

The Battle of Elizabeth City

Lowell L. Getz

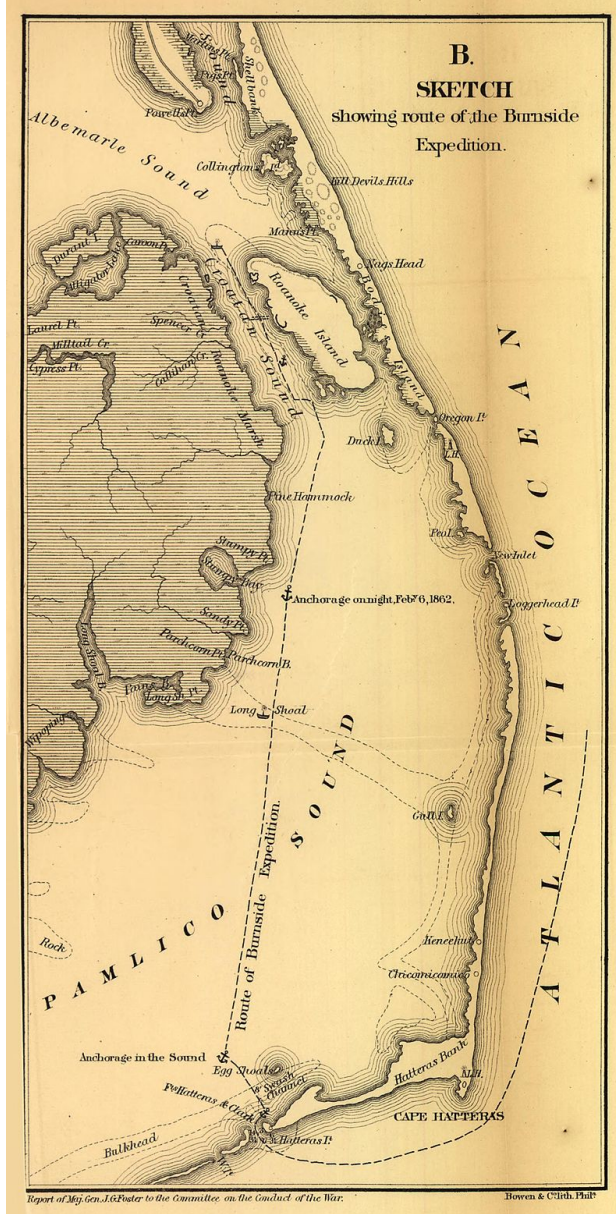
Prologue

By late January 1862, the Union North Atlantic Blockading Squadron had found its blockade of Norfolk, Virginia was not effective. Confederate water born cargoes could reach the city by sending in ships through openings in the barrier islands of the Outer Banks off the northern North Carolina and southern Virginia coasts. From there ships could travel up Pamlico Sound to Croatan Sound, on into Albemarle Sound, up the Pasquotank River to Elizabeth City, and through the Dismal Swamp canal to Norfolk. An alternat route was, from Albemarle Sound into the Nort River and up the Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal to Norfolk. Outgoing cargoes could escape Norfolk in the reverse order. The North Atlantic Blockading Squadron could not guard all passages through the Outer Banks.

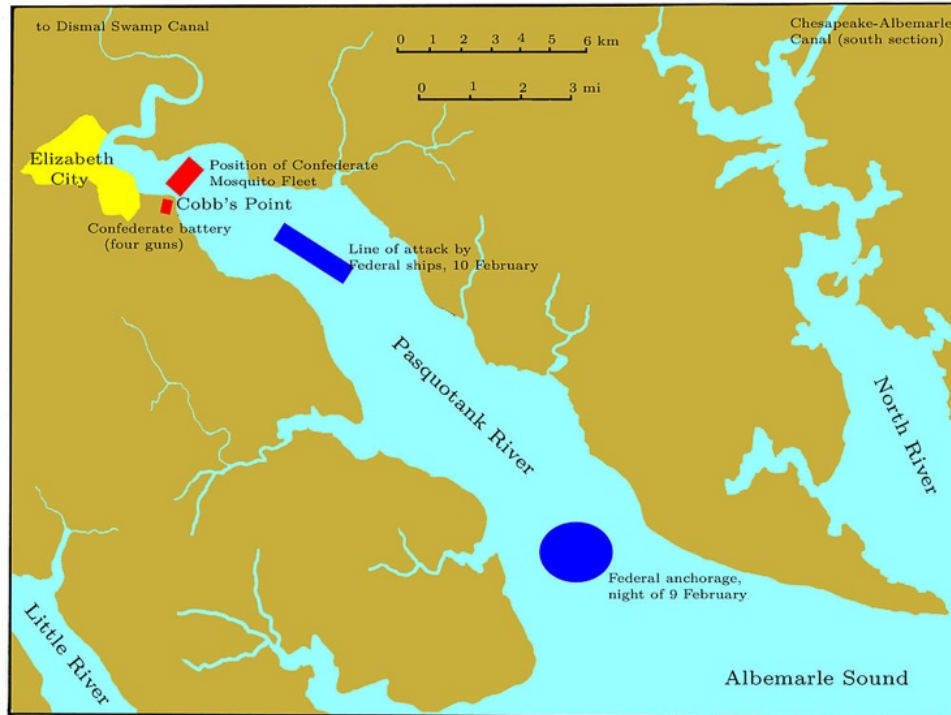
On February 7-8, 1862, the Union, in a combined army-navy amphibious operation, occupied Roanoke Island, adjacent to Croatan Sound. Roanoke Island commanded the channel through Croatan Sound, blocking this route to Norfolk. Of the eight Confederate gunboats on the Pasquotank River, the "Mosquito Fleet", all but one, escaped up the river to Elizabeth City. Although Roanoke Island was in Union hands, presence of the Mosquito Fleet remained a threat to its continued effectiveness in denying access to Norfolk harbor. The Union sent a flotilla of gunboats up to Virginia City the 10th of February in an attempt to destroy or capture the rest of the Mosquito Fleet, commanded by Flag Officer William F. Lynch. This account describes the engagement between the Union and Confederate gunboats on February 10 and 11, 1862.



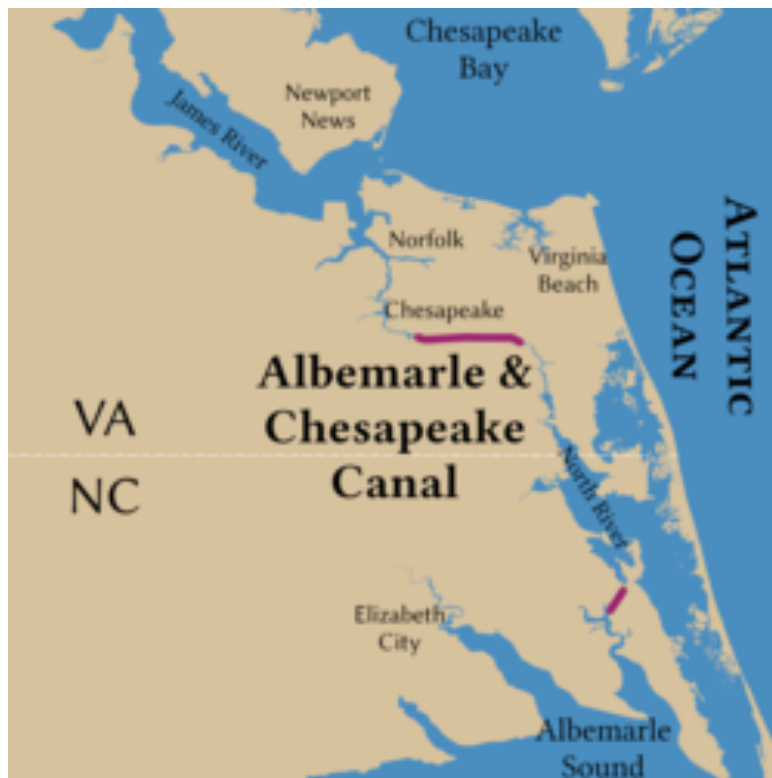
Map of the "back door" route in and out of Norfolk Harbor.
Red line, Dismal Swamp Canal.



