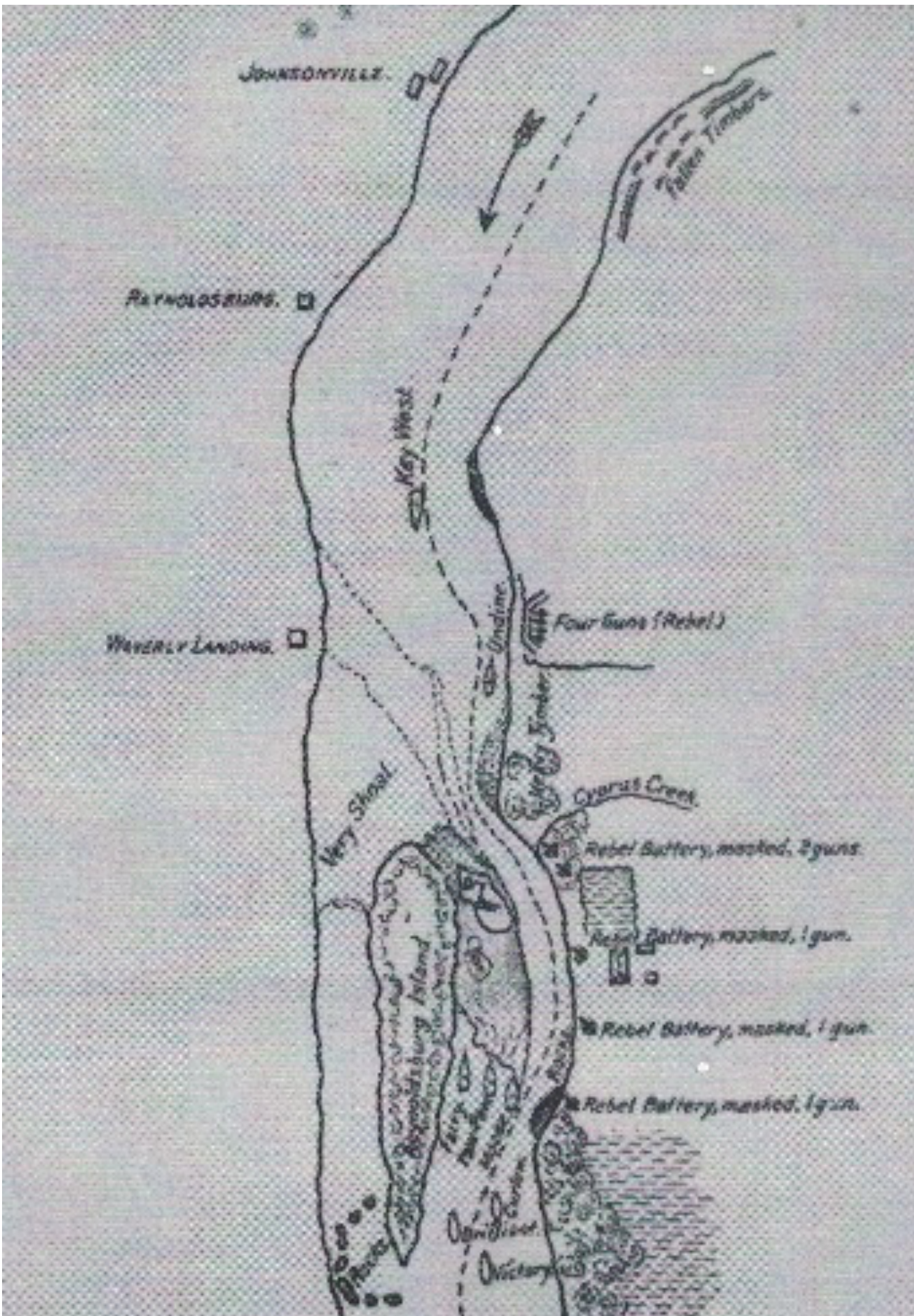
Twenty minutes after the arrival of *Venus*, the transport, *Cheeseman*, came down the river, towing a barge. She, too, ignored Bryant's signals, running under the batteries. When her steam pipe was shot off, *Cheeseman* headed for the west bank and struck her flag.

At 3:10 PM *Undine* was caught in a crossfire of cannon and muskets. She returned rapid fire with her broadsides, firing canister shells at a range of 100 yards, with good effects, into the infantry concealed in the bushes on the banks. Soon her firepower was reduced when the jamming of a blown charge rendered one of the howitzers inoperable. At 3:45, the main steam pipe in the doctor room cracked, filling the place with steam, driving the engineer from his station. *Undine* became unmanageable as Bryant headed her for the east bank so as to save as many of the crew as possible. Her flag was struck at 4:00 PM and the officers and crew were directed by Bryant to save themselves by "taking to the bush" on the bank. The Confederates on the opposite shore ignored her surrender, continuing to fire into the boat, killing several of the crewmen. Bryant fired one more broadside and ordered the guns spiked and the boat fired. Just as he ordered the men to save themselves, Bryant was "knocked senseless." Upon regaining consciousness, he followed his crew ashore. Unfortunately, with no exigency plans in place for such emergencies and owing to the confusion, the signal book was left aboard. With the boat abandoned, the Confederates took command of *Undine* and put out the fire.

Bryant and his crew hid out the rest of the afternoon, making way during the night to Pine Bluff, appearing there at 4:30 AM, the 31st. The crew then headed for Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River, arriving at the fort at 7:00 PM. The next morning, they left Fort Donelson on the steamer *Cuba* for Smithland, where Bryant and the crew disembarked at 8:00 PM. On 1 November, the crew boarded the gunboat, *Moose* for Paducah, reaching there at 8:00 AM the 2nd. From there Bryant reported to Mound City, Illinois.

On the morning of the 3rd, Fitch in *Moose*, accompanied by *Brilliant* (Acting Volunteer Lieutenant Charles G. Perkins) and *Victory* (Acting Master Frederick Read), left Paducah to overtake *Paw Paw* (Acting Master M. V. B. Haines), *Fairy* (Acting Ensign Charles Swendson), and *Curlew* (Acting Ensign H. B. O'Neill) under charge of Acting Volunteer Lieutenant Jason Goudy (in *Towah*), which had been sent upriver in advance. Just below Fort Heinman, the three gunboats met up with Goudy, who was lobbing shells into the hills to unmask any artillery batteries located there. Fitch directed that Goudy's boats fall back and form up with his boats so they could move up in "regular order", holding their fire until fired upon by enemy batteries. When they were not engaged, the flotilla moved 3-4 miles on up to Paris Landing. There he learned that General Forrest had moved his entire command, including 18 or 20 pieces of artillery, up to Johnsonville. He also had with him *Undine*, which was now in running order, and *Venus*, on which he had mounted two rifled 20-pounder Parrotts.

