

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Naval War

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Introduction: Two Navies

On the eve of the Civil War, the United States Navy found itself in a unique position; it was the dominant maritime force of the conflict. During the American Revolution, the War of 1812, and other maritime struggles, the U.S. Navy had always fought against or alongside a vastly superior foe: the British Royal Navy. The U.S. Navy had also relied heavily on naval raiding (*guerre de razzia*) and naval irregular warfare during the Age of Sail.¹ But now, in the emerging Age of Steam, things were different. The U.S. Navy had trained officers, enlisted men with maritime experience, and seafaring vessels.

In April 1861, the U.S. Navy had 7,600 enlisted sailors and 1,554 officers. The vast majority of the enlisted remained in the service but 373 officers resigned.² Most of the resignations were from Southerners, including Franklin Buchanan, the U.S. Naval Academy's first superintendent, who resigned in anticipation of Maryland's secession from the Union. When he realized that Maryland was to remain in the Union, Buchanan desperately tried to regain his commission, but Gideon Welles refused. Buchanan eventually enlisted in the Confederate Navy and became the Confederate nation's only full admiral.³ More than fifty percent of those who lived below the Mason Dixon line remained loyal to the United States, including Admiral David Glasgow Farragut. As early as January 25, 1861, Captain Samuel Francis Du Pont commented on the high level of resignations. In a letter to Commander Andrew Hull Foote, Du Pont lamented, "What made me most sick at heart, is the resignations from the Navy. I...was astounded to see the extent of the demoralization, not only in every department of the government, but among the

¹ Three major types of maritime warfare include *guerre d'escadre* (open-ocean battle-fleet operations), *guerre de course* (commerce raiding), and *guerre de razzia* (war by raiding). For more, please see Benjamin Armstrong, *Small Boats and Daring Men: Maritime Raiding, Irregular Warfare, and the Early American Navy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019).

² William S. Dudley, *Going South: U.S. Navy Officer Resignations & Dismissals on the Eve of the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: Naval Historical Foundation, 1981) see <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/g/going-south-u-s-navy-officer-resignations-dismissals-on-the-eve-of-the-civil-war.html>, accessed August 10, 2026.

³ For more, please see Craig L. Symonds, *Confederate Admiral: The Life and Wars of Franklin Buchanan* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008) and Oretta D. Swartz, "Franklin Buchanan—A Study In Divided Loyalties," *Proceedings* 88, no. 12 (December 1862), see <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1962/december/franklin-buchanan-study-divided-loyalties>, accessed August 10, 2026.

officers of the Navy.”⁴ Prior to the fall of Fort Sumter, the Secretary of the Navy simply accepted a naval officer’s resignation. Later the sailors’ names would be stricken from the rolls of the Navy.

As the war broke out, Lincoln issued orders to recruit 18,000 men into naval service. Most enlisted sailors had little to no seafaring experience but within two months, the Union navy had 13,000 sailors and 2,000 officers. In 1865, 6,700 officers and 51,500 men plus 16,880 mechanics and laborers, were serving in the U.S. Navy. This was a 500 percent increase from before the war. Over the course of four years, approximately 118,044 served in the Union Navy, including approximately 18,000 African Americans.⁵ According to historian Michael J. Bennett, Union sailors tended to be Eastern, urban, and working class or poor; over seventy-eight percent lived along the Atlantic Coast. Their average age was twenty-six, but young boys (typically aged 10-14) would often serve as powder monkeys, ferrying gun powder and ammunition around the ship. Immigrants and free blacks also served in large numbers as the navy had a long tradition of racial integration and the collective work of the ship helped to unite crews across ethnic and racial lines. Initially, free blacks only constituted five percent of weekly enlistments, but enlistment restrictions lifted as the war raged on. Contrabands began joining crews as early as July 1861. African Americans were more often relegated to lower billets, serving as cooks, servants, and musicians at high rates. None were commissioned as officers or warrant officers. Overall, white and black sailors enlisted for practical reasons: employment, security and stability, regular food and pay, freedom and protection, lower risk of death or injury, and “getting clean” (joining the war effort but avoiding the risks or hardships of soldiering.)⁶