Map of the Outer Banks through which seagoing vessels could enter and leave Norfolk Harbor.



Elizabeth City Battle map.



Albemarle and Chesapeake Canal, an alternate route to Norfolk, Virginia.

Introduction

I describe in detail, the actions of the Union gunboats as they engaged the Confederate vessels. In describing the actions during the engagements, I first provide a general account of events that took place, as reported by Commander Stephen C. Rowan, commander of the Union vessels. This is followed by detailed accounts of individual ships, as reported by captains of the involved vessels.

When first using the name of ship captains, other officers and crewmen, and civilians, I give the full name (when available) and the exact title/rank. For simplicity's sake, in subsequent references, I use an abbreviated rank and the last name: Lt, Cdr, Capt, FO, and Adm and Gen. When referring to ships' names, except in rare instances, I do not use the article "the" preceding the name. I do not attempt to define the specific parts of the ships that were damaged. Some are obvious, others not so. There are too many terms involved to provide definitions of all given in this account. Anyone so interested in the latter, can search the literature to identify the meaning of specific terms. The primary source for my data is the *Official Reports of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*. Government Printing Office, Series 1: Vol. 6. (1897)

General Account

On February 9, 1862, Flag Officer Louis M. Goldsborough, commander of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, learned that Confederate steamers that had escaped from Roanoke Island had gone up the Pasquotank River to Elizabeth City, Virginia. He immediately ordered Commander Stephen C. Rowan to take fourteen Union gunboats, from those at anchor off Roanoke Island, and proceed upstream to destroy or capture the enemy vessels. The Union vessels were: *Louisiana* (Lieutenant A. Murray), *Hetzel* (Lieutenant H. K. Davenport), *Underwriter* (Lieutenant William N. Jeffers), *Delaware* (Lieutenant S. P. Quackenbush), *Commodore Perry* (Lieutenant C. W. Flusser), *Valley City* (Lieutenant J. C. Chaplin), *Morse* (Acting Master Peter Hayes), *Isaac N Seymour* (Acting Master F. S. Wells), *Whitehead* (Acting Master Charles A. French), *John L Lockwood* (Acting Master G. W. Graves), *Ceres* (Acting Master John MacDiarmid), *Shawsheen* (Acting Master Thomas J. Woodward), *Henry Brinker* (Acting Master John E. Giddings), *General Putnam* (Acting Master William J. Hotchkiss).

The flotilla entered Albemarle Sound at 3:00 PM the 9th. As the gunboats entered the sound, smoke from two Confederate gunboats was observed in close to the opposite shore, apparently heading for the Pasquotank River. Cdr Rowan signaled to give chase and cut them off, but the steamers made it into the river before the Union vessels could reach them. Because darkness was approaching, Cdr Rowan called off the chase. The flotilla then steamed slowly over the bar and up the Pasquotank River to within ten miles of Cobb's Point, where the vessels went to anchor at 8:06 PM.

As soon as the ships were secured, Cdr Rowan called the commissioned officers aboard the flag ship, *Delaware*, and informed them the enemy vessels either were at anchor behind the battery on Cobb's Point or had escaped through the Dismal Swamp Canal to Norfolk. He reminded them of the "embarrassment" with regard to the short supply of ammunition, only 20

rounds for each gun. Cdr Rowan proposed a reconnaissance in force, to be changed to an attack, if “deemed prudent.” He told the captains not to fire a single shot until he gave the order to fire. Cdr Rowan further emphasized that, to conserve ammunition, each gunboat should try to run down the enemy vessels, engaging them in hand-to-hand combat.

At daylight, the 10th, the Union flotilla weighed anchor and proceeded upriver. *Underwriter*, *Commodore Perry*, *Morse*, and *Delaware*, in that order, with *Ceres* on their right flank, took the lead to reconnoiter the situation. They were followed by the rest of the force, led by *Louisiana* and *Hetzel*; *Valley City* and *Whitehead* remained at anchor until the other ships had passed Cobb’s Point. Then, they steamed up and engaged the battery “in reverse.”

At 7:30 AM, several Confederate steamers were seen retreating upriver. At 8:00, the battery at Cobb’s Point came in view. At 8:30 AM, five of the seven Confederate steamers that had escaped the battle of Roanoke Island (*Beaufort*, *Ellis*, *Fanny*, *Sea Bird*, and *Appomattox*) were behind the Cobb’s Point battery (consisting of four heavy 32-pounders). [The other two: *Raleigh* had been sent up the Dismal Swamp Canal to expedite ammunition supplies from Norfolk on the 9th and *Forrest*, which had been disabled on the 7th in the Battle for Roanoke Island, was in the ways for repairs.] The schooner, *Black Warrior*, armed with two heavy 32-pounders, was at anchor on the opposite side of the river.

The rest of the Confederate ships were lined up diagonally across the river in front of Elizabeth City, with the right end up against the battery. Because Lt Parker and most of the crew of *Beaufort* had been sent ashore to man the battery at Cobb’s Point, there were insufficient crewmen to man her guns. As the Union gunboats came in sight, FO Lynch had her move up the Dismal Swamp Canal to Norfolk. When the lead vessels of the Union flotilla were within two miles of the steamers, the guns of the battery and *Black Warrior* opened fire. They soon were joined in by the 80-pounder and 12-pounder rifles of the Confederate steamers.

The Union vessels continued on steadily, without firing, as shot and shell fell all around and among the advancing gunboats. When the lead vessel was within three quarters of a mile of the battery on Cobb’s Point, Cdr Rowan signaled, “Commence firing and dash the battery.” The Union vessels advanced at “their utmost speed”, firing with “telling effect”, on the enemy, as the gunboats charged the Confederates.

The crew of *Black Warrior* panicked, set fire to her and abandoned ship. Fort Cobb was abandoned as the column of warships past by it. *Commander Perry* ran down FO Lynch’s flagship, *Sea Bird*, sinking her and taking prisoner the officers and crewmen. *Underwriter* tried to cut off the retreat of *Beaufort*, but she escaped up the canal. *Ceres* steamed ahead and captured *Ellis*. Some of *Ellis*’ crew were killed and wounded by musketry from *Ceres* as they attempted to escape on shore. *Delaware* boarded the abandoned and burning *Fanny*, taking her flag. *Appomattox* escaped up the canal to Norfolk.