Fitch continued on, and upon seeing as he went under the Memphis, Clarksville and Louisville Railroad bridge, a Confederate cavalry force of 40-50 troops, he dispersed them by shell fire. As he moved on upriver, above Turkey Island and just below Green Bottom Bar, 30 miles above Fort Heinman, at 9:30 PM, Fitch came upon an enemy encampment. He fired into it, causing the troops to extinguish their fires. He then dropped back down six miles below Johnsonville, anchoring for the night at a point where there was no road on which the Confederates could move artillery in position to fire on the flotilla.



Map of Reynoldsburg Island, Tennessee River, 1864. (*Official Reports of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*; Government Printing Office, Series 1: Vol. 26, 1914).

Early the morning of the 4th, the Union gunboats proceeded up the river to the foot of Reynoldsburg Island. There, Fitch saw up ahead *Tawah* and *Elfin* (Acting Master A. F. Thompson) under the command of Acting Volunteer Lieutenant E. M. King in *Key West*. With them was *Venus*, which had been recaptured by *Tawah*. Fitch moved toward the boats, taking with him *Paw Paw* and *Fairy*, vessels with the longest range guns. The three gunboats moved up to the foot of the chute. There, they opened fire on a battery at the head of the chute, hoping to draw its fire so as to determine the caliber of the artillery pieces. There was no response as the Confederates had moved the artillery behind an embankment to protect the cannon from Union fire.

When Fitch's boats open fire, *Key West*, *Elfin* and *Tawah* started to move down to join up with the vessels below, but were prevented in doing so by a battery in the bend, just above the point. The battery commanded the upper end of the chute. *Moose* was unable to fire on this battery, hidden by a skirt of heavy timber. The battery fired some 30 shells in a 20-minute period at *Key West*. The gunboat took ten shells through her upper works, seven through the deck and two through the hull. The guns of both *Key West* and *Tawah* were disabled. *Key West* backed up, rounded to and, along with *Tawah* and *Elfin*, moved back upriver toward Johnsonville, arriving there at 10:00 AM.

At 2:00 PM, batteries above and below Johnsonville, opened up on the three Union boats. During the afternoon, the Confederates moved additional batteries to the river and fired on the transports at Johnsonville. *Key West*, *Tawah* and *Elfin* moved into position and fired upon the enemy positions. They engaged the Confederate batteries until most of their ammunition was exhausted and *Key West's* and *Tawah's* guns were disabled. It was obvious the gunboats could not hold out any longer. King ordered the gunboats and *Venus*, along with seven other transport, burned. The crews made their way to the fort at Johnsonville.

When Fitch had started up and *Key West* down, the chute, the Confederates set fire to *Undine* and abandoned her. Soon after she had burned down to the water, *Undine's* magazine exploded, destroying the vessel. There was not time for the Confederates to salvage her cannon.

Any attempt by Fitch to move up and engaged the shore batteries on Reynoldsburg Island would have put him within 50 yards of the two batteries. Further, the channel at that point was so narrow and the current so strong, that only one vessel at a time could pass, slowly. If one were to be disabled, she would lodge on the head of the bar directly in front of and less than 100 yards of the batteries. None of the other boats would be able to come to her assistance. Fitch could not take the risk of losing most of his boats in such an endeavor. Even if he had been able to dislodge the batteries, with no ground troops to solidify the position, the Confederates could move the guns quickly back in position. When the surviving boats of the Union flotilla attempted to move back downriver, the batteries would have fired into the sterns of the passing gunboats, most likely destroying the rest of them.

Sometime after dark, Fitch learned that General Forrest was moving some of his heavy guns below his position in an attempt keep the remaining Union gunboats from moving downriver. Before the artillery could be put in place, Fitch moved down to Paris Landing, where he anchored for the night.

After spending the day of the 5th of November refueling the boats with wood, Fitch in *Moose*, along with *Victory*, *Fairy*, *Paw Paw*, and *Brilliant*, attempted to start upriver again the 6th, but the wind was so strong the pilots were afraid of running the rocky bars. Rather than risking sinking the boats, the flotilla anchored for the night. As they got underway the morning of the 7th, when about 11 miles above Ft. Heinman, Fitch got word that General Forrest's forces were again moving toward Paris Landing. Leaving *Paw Paw* and *Victory* to obtain more detailed information, Fitch moved *Moose* and the other two boats back to Paris Landing to prevent a battery being moved there. At 4:00 PM *Paw Paw* and *Victory* rejoined the fleet.

The morning of the 8th all the boats except *Paw Paw*, which was out of fuel, once again moved out. Refueled, *Paw Paw* moved below Ft. Heinman to prevent General Forrest from bringing in batteries while the Union fleet was upriver. Upon reaching White Oak Island, 15 miles below Johnsonville, Fitch learned that the Confederates had positioned a battery there the night of the 4th. However, when the enemy discovered on the 5th that the Union boats had withdrawn back to near Ft. Heinman, General Forrest moved those artillery pieces back to Paris Landing. Fitch, therefore, was able to take the convoy, unmolested, on up to Johnsonville. After Fitch communicated with the commander of the post, he moved the flotilla back to Ft. Heinman and anchored until morning.

In going up to Johnsonville, the previous day, Fitch had realized his chances of successfully running the channel at White Oak Island was much less than he had realized. The channel was very narrow, running close under the left bank, with a strong current. Only one boat at a time could move through the chute. Boats moving through the chute would be within 20 yards of the enemy guns, most likely resulting in disablement of all boats attempting to pass by. There had been nine masked guns that could have fired on a single boat at a time, four directly in front, two broadside, and three directly in the rear. If the Confederates reoccupied the positions, there would be almost no chance of getting by the batteries. Fitch concluded nothing more could be done on the Tennessee without the presence of an ironclad. The navy could not support another expedition to Eastport. The proposed mission was abandoned.

At about this time, Fitch received reports that General Forrest was moving a heavy force to the Cumberland River in an attempt to prevent the Union from moving supplies up that river. Accordingly, Fitch moved his gunboats downriver to the Ohio River in preparation for sending them up the Cumberland.

Cumberland River

Following termination of action on the Tennessee River, Fitch moved *Moose* and *Brilliant* to the Cumberland river operations, leaving the other boats at Paducah so as to be available if needed on the Tennessee. The light drafts, *Springfield* (Acting Master Edmund Morgan), *Fairplay* (Acting Master George J. Groves), *Reindeer* (Acting Volunteer Lieutenant Henry A. Glassford), and *Silver Lake*, (Acting Master J. C. Coyle) and the ironclads *Carondelet* (Acting Master Charles W. Miller) and *Neosho* (Acting Volunteer Lieutenant Samuel Howard) were assigned to Fitch's Cumberland fleet.