Overseeing the Union Navy was Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, often called “Father Neptune,” in part because of his noticeable brown wig and contrasting white beard. A former newspaper editor, Connecticut General Assemblyman, and postmaster, Welles came from a long line of politicians. In 1846, he began a three-year tenure as Chief of the Bureau of Provisions and Clothing for the Navy. His political allegiances evolved, and he eventually left the Democratic Party to join the Republican Party, founding the *Hartford Evening Press* to advance their cause. In 1861, Lincoln appointed him Secretary of the Navy. An “earnest, candid, and often cranky” cabinet member, Welles was well-known for his candor and loyalty; he was “likely to assert positions boldly, occasionally losing his temper in the process.”⁷ He remained a staunch defender of his commander-in-chief—he was by his bedside when he died—and had a noticeably

⁴ S.F. Du Pont to Andrew Hull Foote, January 25, 1861, as quoted in the correspondence reprinted in James Mason Hoppin, *Life of Andrew Hull Foote, Rear-Admiral United States Navy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1874), 148.

⁵ *Report of the Secretary of the Navy with an Appendix Containing Reports from Officers, December 4, 1865* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1865), xxxii. See Michael J. Bennett, *Union Jacks: Yankee Sailors in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and Barbara Brooks Tomblin, *Bluejackets and Contrabands: African Americans and the Union Navy* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009).

⁶ Bennett, *Union Jacks*.

⁷ Craig L. Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008), x; Craig L. Symonds, *Civil War at Sea* (New York: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 23.

contentious relationship with Secretary of State William Henry Seward. Despite having no naval service, Welles proved a highly successful naval secretary. An effective and efficient manager, he quickly mobilized the U.S. Navy for war, modernizing and enlarging it. He implemented a successful blockade, embraced new naval technology like the ironclad, and ultimately supervised one of the largest maritime forces of the 1860s. His wartime diaries have been an invaluable resource for historians.⁸

More importantly, the Union Navy had ships. At the start of the war, there were forty-two vessels in commission in the United States Navy; however, only four were based in Northern ports. The rest were either seeking repairs or patrolling international waters (as far away as China and Brazil). Lincoln quickly recalled all but three ships from abroad and began a massive ship building mission, taking advantage of the Federal shipbuilding yards in Philadelphia, Brooklyn, and elsewhere. Most of these new ships were wooden steam-and-sail sloops which were lightly armed and built for speed to counteract Confederate blockade-runners, privateers, and commerce raiders. The Federals also launched an expansive government ship-purchasing program, buying and refitting merchant vessels of all shapes and sizes (passenger ships, cargo vessels, ferry boats) for blockade duty. By the end of 1861, the Union had 260 warships. By war's end, the U.S. Navy possessed 671 vessels, 418 of which were converted merchant ships. The other ships were ironclads—often referred to as “monitors” after USS *Monitor*—iron-hulled and armed ships that embodied the most advanced naval technology of the era. Embracing innovation, the U.S. Navy had committed considerable time, resources, and funds to building a modern maritime force.

The Confederate Navy paled in comparison. Without a single warship to its name when the hostilities began, the Confederate government quickly realized its naval forces would never equal the sizeable and powerful Union Navy. The only vessels the Confederate nation had were those seized by local and state governments: ten small tenders and tugs, four revenue cutters, and a decrepit side-wheel steamer.⁹ Initially, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Virginia established their own navies but each was soon absorbed into the Confederate Navy.¹⁰ As historian James McPherson explained, the naval war would always be asymmetrical because the Confederate navy did not have the manpower nor the financial capital, materials, or manufacturing capacity to initiate or support a substantial ship-building and/or ship-purchasing program. Instead, the Confederacy embraced creativity and took risks by issuing *letters of marque*, relying on commerce raiding

⁸ William E. Gienapp and Edica E. Gienapp, eds., *The Civil War Diary of Gideon Welles, Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

⁹ Symonds, *Civil War at Sea*, 16.

¹⁰ John M. Coski, "A Navy Department, hitherto unknown to our state organization," in William C. Davis and James I. Robertson, Jr., eds., *Virginia at War, 1861* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005), 65-87; James Morris Morgan, "The 'St. Lawrence' and the 'Petrel,'" *Proceedings* 46, no. 210 (August 1920) see <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1920/august/st-lawrence-and-petrel>, accessed August 10, 2026.