Three of the Union vessels (*Underwriter*, *Delaware* and *Valley City*) ran on up the river to Elizabeth City and pulled in alongside the wharves. A battery of field artillery was seen retreating down the street. A party of ship crewmen went ashore and encountered a mounted artillery officer (a Lieutenant Scruggs), who was compelling town’s people to set fire to their houses. He had been ordered to do so by the commander of the defenses of Elizabeth City, Colonel [although addressed as “General” because of his history as a mercenary in civil wars in Spain, Circassia and Hungary.] Frederick Henningsen. The shore party arrested Lt Scruggs and took him back to the flagship. Men and women came down to the wharf to implore of Cdr Rowan to put out the fires

and save their houses and property from destruction. Cdr Rowan did not allow any crewmen ashore to extinguish the flames, for fear they would be blamed for setting fire to the houses. No other houses were set afire, however.

Later, Cdr Rowan sent men to break into the commissary storehouse and bring stores of fresh beef, bread and flour to the Union ships. *Forrest*, along with a smaller vessel were burned in the shipyard. Engineers were sent to destroy the machinery, boilers and railway associated with the shipyard. During the following three days, the machinery of *Fanny* and *Sea Bird* was destroyed and as much of their armament and ordinance stores that could be recovered, were put aboard the Union gunboats. Lt Flusser was placed in charge of destroying the Cobb's Point battery. He also brought off a large amount of powder, powder tanks, and projectiles.

Ship Reports

[Note. *Ceres* (Acting Master MacDiarmid) and *Isaac N Seymore* (Acting Master Wells) did not file reports.]

Hetzel (Lieutenant H. K. Davenport)

Hetzel, along with the other gunboats, got underway at 6:50 AM, the 10th, and headed upriver. As soon as the Union vessels came into view, little after 8:00 AM, the Confederate flotilla and the battery at Cobb's Point began firing at them. *Hetzel* kept moving upriver. When Cdr Rowan signaled to make a mad dash and begin firing, *Hetzel* could not, at first, fire on the enemy. Her placement in the battle line and narrowness of the stream, would endanger the Union vessels ahead of her, should she fire. Eventually, she was able to get off two shots at the battery and one at *Black Warrior*, all the while enemy shells were falling all around her.

At 9:25, cease fire was signaled, the Cobb's Point battery having been abandoned and the enemy steamers captured, sunk or escaped up the Dismal Swamp Canal. At 9:45, a surgeon came aboard *Hetzel* to attend to 18 year-old Acting Midshipman William C. Jackson, from *Ellis*, who had been wounded while attempting to escape to the shore. He died at 10:15 PM that night and was buried ashore the next morning, with full honors, by crewmen from *Hetzel*. At 9:50, *Hetzel* moved down to anchor off Elizabeth City, with the rest of the squadron. At 11:10, she moved on down and anchored off Cobb's Point. Twenty minutes later, the Executive Officer, Lieutenant C. L. Franklin was sent ashore with an armed boat's crew to assist in the destruction of the Cobb's Point battery.

Hetzel was not hit during the engagement.

Ammunition expended: 80-pounder: shells, 20; solid shot, 22. 32-pounder: shells, 1. 9-inch gun: shells, 52; shrapnel, 1.

Underwriter (Lieutenant William N. Jeffers)

Underwriter went upriver toward Elizabeth City with the rest of the flotilla the morning of the 10th. When less than a mile from the Cobb's Point battery, Lt Jeffers saw the signal, "Make a dash at the enemy". *Underwriter* continued at full speed, opening fire at the same time. As she neared the enemy gunboats, Lt Jeffries ordered the pilot to put *Underwriter* alongside *Sea*

Bird. When within a hundred yards of her, he saw two other steamers turning to escape. He ordered the pilot to give chase to them. One, in attempting to pass across *Underwriter's* stern, was met by another Union vessel and captured. The second boat steamed ahead, firing musketry at *Underwriter*, who responded with her 12-pounder rifle. The shells did not disable the gunboat and she escaped around a bend in the river. *Underwriter* went alongside the Elizabeth City wharf, remaining there until ordered to drop down and anchor off the battery.

Casualties. Wounded. James Matthews, Master at Arms.

Ammunition expended: 80-pounder rifle: shells, 9. 12-pounder rifle: shells, 1; stands of grape, 1. 8-inch gun: shells, 4. 12-pounder howitzer: shrapnel, 1; canisters, 2.

Delaware (Lieutenant S. P. Quackenbush)

Delaware got underway at 6:00 AM, the 10th, coming into view of the Confederate vessels at Cobb's Point battery at 8:00 AM. Seven steamers [Note. Actually, only five were there.] and one, armed schooner (*Black Warrior*) were observed diagonally lined across the river. When within range, the signal to make a dash was raised and repeated when within 600 yards of the enemy vessels. Union gunboats were firing, "filling the air shot and shell", the Confederates doing the same. At 9:25 AM, *Black Warrior* struck her colors and was fired by her crew. Lt Quackenbush sent the cutter, with the Assistant Paymaster, F. R. Curtis and some crew, including Acting Master J. H. Raymond, to board the abandoned and burning *Fanny* and bring back her flag. Once they had the flag, the cutter continued on to Cobb's Point, the crew going ashore and planted a Union flag over the abandoned battery. Then, they returned to *Delaware*, now tied up at the city wharf. *Delaware* left the wharf at 11:30, made prize of *Ellis*, placing Acting Master L. B. Chase aboard her, as acting commander. *Delaware* then went to anchor off Cobb's Point.

Delaware was not struck during the engagement.

Ammunition expended. 9-inch gun: shells, 1. 12-pounder howitzer: shells, 2.

Commodore Perry (Lieutenant C. W. Flusser)

Commodore Perry opened fire, on the Cobb's Point battery and *Sea Bird* at 8:15 AM, the 10th. Once past the battery, she concentrated her fire on *Sea Bird*. At 9:40 *Commander Perry* ran down and boarded *Sea Bird*, taking prisoner 42 officers and crewmen. In the collision with *Sea Bird*, the ring stopper of *Commander Perry's* anchor was snapped, the anchor going to the bottom and lost. *Fanny* ran close beside of *Commodore Perry* and fired a volley of musketry into the Union vessel. *Commodore Perry* returned fire with a shell that "that put her in a sinking condition." The ramming and the time taken to take aboard prisoners prevented further action by *Commander Perry*. At 2:25 PM, Master's Mate Lynch and two engineers destroyed *Sea Bird's* machinery and set her on fire. They also took one rifled gun back to *Commander Perry*.

Only minor damage resulted from the ramming. *Commander Perry* was not struck by enemy shells.

Casualties.

Killed.—Frederick Wierland, seaman; Thomas O'Mara, Company A, Fourth Rhode Island Volunteers, born at Fall River, Mass.

Wounded.—Henry C. Webster, acting master's mate, in the leg, severely but not dangerously.

Ammunition expended: 15 shells, most of them at the Cobb's Point battery.