At 3:00 PM 30 November 1864, Major General George H. Thomas telegraphed Acting Rear Admiral Samuel P. Lee, Commander of the Union Mississippi Squadron, asking assistance in convoying transports and patrolling the Cumberland River from the mouth up to Nashville. Admiral Lee ordered Fitch to carry out General Thomas' request. General Thomas further requested on 1 December that one ironclad be stationed at Clarksville. General Thomas informed

Fitch that, given he had no way of learning if General Hood might attempt to cross the Cumberland above Nashville, Fitch should patrol the river with at least one ironclad and two gunboats as far as Carthage, providing the channel is deep enough for the boats.

On 3 December, Fitch stationed *Carondelet* at Clarksville, so as to assist in repelling an attack on the right of the Union army resting on the river below Nashville. The rest, Fitch moved to Nashville, where he held them “in readiness to move wherever they might be required.” Fitch took *Moose* downriver and back several times during the day to ensure all was clear. In the afternoon, he dispatched *Springfield* to convoy some transports upriver and to cooperate with army gunboats.

At 9:00 PM, the 3rd, Fitch received word that the Hood’s left wing had struck the river and established artillery batteries at Bell’s Mills, about 18 miles by river below Nashville and had captured two Union transports, *Prairie State* and *Prima Donna*. Although the night was dark and clouds were rolling in, Fitch set out at once to recapture or destroy the transports. Fitch directed Howard to move *Neosho*, accompanied by *Brilliant*, down to Clarksville and relieve *Carondelet*, which returned to Nashville. The boats passed the Confederate batteries at Bell’s Mills without drawing fire. Once the Union gunboats were in position, Fitch moved his flotilla downriver (in the following order: *Carondelet*, *Fairplay*, *Moose*, *Reindeer*, and *Silver Lake*) to attack the enemy batteries

Miller was ordered to run *Carondelet* below the lower batteries, firing grape shot and canister as he went, round to and move back upstream, firing into the batteries as he passed them again. *Fairplay* trailed closely behind *Carondelet*, the other boats following. The boats moved down quietly, with no lights showing, unseen by the Confederates. When a little above the lower battery and a quarter of a mile below the upper battery *Carondelet* opened fire at 1:00 AM, the 4th. By that time, *Fairplay* was a little below the upper battery, *Moose* abreast of it and *Reindeer* about 50 yards above.

When *Carondelet* opened fire, the Confederates responded with a heavy volley of musket fire into the line of Union boats. The upper battery also engaged the gunboats. As this was going on, *Fairplay* had to hold up to keep from running into *Carondelet*. Smoke from the guns and smokestacks, as well as steam, was so dense the pilots could not see where they were running. *Moose* almost ran into *Fairplay* and had to stop. After *Carondelet* and *Fairplay* finally passed below the batteries, *Moose* was still lost in the smoke. The Confederate batteries were firing directly into the port quarter of *Moose*, such that she could not bring her guns to bear on the batteries. Musket fire from the banks and hillside also was a problem, but fire from *Moose* soon quietened it down.

Most of the fire from the upper battery, while rapid, went over the boats, mainly because the gunboats were so close to the guns. The river at this point was only 70-80 yards wide, placing the boats almost directly under the guns. Two percussion shells struck *Moose* slightly above the water line, another the wheel, neither doing much damage. Another came quartering from the battery, lodging in the bread room near the magazine, but did not explode. Yet another would have passed on through the bottom but was deflected when it struck one of the deck beams. It did not explode, either. *Silver Lake* was not close enough to engage the batteries, but fired into the bank, finally silencing the musketry fire.

Fitch directed the pilots to back up the boats out of the smoke. He was afraid that by this time, *Carondelet* and *Fairplay* had rounded to and were coming back upriver past the batteries, posing the threat of collisions in the dense smoke. Because *Moose* was taking heavy fire, it was too dangerous to attempt to round to, thus exposing her to even more damage. Although slowly

backing up, the pilots, John H. Ferrell and George W. Rowley, kept *Moose* in a position that allowed her guns to fire into the shore batteries, slowing their rate of fire.

When above the upper battery, Fitch was able to bring his port broadside and bow guns to bear on the Confederate position, silencing the enemy guns. Once *Reindeer* was above the upper battery, Glassford rounded to and pulled up alongside and lashed her to *Moose*. Fitch had hoped this would aid the two boats in firing on the enemy position. By this time, fire from the batteries had ceased. Fitch, knowing that *Carondelet* and *Fairplay* were in position to provide protection from below the batteries and take care of *Prairie State* and *Prima Donna*, which had been recaptured, decided to wait until daylight to continue the action.

At early daylight, *Neosho* and *Brilliant* moved up to join the other boats. There was no further action, however, as the Confederates had abandoned their positions during the night, taking the guns with them. Around 8:00 AM, Fitch moved *Moose* down to meet up with *Carondelet* and *Fairplay*. Since all was clear, Fitch returned to Nashville with the gunboats and two transports. In spite of all the musket fire and shelling from the batteries, the Union did not lose a single man and damage to the boats was minimal.

Reports of Individual Vessels

Below are the accounts of the actions of *Carondelet*, *Fairplay* and *Reindeer*, on the 3rd and 4th of December, as reported by their commanding officers. These provide more detail than is given in the summary of actions described above. There was no report from the other vessels.

Carondelet

Carondelet departed Hyde's Ferry, just below Nashville, at 11:15 PM 3 December, and proceeded downriver. At 1:00 AM the 4th, she encountered a Confederate battery of four guns on the south side of the river opposite Bell's Mills. Two Union transports, *Prairie State* and *Prima Donna*, that had been captured by the Confederates were tied up to the bank at that point. Enemy troops were observed unloading the transports. *Carondelet* opened fire on the enemy positions as she slowly steamed by. Once beyond the battery, *Carondelet* rounded to and moved back up to within about 300 yards of the guns, fired a few shots, passed up abreast of the battery and then dropped back downriver. The Confederates returned fire for about 20 minutes before moving their guns back away from the river. *Carondelet* moved back up to within range and continued firing sporadically at the enemy positions until 2:30 AM. She then moved downriver, went along-side the transports, chasing away the Confederate troops on board them, made fast to transports, and towed them to the opposite side of the river. Just as the transports had been tied up, *Fairplay* came alongside and both gunboats moved out into the river.

Carondelet waited until 5:30 AM, by which time the Union crewmen still aboard the transports were able to get up steam. *Carondelet* then dropped about 3½ miles downriver. There she found the steamer, *Magnet*, disabled by Confederate fire, tied up to the bank. *Carondelet* stayed there until *Magnet* could raise steam. *Carondelet* then proceeded upriver, with the transport alongside, to join up with Fitch and the other boats returning to Nashville.