(*guerre de course*), embracing naval guerrilla warfare, and developing ironclad technology, torpedoes, and submarines.¹¹

The Confederate Navy began the war with a substantial cadre of officers but almost no enlisted men or vessels. It took time to establish a Department of the Navy and recruiting stations (*rendezvous*) so that the Confederacy could enlist seamen, pilots, and midshipmen. As Rear Admiral Raphael Semmes explained, “The naval officers who had come South, had brought with them nothing but their poverty, and their swords all of them who had been in command of ships at the secession of their respective States, having, from a sense of honor, delivered them back to the Federal Government.”¹² Initially, mariners, seamen, and immigrants from Confederate ports actively enlisted in the Confederate Navy, especially with the promise of high wages, good food, and the potential of prize money from privateering or commerce raiding. Later, the Confederacy resorted to bounties to help address severe manpower issues. At maximum strength, the Confederate navy reached 4,966 in April of 1864. The total number of sailors who served the Confederate navy is estimated to be between 6,000 and 7,000. While the Confederate navy’s officer corps and enlisted seamen were primarily white, the Confederacy employed both black and white civilian pilots to navigate the coastal and inland waterways. Over forty percent of the Savannah Squadron’s pilots were enslaved African Americans hired out by their owners. Enslaved men were also allowed to enlist with their owners’ consent and served aboard ship as officers’ servants, coal heavers, or pilots.¹³ Given the over 3,500 nautical miles of coastline to defend, the 189 harbors to protect, and the tens of thousands of inland waters to navigate, the lack of sailors and sailing vessels proved a substantial problem for the Confederacy.

Quickly, the Confederacy began cobbling a navy together by purchasing vessels (side-wheel steamships, cargo ships, and even ferries), building ships, and rehabbing commercial vessels into war machines. The naval buildup happened on two simultaneous fronts: purchasing and/or constructing warships in foreign countries, e.g. Britain and France, and domestically constructing ships in places like Norfolk, VA, New Bern, NC, Charleston, SC, Savannah and Columbus, GA, Jacksonville, FL, Mobile, AL, New Orleans, LA, and Memphis, TN.¹⁴ Confederate shipbuilding efforts were frequently hampered by material, labor, and machinery shortages. In April of 1861, the Confederate Navy acquired its first windfall after capturing the Gosport Navy Yard in Norfolk, where ten U.S. warships were laid up for repairs. The Confederacy’s naval build up continued, focusing on three types of vessels: commerce raiders, which were built for speed, lightly armed, and designed for attacking enemy merchant vessels on the high seas; ironclads, which were mostly wooden-hulled ships with iron-plated armor adorning their exterior designed to counteract the

¹¹ James M. McPherson, *War on the Waters: The Union and Confederate Navies, 1861-1865* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

¹² Raphael Semmes, *Service Afloat: The Remarkable Career of the Confederate Cruisers Sumter and Alabama during the War Between the States* (New York: P.J. Kennedy, 1896), 91.

¹³ Barbara Brooks Tomblin, *Life in Jefferson Davis’ Navy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019).

¹⁴ William N. Still, *Confederate Shipbuilding* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1987).

largely wooden fleet manning the Union coastal blockade of southern ports; and various unconventional ships (semi-submersible torpedo boats and a submarine), floating batteries (large floating artillery platforms), and underwater obstacles and explosives. At its peak, the Confederate navy numbered 121 total boats, including 20 ironclads, 8 torpedo boats, and 2 submarines. And while the Confederate Navy never reached the size or power of the U.S. Navy, the Confederacy's maritime successes were some of the Confederate nation's greatest achievements overall.

The Confederate Secretary of the Navy was Stephen Russell Mallory, a former Florida senator and chairman of the Naval Affairs Committee. Known for his "round avuncular face framed by a leprechaun-like fringe of beard," Mallory had far more naval expertise than his Union counterpart.¹⁵ Born in the West Indies, Mallory grew up in the "rough-and-tumble maritime community" of Key West where he adjudicated the conflicting salvage claims of ship owners and wreckers.¹⁶ His pre-war political experiences provided him with a keen understanding of naval administration and the personalities of several subordinates. His calm equanimous personality explained why he was one of only two Confederate cabinet members to retain his position for the entire war. Yet, Mallory faced the daunting task of building a permanent naval force from nothing. He developed shipyards and foundries; embraced creativity and innovative naval technology; and even established the Confederate States Naval Academy in Richmond.¹⁷ Mallory believed that the "inequality of numbers might be compensated for by invulnerability," explaining why he was an early champion of ironclad warships and why CSS *Manassas* became the first ironclad to engage in Civil War combat during the October 12, 1861 Battle of the Head of Passes—six months before the famous Battle of Hampton Roads.¹⁸

Naval Technologies

Like their army counterparts, the Civil War navies benefitted from the industrial revolution and new evolutions in fighting technology. Both the Union and Confederate maritime forces embraced the recent shift from sail to steam, from smoothbore guns to rifled artillery, and from round shot to explosive shells. They also embraced new weaponry, including ironclads, torpedoes and torpedo boats, semi-submersibles, and submarines.