Valley City (Lieutenant J. C. Chaplin)

Valley City got underway at 6:30 AM, the 10th, and stood upriver with the rest of the flotilla. Upon nearing Elizabeth City, she began taking fire from the Cobb's Point battery and nearby enemy steamers. When commence firing was signaled, Lt Chaplin immediately returned the enemy fire from *Valley City's* port battery, keeping up a "brisk return of the fire." A steamer and the schooner opened fire on *Valley City's* starboard bow, the fire was returned by her starboard battery. A shell went through both of *Valley City's* boats, "smashing them to pieces" and wounding the pilot. As she was making a "mad dash" for the enemy vessels, at 8:30, the shore battery fired a shell through the port bow, passing through the magazine, exploding outside the screen on the berth deck. Several crewmen in the powder division were severely burned. The protecting bulkheads of the magazine were torn into pieces and the forward part on the berth deck set afire.

The pumps were manned and the fire quickly extinguished. While all this was taking place, Gunner's Mate John Davis sat on the top of an open powder barrel to keep it from exploding, while continuing to pass powder bags up to the gun divisions. When cease fire was signaled, *Valley City* came to anchor, at 11:00 AM, at Elizabeth City. She moved down to anchor off the battery at 8:00 PM.

Casualties.

Thomas T. Daniel, pilot; age 45 years; born on Roanoke Island; resides at Cape Hatteras; wounded by a fragment of shell; fracture of the ankle; not dangerous.

James A. Young, officers' cook (colored); age 42 years; born in Maryland; resides in Baltimore; contusion of leg by splinter, and burned severely in face and neck; not dangerous.

John Lahey, nurse; age 23 years; born and resides in New York; burned about face and head.

Thomas Doyle, ordinary seaman; age 24 years; born and resides in New Hampshire; burned about face, head, and neck severely.

Lt Chaplin did not report ammunition expended.

Morse (Acting Master Peter Hays)

Morse got underway at 6:00 AM, the 10th and moved up toward Elizabeth City, coming within sight the enemy fleet and batteries at 7:00. At 7:30, *Morse* opened fire with her bow gun at a distance of three fourths of a mile, maintaining a steady fire throughout the engagement. *Morse* was not struck and had no casualty. She fired 13 shells and 1 shrapnel.

Whitehead (Acting Master Charles A. French)

Whitehead got underway at 6:45 AM, moving upriver toward Elizabeth City. When within range, *Whitehead* opened fire on the nearest steamer. At 8:20, *Whitehead* began receiving fire from *Black Warrior* and the Cobb's Point battery. She began concentrating her fire on *Black Warrior*, as she closed in on the schooner. *Black Warrior's* crew set her afire and escaped to the shore. Master French and some of *Whitehead's* crew boarded her and attempted, to no avail, to extinguish the fire. He wanted to salvage some of her cargo of naval stores. Although *Black Warrior* had been fired in several places, Master French was able to take off a boat load of articles and some papers and all her books from the cabin, along with *Black Warrior's* two yawl boats. He scuttled *Black Warrior*, moved out to the middle of the river and dropped anchor. At 6:00 PM, *Whitehead* moved downriver and anchored for the night off the Cobb's Point battery.

Whitehead suffered no damage or casualty.

She expended 7 shells during the engagement.

John L Lockwood (Acting Master G. W. Graves)

At 9:00 AM, *John L Lockwood* began firing on *Black Warrior*, continuing to do so until the crew deserted her. Then, *John L Lockwood* went across the river toward *Fanny*, firing shrapnel and musket volleys. *Fanny's* crew set her afire and abandoned the ship in her boats. Master Graves sent a crew aboard *Fanny*, but the fire had spread too much to put out. The crew were able to capture 20 stands of arms, however. *Lockwood* received a shot through her smokestack and one of the boat davits was unshipped by a spent shot. None of the crew was struck.

John L Lockwood fired 8 rounds of 80-pounder ammunition and 4 rounds of howitzer ammunition.

Shawsheen (Acting Master Thomas J. Woodward)

Shawsheen was at anchor, with the rest of the flotilla, in the Pasquotank River ten miles below Cobb's Point, the morning of the 10th, when the flotilla weighed anchor and began steaming upriver toward Elizabeth City. At 6:30 AM, Master Woodward saw a sail crossing the river above the Union ships. *Shawsheen* fired a shot across its bow, bringing her to a stop. *Isaac N Seymore*, closest to the enemy schooner (found to be loaded with wood), steamed up and took her in tow. *Shawsheen* then got underway and stood up the river after the other Union vessels that were proceeding slowly toward Elizabeth City. She soon overtook them.

At 7:30, enemy vessels were seen retreating upriver at Elizabeth City. When Cdr Rowan signaled "Make a mad dash at the enemy", the Union vessels began firing, causing the Confederate ships to scatter, the Union vessels closing on them. *Shawsheen* was running for *Fanny*. As she closed in on *Fanny*, the crew "waved a flag in defiance" at *Shawsheen*. When the latter began firing muskets and small arms at *Fanny's* crew and readied to send out boarders, her crew set *Fanny* afire. Cdr Rowan ordered Master Woodward to back off. *Shawsheen* then went in pursuit of a steamer that was headed up the Dismal Marsh Canal. When it became evident that the enemy steamer could out-run *Shawsheen*, Master Woodward called off the chase and after a short time off the city, went downriver to anchor near the battery at Cobbs Point.

Master Woodward reported no damage or casualty.

Shawsheen fired 10 rounds of ammunition from her forward rifled gun.

Henry Brinker (Acting Master John E. Giddings)

Henry Brinker moved out at 8:00 AM, the 10th, in her assigned position at the rear of the Union flotilla. Because the other vessels were between her and the Cobb's Point battery, *Henry Brinker* could not fire safely on the enemy until nearly opposite the battery. She had fired four shots at *Black Warrior*, when the signal to "Make a dash at the enemy" was raised. *Henry Brinker* closed in on Elizabeth City, but had no opportunity to engage either the battery or the enemy vessels as she passed them by. Master Giddings was ordered back down the bar above Cobb's Point. On the way down, *Henry Brinker* went alongside the burning *Sea Bird*. Giddings sent men aboard to get her log book and papers. When the men were back aboard *Henry Brinker*, she moved on down and anchored above Cobbs Point.

Henry Brinker was not struck during the engagement.

Ammunition expended: shells, 8.

General Putnam (Acting Master William J. Hotchkiss)

Owing to a faulty boiler, *General Putnam* could not get up sufficient steam to arrive in time to take part in the engagement. Master Hotchkiss did render assistance in getting *Ceres* and *Ellis* afloat after they went ashore. He then sent a boat to *Black Warrior* to put out her fire, but the fire was too far advanced to be subdued.

Louisiana (Lieutenant A. Murray)

Lt Murray reported only that *Louisiana* had taken her assigned position in the column of Union vessels and engaged the fortified works.