Fairplay

Fairplay departed Nashville at 9:30 PM the 3rd, following *Carondelet* downriver. At 1:00 AM, opposite Bell's Mills, she received musket fire from the banks and heavy artillery fire from

a battery of four guns. *Fairplay* returned fire as she passed, continuing to do so until she turned the bend below and was out of range of the guns. At Hillsboro Landing, two miles below the lower battery, she encountered the transports, from which Confederate infantry were removing the cargo. *Fairplay* continued on down to join up with *Carondelet*, rounded to and accompanied the latter back up to the transports.

The two vessels fired on the infantrymen, driving them from their task. At 2:45 AM, *Fairplay* assisted *Carondelet* in moving the two transports to the opposite side of the river. Those of the Union crew still aboard the two transports set about repairing damage incurred when they were captured. *Fairplay* and *Carondelet* remained there until 4:00 AM, when they moved four miles downriver to the disabled transport, *Magnet*. She was soon put in order by her crew and at 6:00 AM, the two gunboats and *Magnet* proceeded upriver. They took with them *Prairie State* and *Prima Donna*, joined up with the rest of the gunboats and moved back to Nashville, arriving there at 2:00 PM.

Fairplay was struck twice by 12-pounder cannon fire during the engagement, one shell passing through the main and boiler decks, a few inches above the forward part of the boilers, cutting the escape pipe of the port engine. The other shell passed through the cabin below the pilot house. No serious damage was incurred as both passed completely through the vessel before exploding. *Fairplay* was also hit numerous times by musket fire and canister shells, but none of the crew was struck.

Reindeer

Reindeer got under way at 9:30 PM, the 3rd, following *Moose*, reaching Bell's Mills at 12:45 AM. There, she joined the other gunboats in firing on the Confederate batteries. Because the dense smoke made it impossible to determine the position of *Moose*, *Reindeer* had to suspend firing for fear of hitting her. The smoke also obscured the shore, causing *Reindeer* to go broadside to the current as she drifted downriver. To avoid colliding with *Moose*, Glassford steered his vessel into the shore, then swerved her around to move down stream, stern first. This maneuver exposed the gunboat to "raking fire" from the Confederate batteries but resulted in only a few splinters knocked from the wheel by an exploding shell.

As soon as *Reindeer* was in the clear, Glassford moved her upstream and rounded to and at 3:30 AM she was lashed to *Moose* to join the engagement. By that time, however, the Confederate batteries had withdrawn. The two vessels returned to Nashville, arriving there at 1:00 PM.

The seven gunboats remained at Nashville until needed again. On the 6th of December, Fitch went downriver in *Neosho*, with Glassford (*Reindeer*) in charge of a convoy, consisting some of the light boats and a number of transports, trailing 2-3 miles behind. When opposite of Bell's Mills, 18 miles below Nashville, *Neosho* began receiving heavy musket fire and a volley from 14 artillery pieces located above, abreast and below her. As she passed the upper battery, all her flag and signal staffs were shot away. The flag lay drooping over the wheelhouse. While the boat was still under fire, pilot John H. Ferrell and Quartermaster John Ditzenback went out of the pilot house, retrieved the flag and tied it to the stump of the signal staff, the tallest remaining mast. *Neosho* slowed and returned fire. For his actions, Ditzenback was awarded the Medal of Honor.

When abreast of the lower battery, *Neosho* rounded to and moved back upriver until opposite the middle battery. Because of the configuration of the river and the location of the enemy emplacements behind spurs of hills, this was the only place *Neosho* could bring to bear canister

fire into the batteries. The Confederate batteries were located such that only one gunboat at a time could effectively engage them.

Neosho fired grape and canister shot into the Confederate positions at a range of 20-30 yards. The fire was effective in driving away the sharpshooters and infantry, but was ineffective on the batteries, directly over the gunboats. The gunboats were so far under the batteries, that in order to clear the banks, it was impossible to keep from elevating over the enemy positions. At the same time *Neosho* received concentrated fire from the shore batteries. In a few minutes everything perishable on deck was completely demolished. In spite of receiving heavy fire, Fitch kept *Neosho* in this position for two and a half hours. Finally, because the Confederate shells were cutting away the summer pilot house, Fitch moved her on upriver to meet the convoy.

Realizing it would be impossible to steam the convoy past the enemy positions without losing several of the transports, Fitch turned the convoy about and steamed back to Nashville, the transports under the protection of *Fairplay* and *Silver Lake*. Fitch had the debris cleared from the deck of *Neosho* and moved back downriver, taking with him *Carondelet*. He had *Carondelet* tie up to the bank upstream of the upper battery, with instructions to hold its fire, until *Neosho* drew fire, exposing the enemy positions. *Neosho* moved down, all the way past the batteries before rounding to and moving back to her earlier position. On the way down, the battery opened fire on *Neosho*. *Carondelet* then engaged the batteries.

Toward dark, the Confederate batteries became silent. After dark, *Neosho* made another pass of the batteries, this time drew only two rounds of fire. Fitch then retired back upriver to tie up six miles below Nashville. Although *Neosho* had been hit more than a hundred times during the day, none of the crew was wounded.

From 7-15 December, severe weather and very low water prevented any action on the river below Nashville. This did not create a problem, however, as the role of the river gunboats was not to drive the Confederate batteries entirely from the river. Rather, they were to induce the batteries to remain until the army was ready to move on them. The Union army could not capture the guns so long as the Confederate army's left wing held its current position.

There was, however, gunboat action on the Cumberland above Nashville. On the 11th, *Brilliant* (under temporary command of Acting Master John H. Rice; Perkins was ill) and *Springfield* were sent upriver to Carthage to cooperate with Union army operations in that area. There were a number of steamers and barges near the mouth of Stones River after fuel wood. General J. L. Wood, Chief Quartermaster, wanted to get them back because the Confederates were bringing up batteries to capture the Union vessels. *Brilliant* and *Springfield* successfully escorted the steamers and barges back to Nashville that night. When the Confederate batteries moved into position the next morning, it was too late.

At daylight the 14th of December, Fitch led a convoy of gunboats (*Neosho*, *Carondelet*, *Moose*, *Reindeer*, *Fairplay*, *Brilliant*, and *Silver Lake*) downriver to the batteries at Bell's Mills. The purpose was "attracting the attention of the batteries" while the Union troops were moving to their rear. Fitch sent *Neosho* down below the batteries to feel their strength and then return to the convoy. *Neosho* engaged them, returning to report only four guns in position. Although these easily could have been taken out by the gunboats, the Union army was not yet in position to capture them. Fitch kept the gunboats moving around upriver of the batteries into the afternoon, until the Union cavalry was in position to the rear of the battery. He then sent *Neosho* and *Carondelet* down to fire into the enemy positions. After a few rounds from the gunboats, together with shells from the Union artillery, the Confederates realized their situation was untenable and tried to

remove their guns. Before they could do so, the Union cavalry moved in and captured the batteries, with little resistance.