The single most important naval innovation of the Civil War was the widespread use of ironclad warships. Ironclad vessels were first tested in the Crimea in 1855, yet it was during the U.S. Civil War that the utility of armored vessels would be fully realized. Ironclads on both sides of the conflict came in various designs, but all featured iron-plated armor on their exteriors to

¹⁵ Symonds, *Civil War at Sea*, 19.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19-23.

¹⁸ Joseph T. Durkin, *Stephen R. Mallory: Confederate Navy Chief* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), 153.

deflect enemy cannon-fire. Most of the Confederate ironclads were simply wooden ships fitted with iron-plated armor of varying degrees of thickness. The Union Navy employed similar armored vessels but focused its ironclad construction on completely iron-hulled and armored monitors—inspired by USS *Monitor*. The first Civil War ironclad to see combat was CSS *Manassas* when it attacked the Federal blockading force at the Mississippi River's Head of Passes on October 12, 1861. The Federals first deployed ironclad river gunboats (City Class gunboats) in January 1862 to support Union naval operations along the western waters. These gunboats played an important role in the battles for Fort Henry and Fort Donelson in February of 1862.

Of course, the most famous duel of the ironclads was the Battle of Hampton Roads on March 8-9, 1862. Earlier, the Confederates had converted the captured Union vessel, *Merrimack*, into the ironclad *Virginia*. This was part of a greater scheme by Confederate Secretary of the Navy Mallory to build ironclads that might raise the Union blockade by sinking Federal wooden ships and ultimately regain control of the southern coast: he “regard[ed] the possession of an iron-armored ship as a matter of the first necessity. Such a vessel at this time could traverse the entire coast of the United States, prevent all blockades, and encounter, with a fair prospect of success, their entire navy.”¹⁹ Union Secretary Gideon Welles heard of CSS *Virginia*’s construction—courtesy of former enslaved person Mary Touvestre who stole the ironclad’s plans and walked from Portsmouth to DC with them—and quickly appointed an Ironclad Board who commissioned three different designed ironclads. One was USS *Monitor*, a radically designed ironclad with a revolving turret.

On March 8, 1862, CSS *Virginia*, under the command of Flag Officer Franklin Buchanan, left Norfolk and steamed out to attack nearby Union ships, including USS *Cumberland*. Around two in the afternoon, *Virginia* rammed *Cumberland* with its 1,500-pound iron ram, “mortally” killing *Cumberland* and 121 of the 376 crewmen. Next, *Virginia* targeted USS *Congress*, whose captain intentionally ran it aground rather than face the ironclad directly. CSS *Virginia* then pounded *Congress* with cannon fire, forcing the Union vessel to lower its flag and surrender around 4:00 p.m. 120 of *Congress*’s 434 crewmen died. From this wooden vessel vs ironclad fight, CSS *Virginia* emerged victorious, having defeated two Union ships and suffering only two deaths and twelve injuries to its own crew. While often overshadowed by day two of the battle, March 8, 1862, proved to be the bloodiest day in American naval history for nearly eighty years until the Japanese attack on the American naval fleet at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Dawn the next day, March 9, 1862, brought forth one of the most famous battles in American naval history. The evening prior, USS *Monitor* had slipped into Hampton Roads—unknownst to CSS *Virginia*’s crew. *Virginia* aspired to repeat its successes from the day before. While steaming towards USS *Minnesota*, *Virginia*’s crew spotted a peculiar raft-like vessel: the

¹⁹ S.R. Mallory, Secretary of the Navy to Hon. C.M. Conrad, Chairman Committee on Naval Affairs, May 10, 1861, United States Navy Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, 30 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1894-1922), Series II, volume 2, p. 69 (hereafter cited as *O.R.N.*, II, 2, 69).