Epilogue

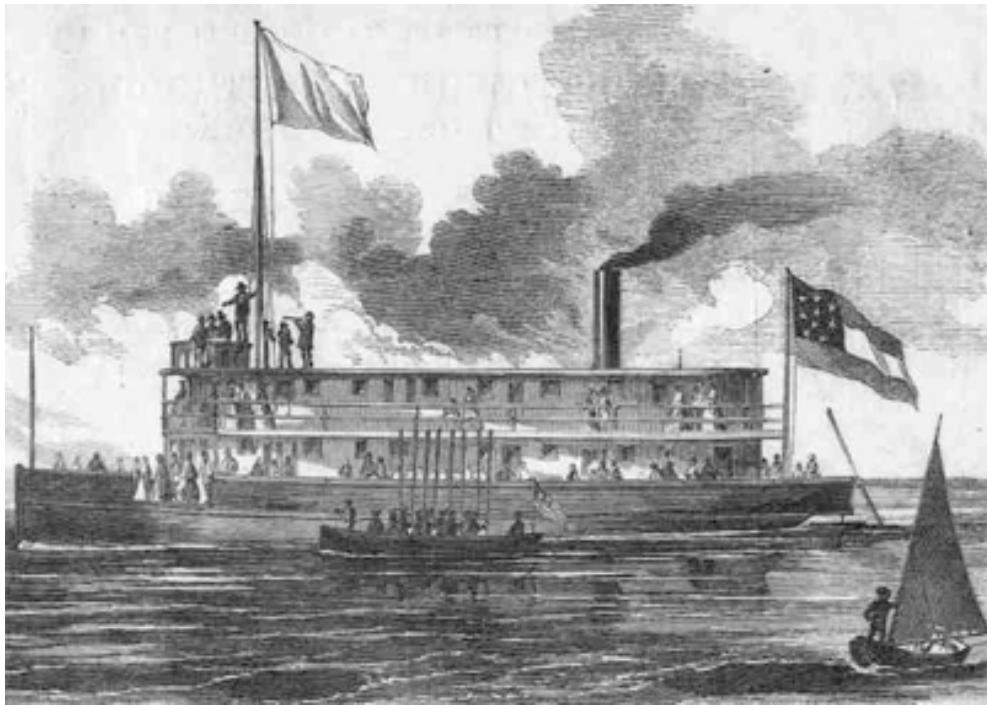
Of the eight Confederate vessels of the Mosquito Fleet, only *Appomattox*, *Raleigh* and *Beaufort* escaped capture or destruction during the battles of Roanoke Island and Elizabeth City.

On the 11th, Cdr Rowan sent *Louisiana*, *Underwriter*, *Lockwood*, and *Commodore Perry*, under command of Lt Murray, on a reconnaissance to Edenton, Virginia, at the western end of Albemarle Sound, to determine if a fort was located there. If not, he was to destroy all public property, but to take care no private property was disturbed. Lt Murray took possession of the town (There was no fort.), quietened the apprehensions of the citizens, drove off a body of artillery, destroyed eight cannon and a vessel in the stocks, and captured two schooners.

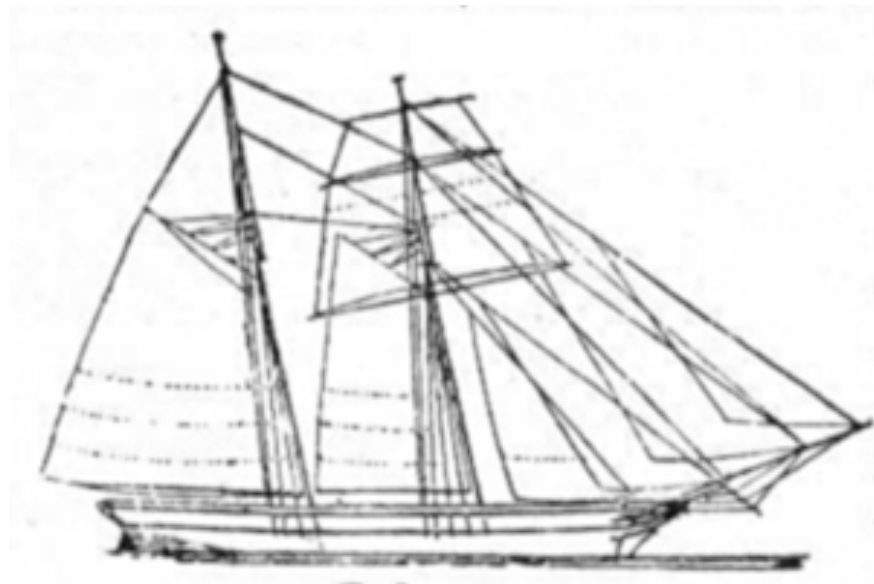
When Lt Murray's ships had returned, Cdr Rowan sent *Louisiana*, *Underwriter*, *Lockwood*, *Whitehead*, and *Shawsheen*, under command of Lt Murray, to take the two schooners in tow and use them to obstruct the Chesapeake and Albemarle Canal. *Louisiana* and *Underwriter* anchored outside the bar off the North River, the other three ships, commanded by Lt Jeffries, went up to the mouth of the canal. The schooners were sunk, obstructing the canal. Both "back door"

accesses to Norfolk were then closed to blockade runners. Because Norfolk was now isolated, it no longer useful to the Confederacy and was abandoned in May 1862