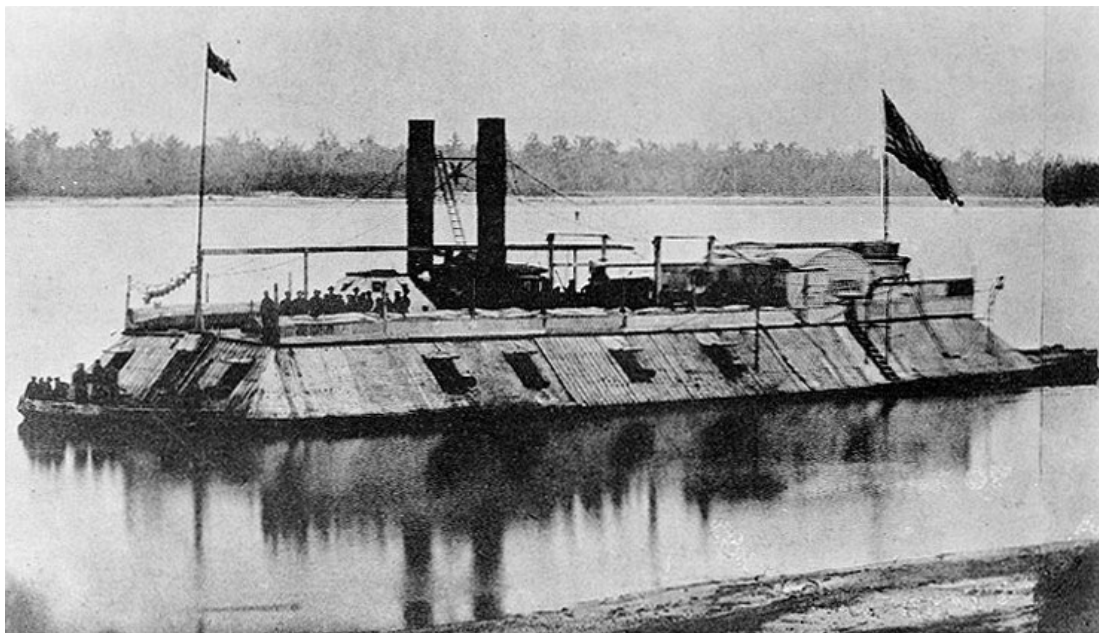
It was then rapidly becoming dark and Fitch withdrew a short distance upriver, remaining there the rest of the night. At daylight the next morning, it was obvious that the Union army was in possession of the field. The gunboats' mission completed, Fitch moved the gunboats back to Nashville. The action of the last two weeks incurred no loss of life and only six or eight men in the turret of *Neosho* were bruised and scratched when a shell exploded upon hitting the muzzle of one of the guns. Damage to the gunboats was minor.

Before the vessels left Nashville on the 14th, Fitch had sent Morgan and *Springfield* upriver to give him information regarding condition of affairs above Nashville. By the time Fitch had returned to Nashville, he still had not heard from Morgan. Fitch, therefore, ordered Glassford, with *Reindeer*, *Silver Lake* and *Fairplay*, to continue on a reconnaissance mission upriver as far as Stones river. The boats returned that night reporting that all was quiet.

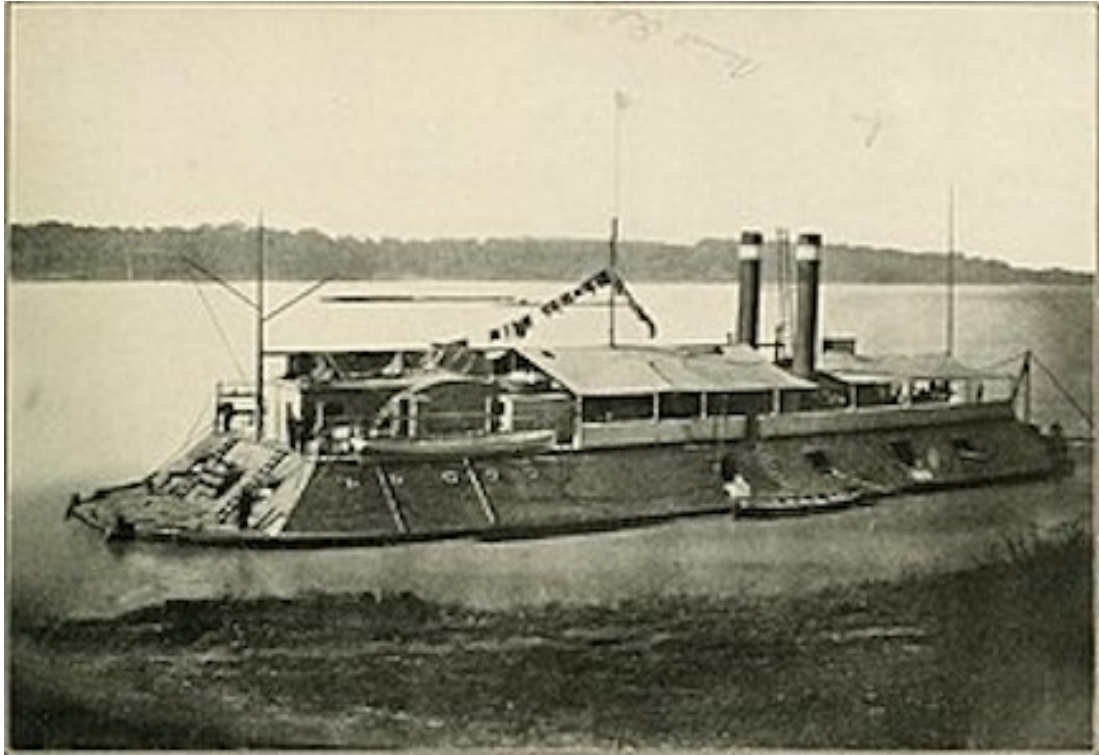
Epilogue

Following his defeat at the Battle of Franklin, General Hood continued his attacks on General Thomas' forces, culminating in his defeat at the Battle of Nashville, 15-16 December. General Hood then retreated to Mississippi, leaving Tennessee in Union hands. There was no more river boat action on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. For the Union Naval Forces, Western Waters, the war essentially was over.