ironclad *Monitor*. *Virginia* fired on *Monitor*, and *Monitor* soon responded; the two ironclads eased into a close range, albeit ineffective, firefight. *Monitor* successfully deflected *Virginia*'s attempts at ramming before finally disengaging and heading for safer, shallower waters. Soon thereafter, *Virginia*, low on ammunition and worried over the lowering tide, returned to Norfolk. The battle effectively ended in a draw—though both sides claimed victory. The Battle of Hampton Roads proved a key turning point in the evolution of naval warfare, illustrating that wooden ships and unarmored vessels were no match for armored vessels. “Monitor mania” arose in the United States, and the navy committed itself to ironclad ships. As historian Craig Symonds explained, this shift to ironclad technology,

changed [the] roles played by the men (and today women) who manned these vessels. Even at the time, a number of men on board both ironclads referred to their vessels as “machines.” They understood that they had become parts of a machine of war: they fed its engines, steered its great bulk, and handled its guns, but their relationship to the ship had changed. They no longer stood on the weather deck, or climbed non-existent rigging—indeed, none of them could even *see* their foe. They were quite literally in the belly of the beast.²⁰

In addition to pioneering ironclad warships, the Confederate Navy also had considerable success with torpedoes—what we would call naval mines. In 1861, the Confederacy developed a Confederate Torpedo Bureau which began experimenting with various designs. Underwater mines figured prominently in the coastal defenses of most major southern ports where the Confederates would sink torpedoes in rivers, bays, and estuaries, positioning them so that Union vessels could not travel up the James, Mississippi, or Savannah rivers and forcing Union ships into close range of Confederate coastal fortifications and guns. The first Union vessel sunk by a torpedo was in December 1862 when USS *Cairo* sank in the Yazoo River. In July 1864, the Confederates laid some 189 torpedoes in the channel at Mobile Bay, leaving only a 200-yard opening for blockade runners and setting the stage for the fateful Battle of Mobile Bay. While the Union fished up and disarmed many torpedoes, Confederate torpedoes sank or damaged forty-three Union vessels making it the Confederacy's most lethal naval weapon.

The Confederate Navy also developed several semi-submersible vessels. Most were designed to implant a torpedo attached to the end of a long spar into the hull of Union blockade ships and subsequently detonate the Federal ship. As many as nine of these semi-submersibles were built in various Confederate port cities, but the most successful was CSS *David* at Charleston. In October of 1863, *David* attacked USS *New Ironsides* and detonated a spar torpedo underneath the hull, severely damaging the ship and forcing it out of blockade service for several months. Even more radical was the Confederate submarine, *HL Hunley*. Privately built in Mobile, Alabama by H.L. Hunley and George McClintock, it proved difficult to command and sank twice during training exercises, killing sixteen men including Hunley. But a third crew, commanded by Confederate Army Lieutenant George Erasmus Dixon, made a successful night attack on USS

²⁰ Craig Symonds as quoted in *American Battlefield Trust*, “The Battle of Hampton Roads: Then & Now An Interview with Naval Historian Craig Symonds,” see <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/battle-hampton-roads-then-now>, accessed August 10, 2026.

Housatonic on February 17, 1864, sinking the ship before sinking itself. H.L. *Hunley* was the first successful use of submarine technology in war.

Anaconda Plan and the Blockade

The cornerstone of the United States' Civil War strategy—for both the army and the navy—was Major General Winfield Scott's famous Anaconda Plan. A plan of exhaustion, the Anaconda Plan called for both a naval blockade of the entire Confederate coastline along the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Mexico as well as a joint army and naval effort to control the Mississippi River. This would divide the Confederacy in two, separate the far West from the Confederate capital at Richmond, seal off the Confederacy from Europe, and ultimately “suffocate” the Confederacy into submission. As Winfield Scott explained to Major General George Brinton McClellan, “We rely greatly on the sure operation of a complete blockade of the Atlantic and Gulf ports soon to commence. In connection with such blockade we propose a powerful movement down the Mississippi to the ocean...the object being to clear out and keep open this great line of communication in connection with the strict blockade of the sea-board, so as to envelop the insurgent States and bring them to terms with less bloodshed than by any other plan.”²¹ Accordingly, after the fall of Fort Sumter, on April 19, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles established a Union blockade of all coastal Confederate States except Virginia and North Carolina as they had not formally seceded.²² On April 27th, President Lincoln expanded the blockade to include the entire Confederate coastline including Virginia and North Carolina.²³ A Blockade Strategy Board, chaired by Captain Samuel Francis Du Pont was quickly established. Creating legal and diplomatic headaches for the Union high command, the blockade helped to discourage international complications within an internal conflict; it also granted the Confederacy belligerent status. The United States may have never recognized the Confederate States of America as a sovereign nation, but by issuing the blockade—as opposed to issuing an executive order to close the Southern ports—Lincoln and the Federal government implied they were fighting an external foe in international law. For the Confederacy, belligerent status meant that European nations might treat them equally to the Union, that they could float foreign loans, contract the construction of vessels in foreign shipyards, and buy arms, ammunition, and war materiel. It also increased the potential for foreign intervention should the doctrine of neutrality be violated.²⁴