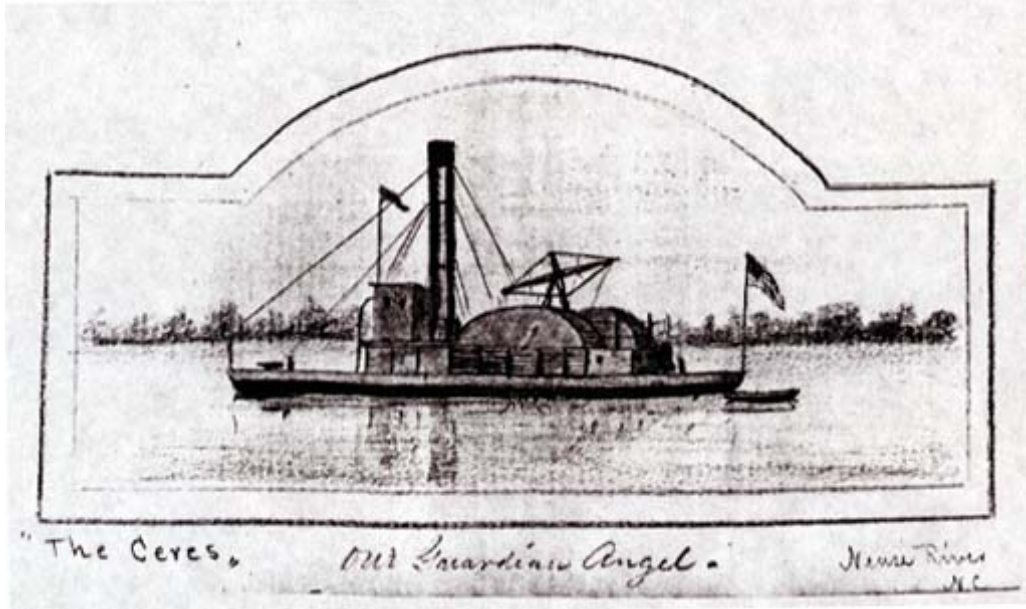
Ships



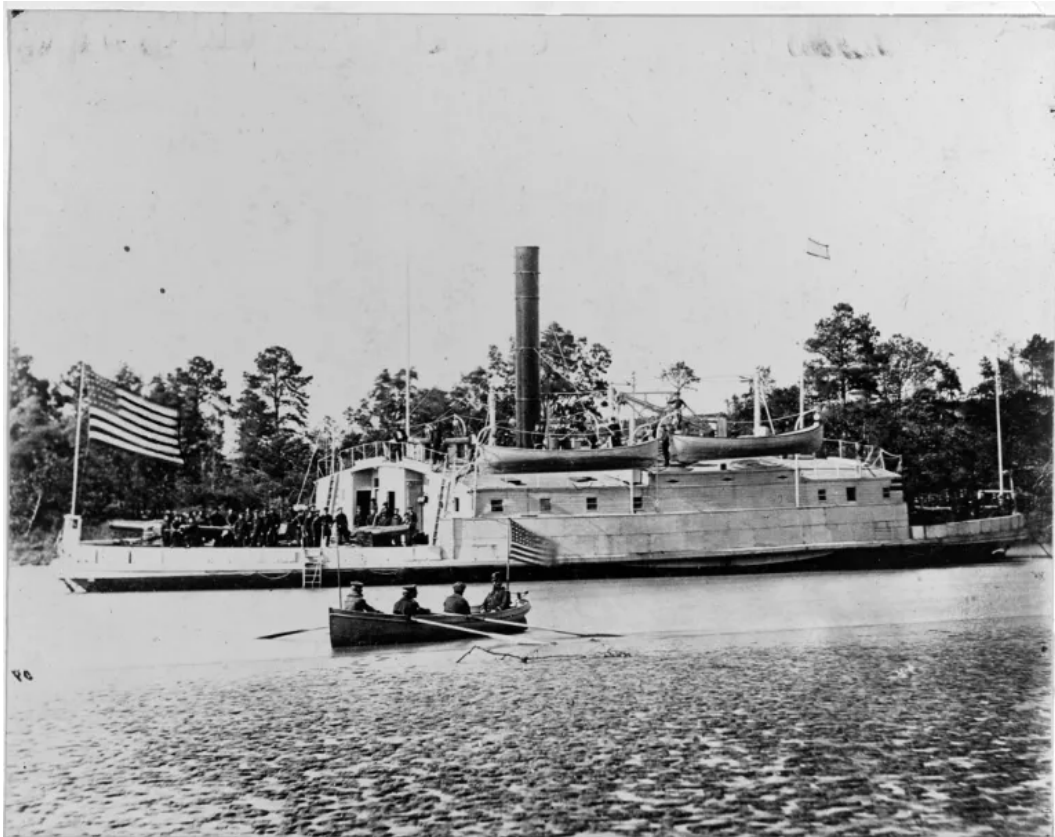
CSS Appomattox. (Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper)



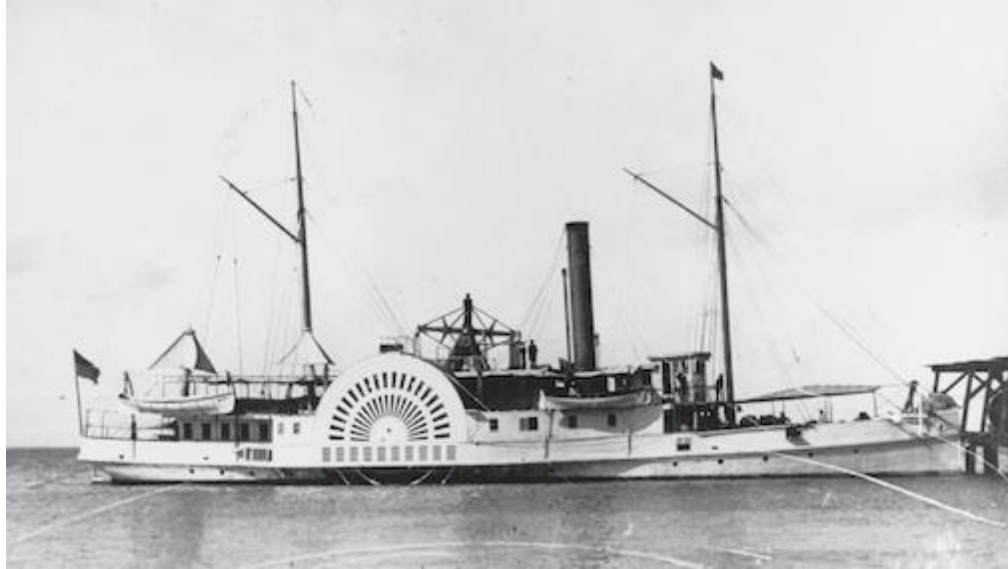
Schooner similar to CSS *Black Warrior*



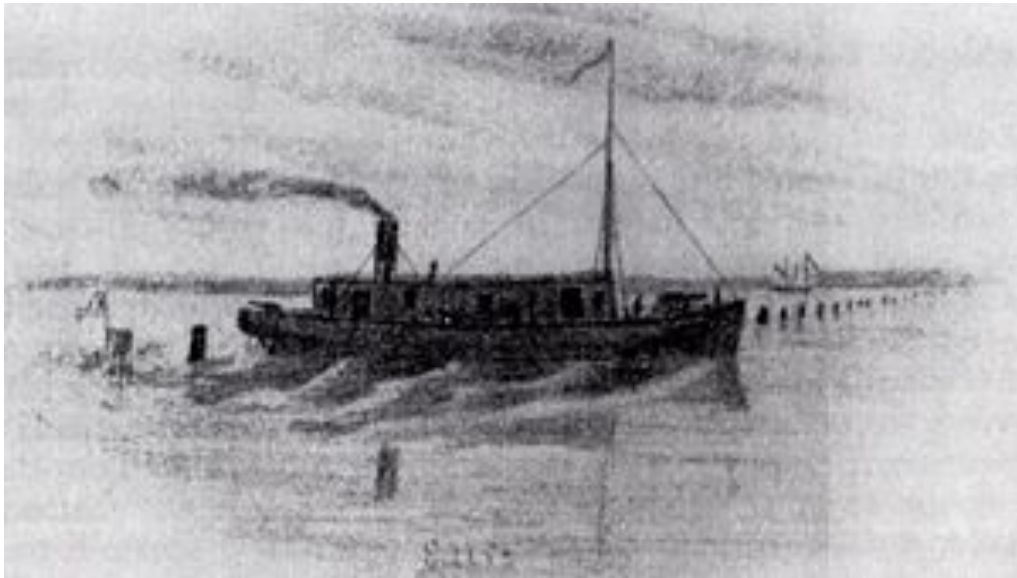
USS Ceres (Naval Heritage and History Command)