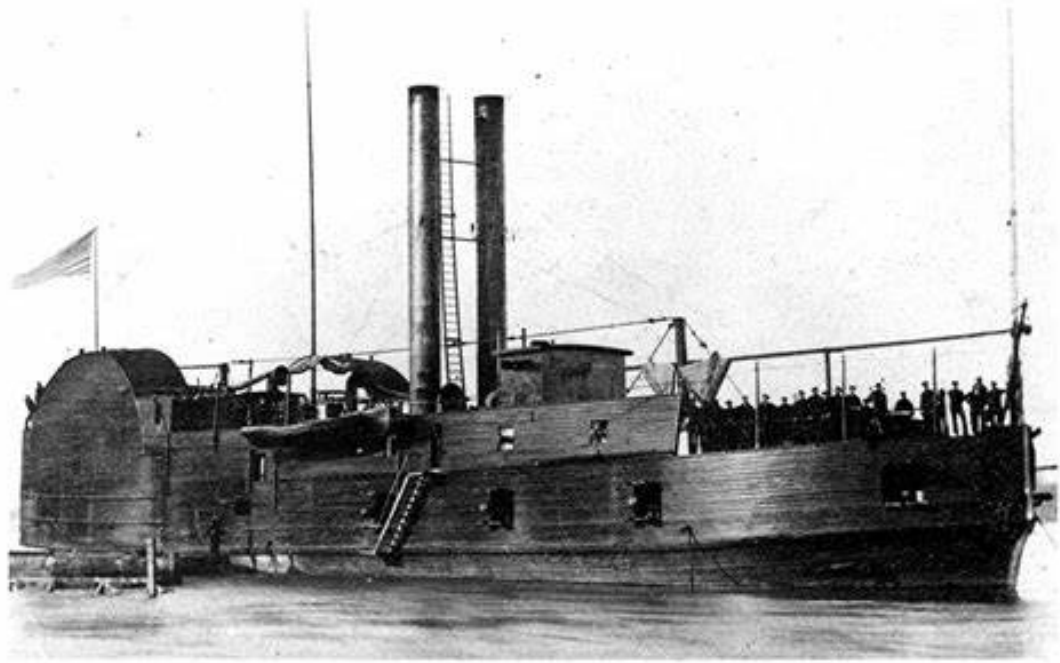
Gunboats



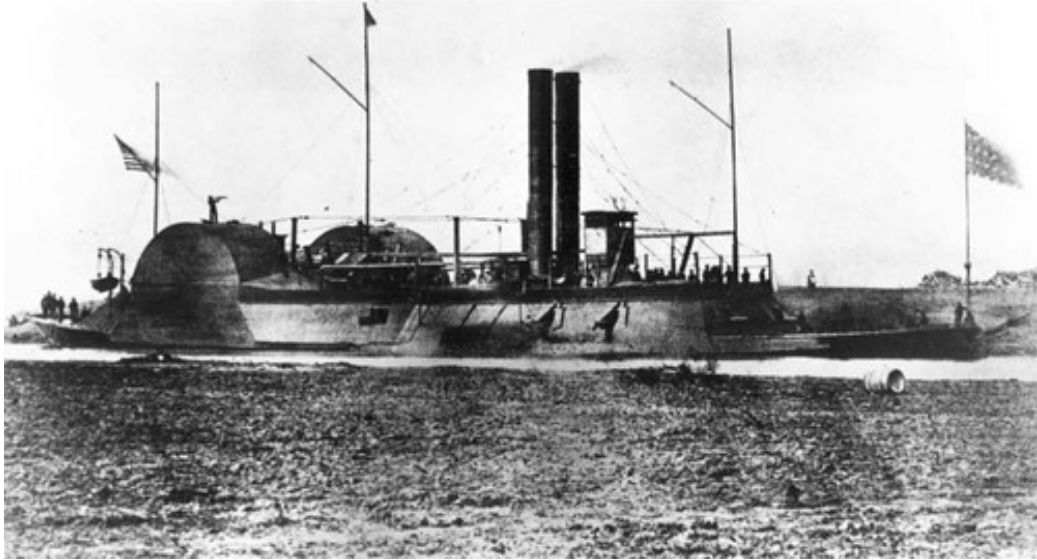
USS Carondelet



USS Cincinnati



USS Conestoga

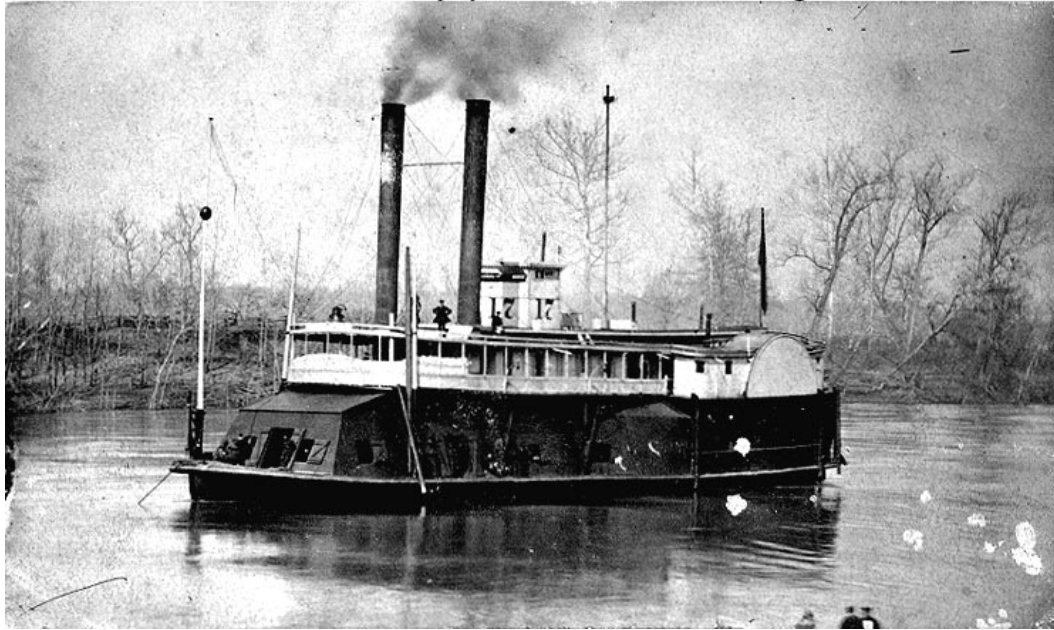


USS Eastport