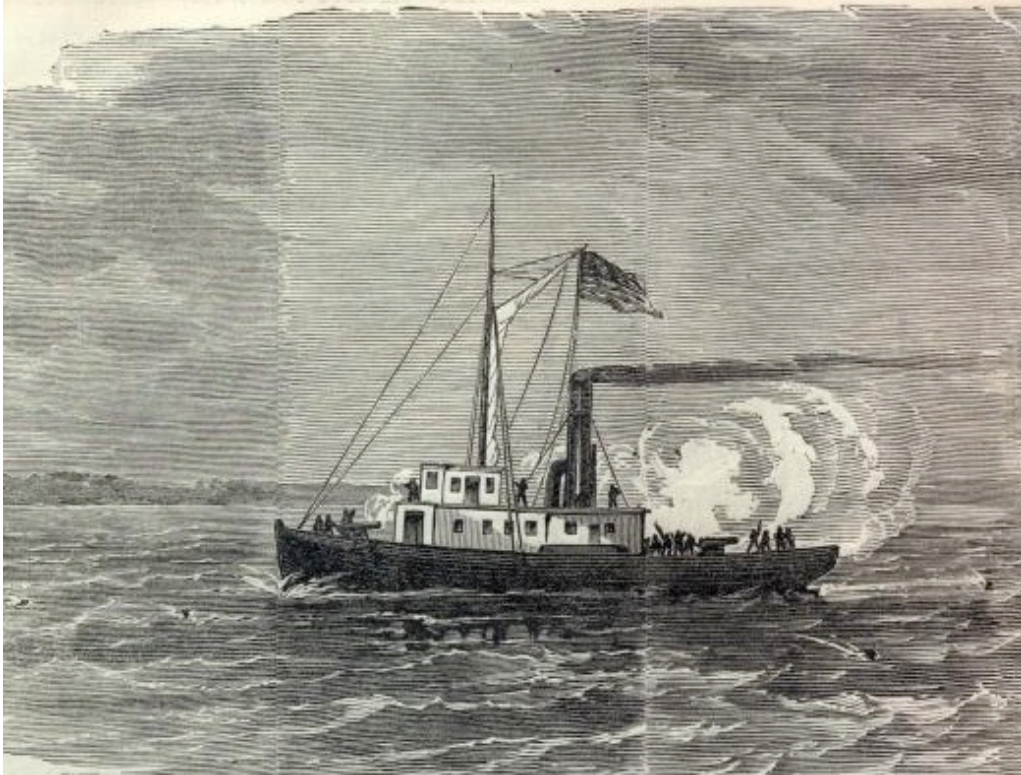
USS Commodore Perry (Library of Congress)



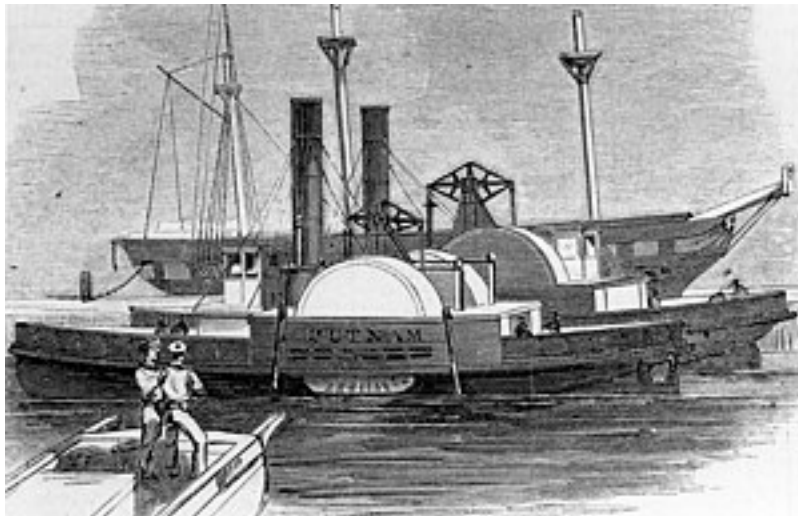
USS Delaware (Library of Congress)



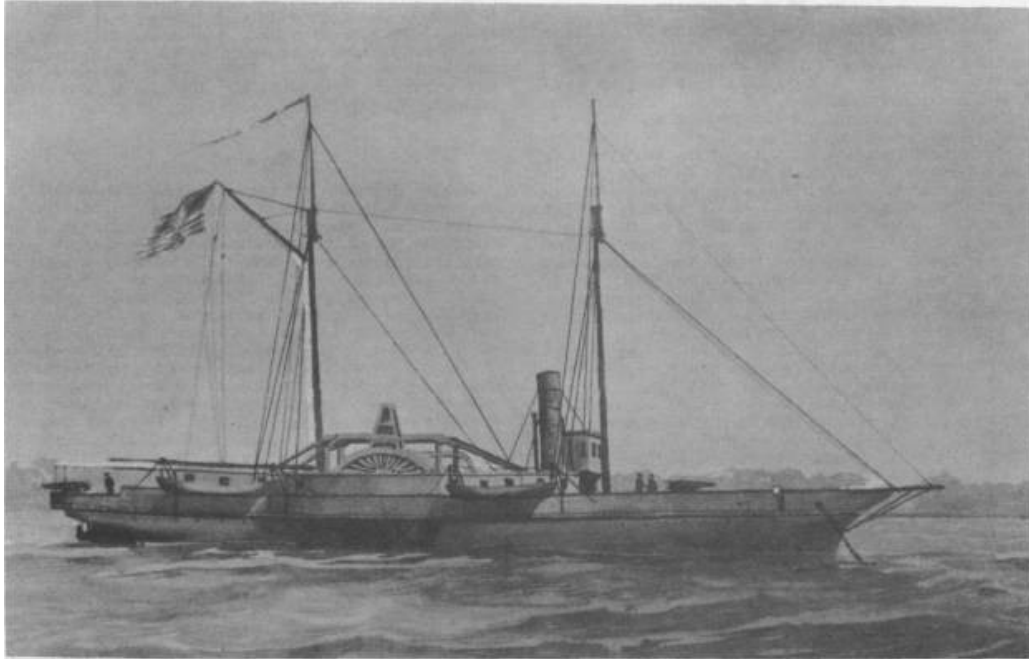
CSS Ellis (The Long Roll)



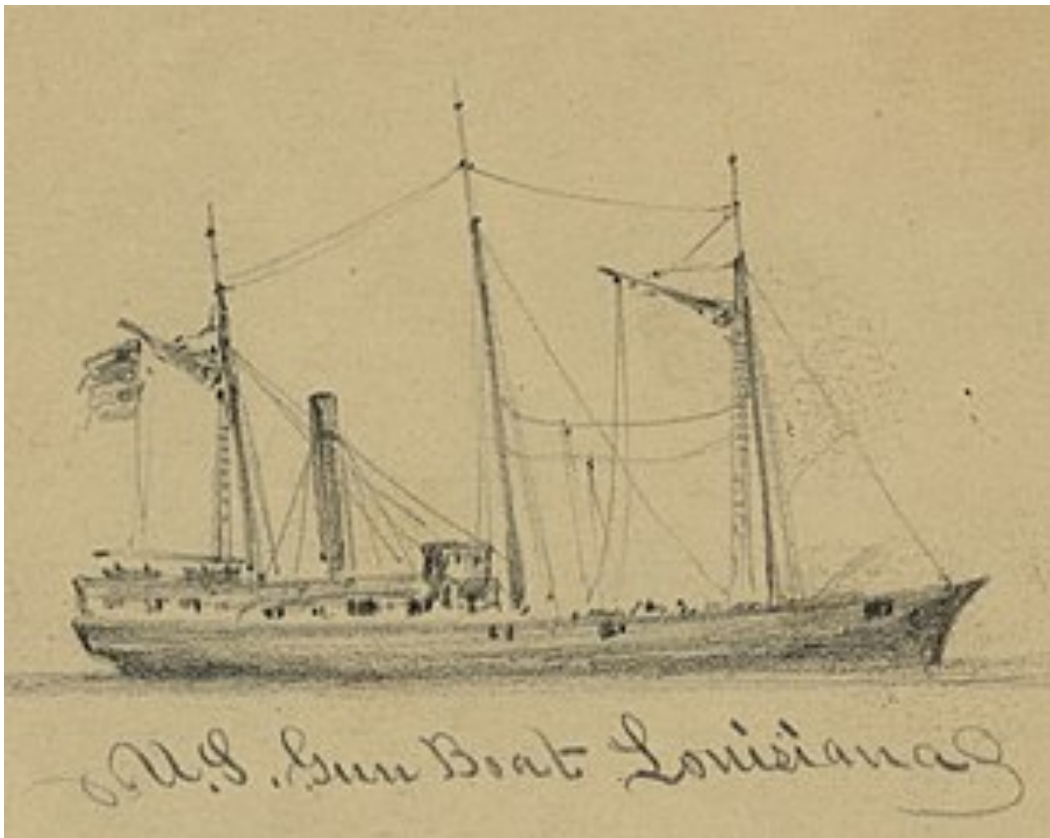
CSS Fanny (Harper's Weekly)



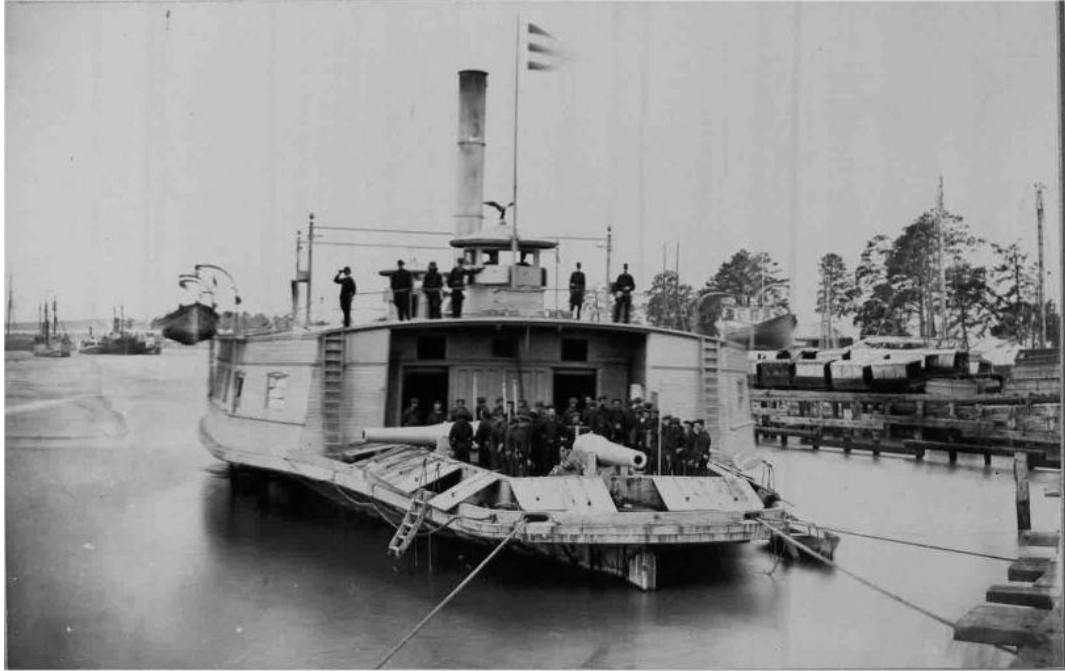
USS General Putnam, foreground. (Wikipedia)



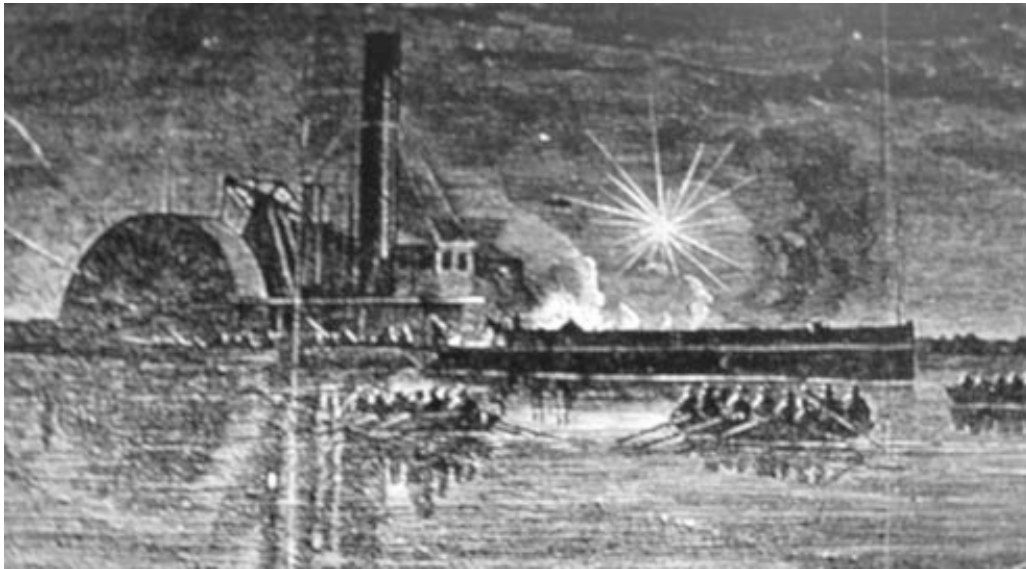
USS Hetzel (Naval Heritage and History Command)



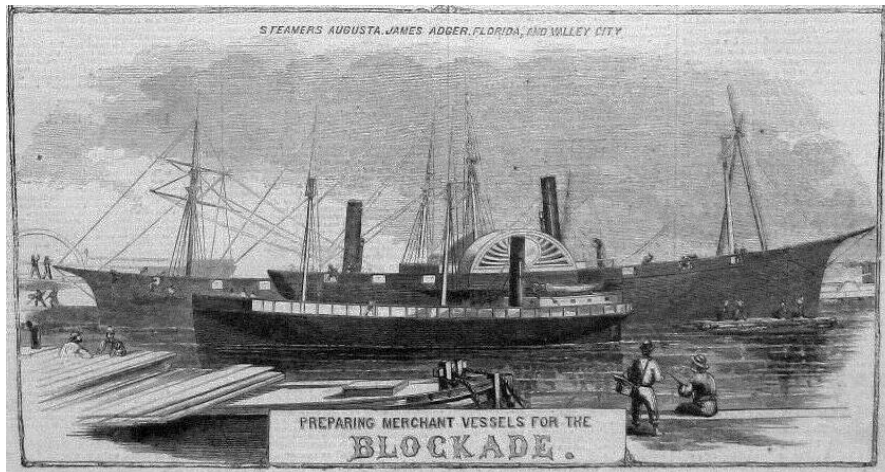
USS Louisiana (Library of Congress)



USS Morse (Everett Collection/Bridgeman Imaging)



USS Underwriter (Encyclopedia of North Carolina)



USS Valley City (Old Navy Ship Photo Archive)



USS Whitehead (Wikipedia)