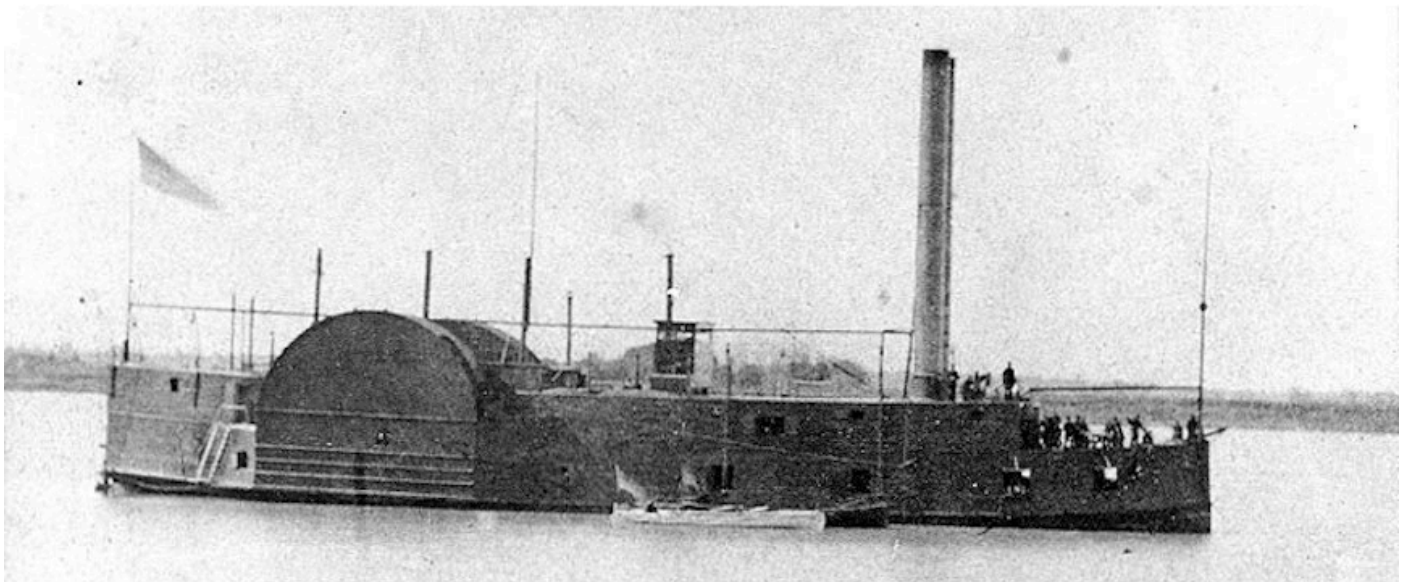


USS Essex

Photo # NH 91812 USS Fairplay on the Western Rivers during 1862-65

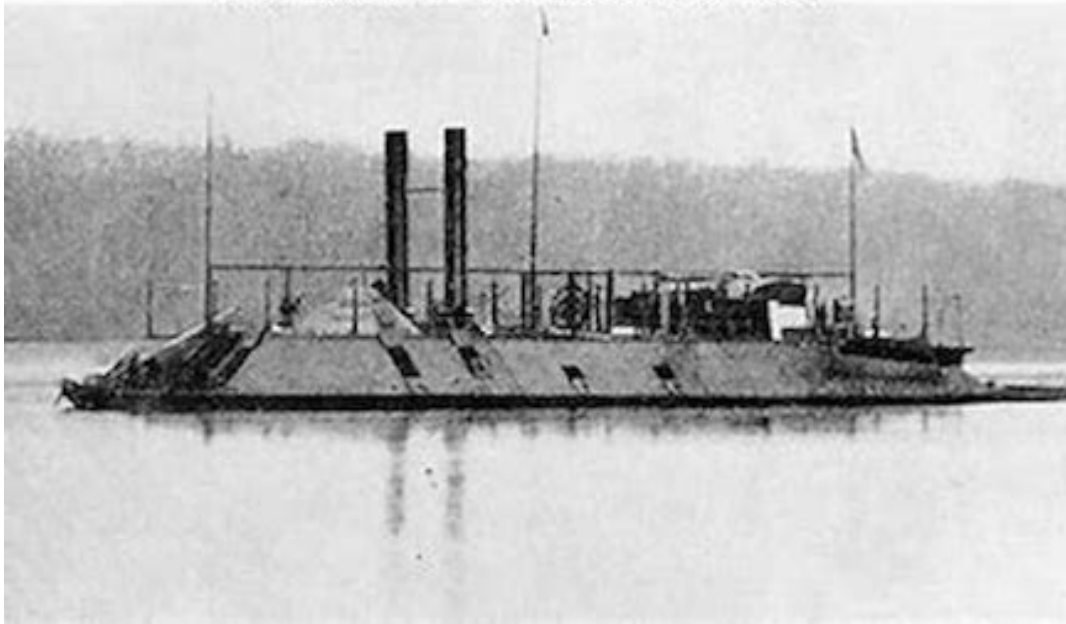


USS Fairplay



USS Lexington

Photo # NH 51426 USS Louisville (1862-1865)

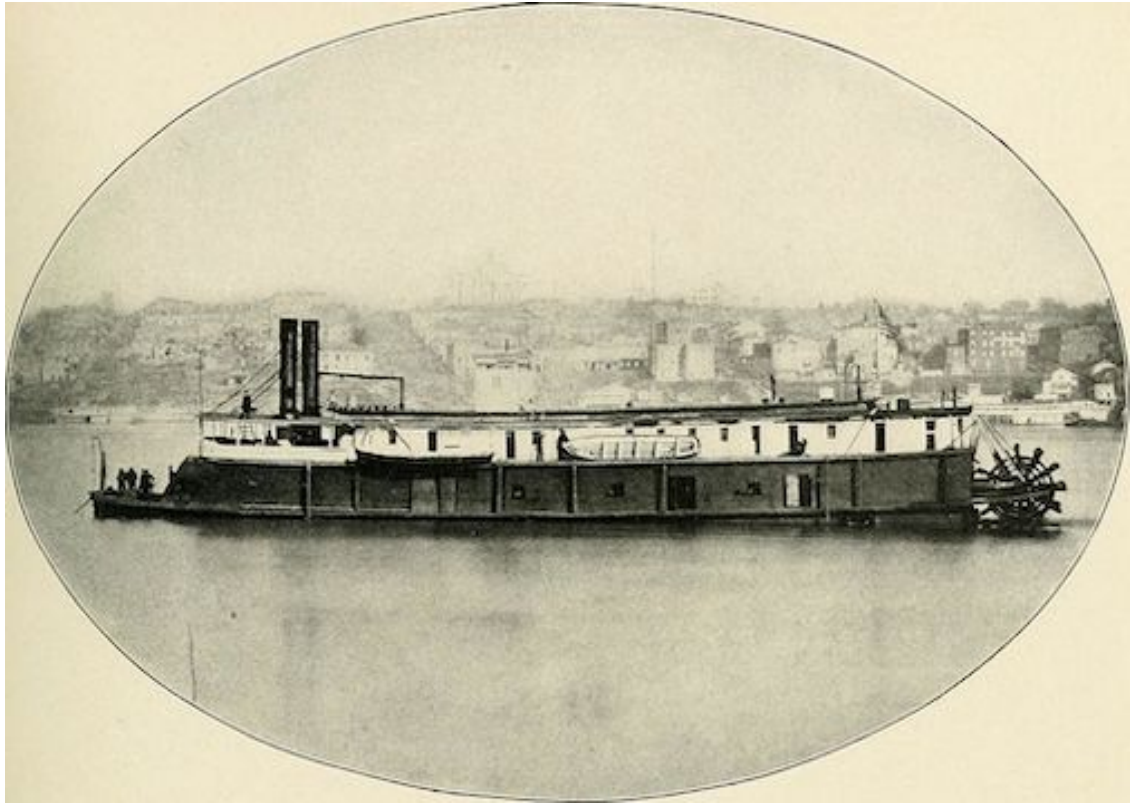


USS Louisville

Photo # NH 45557 USS Pittsburgh on the Western Rivers during the Civil War



USS Pittsburgh



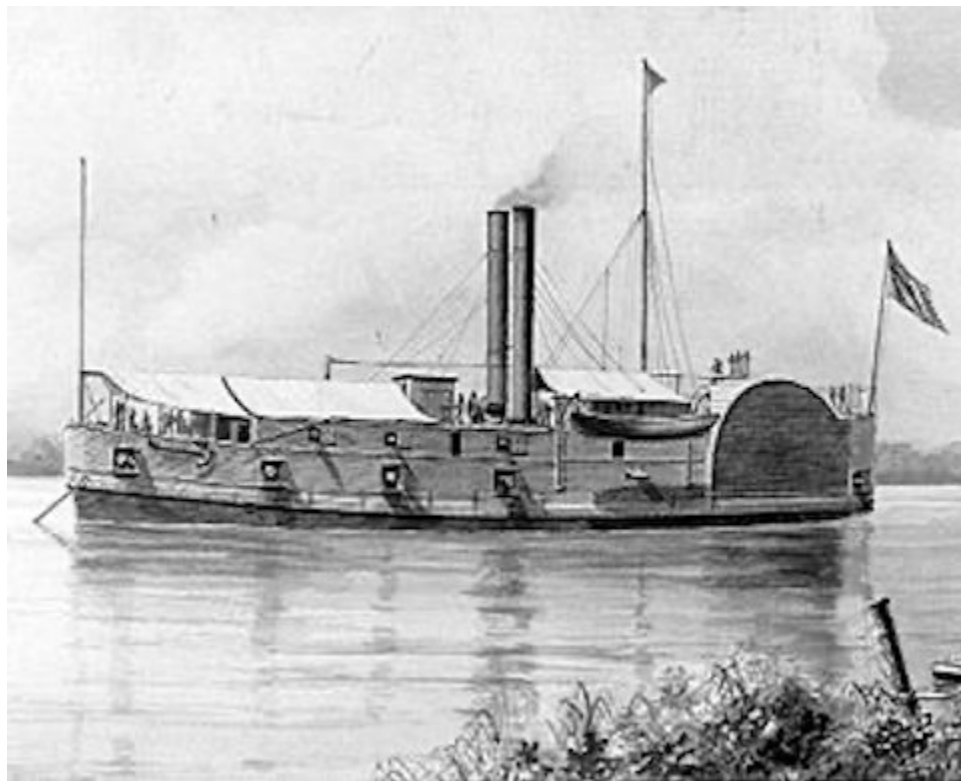
USS Silver Lake



USS St. Clair



USS St. Louis



USS Tyler

Boat Commanders



Commander LeRoy Fitch



Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote



Lt Commander Moreau Forrest



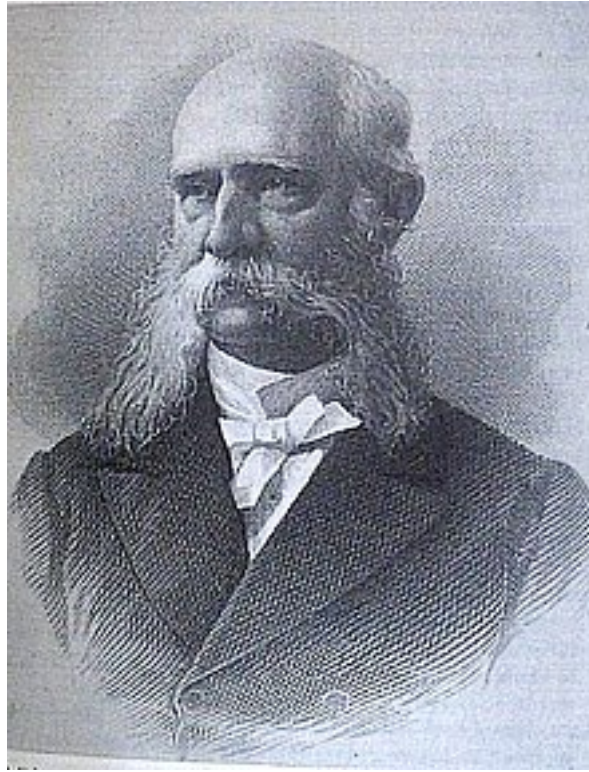
USS James A. Greer



Lieutenant William Gwin



Acting Rear Admiral Samuel P. Lee



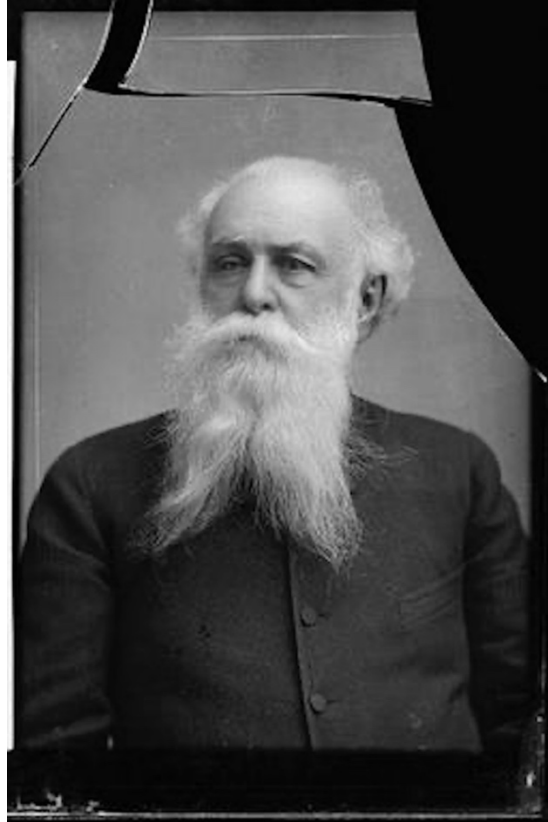
Lieutenant Seth L. Phelps



Commander David D. Porter



Lieutenant James Shirk



Commander Roger N. Stembel



Commander Henry Walke