²¹ “Winfield Scott to Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, May 3, 1861,” in United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 51, part 1, p. 369 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 51, pt. 1, 369).

²² “By the President of the United States of America—Proclamation,” April 19, 1861, in *O.R.N.* I, 5, 620.

²³ “By the President,” April 27, 1861, in *O.R.N.* I, 5, 620-1.

²⁴ For more, see Howard Jones, *Blue and Gray Diplomacy: A History of Union and Confederate Foreign Relations* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

The Union blockade of all southern states and Confederate ports proved a daunting task. The Confederate coastline extended over 3,500 miles and included 189 river mouths, navigable inlets, and harbors suitable for maritime commerce. As Union Admiral David Dixon Porter explained, “taking into consideration the extent of coast that had to be blockaded, and the short time in which it was all accomplished, the work can scarcely be comprehended by the ordinary mind.”²⁵ This explains why initially, the blockade was not very successful. Nearly 30,000 bales of cotton left the port of Charleston in the first six weeks alone.

Over time, however, the blockade strengthened as the United States commissioned hundreds of ships and employed tens of thousands of sailors towards blockade duty over the course of the war. Most of these ships were a part of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron (which covered the coasts of Virginia and North Carolina), the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron (which covered the oceanic coasts of South Carolina and Florida, to Cape Canaveral), the East Gulf Blockading Squadron (which patrolled the gulf coast of Florida from Cape Canaveral to St. Andrew’s Bay), and the West Gulf Blockading Squadron (which covered St. Andrew’s Bay west to the Rio Grande). The primary focus of the blockade centered on pivotal Confederate ports like Charleston, SC, Galveston, TX, Mobile, AL, New Orleans, LA, Savannah, GA, and Wilmington, NC. Such port towns often proved difficult to blockade as many had multiple navigable channels, tricky currents, protective shoals, and defensive Confederate forts. For Union sailors and ships, blockade duty could be mind-numbingly monotonous; they typically anchored off major southern ports and maneuvered periodically to prevent ships from entering or exiting. Infrequent bursts of action punctuated days or even months of dull routine.

As the Union blockade often placed U.S. ships within view of the Confederate coastline, the U.S. Navy became an unexpected beacon of emancipation. As Benjamin Gould explained in his journal, USS *Cambridge* received a constant stream of escaping enslaved persons who typically arrived in groups—sometimes as large as twenty.²⁶ The enslaved persons would procure small boats or rafts and sail out to the blockaders—and to freedom. The Navy often encouraged able-bodied African Americans to enlist while it transported the rest to contraband camps along the coast. The Navy also benefitted from the intelligence brought by the escapees.²⁷ Of course, the most famous runaway enslaved person to escape via the waterways was Robert Smalls. Born into slavery, Smalls had been working aboard CSS *Planter*, a 147-foot cotton steamer with a primarily enslaved crew, at the start of the war. Desiring freedom for himself and his family, Smalls awaited an opportunity to commandeer the ship. On May 13, 1862, after the three white officers went ashore at Charleston, Smalls took control of *Planter* and boldly escaped the well-guarded harbor. Smalls picked up his wife, two children, and eight other enslaved people before sailing towards the Union blockade and surrendering *Planter* to USS *Onward*. He soon became a civilian pilot for

²⁵ David D. Porter, *The Naval History of the Civil War* (New York: The Sherman Publishing Company, 1886), 18.

²⁶ William B. Gould IV, ed., *Diary of a Contraband: The Civil War Passage of a Black Sailor* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

²⁷ For more, please see Barbara Brooks Tomblin, *Bluejackets and Contrabands: African Americans and the Union Navy* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2009).

the U.S. Navy but later became a pilot for the Army, where he became the first African American to captain an Army ship.

Meanwhile, the Confederacy employed sleek blockade runners to run the blockade—often in the dead of night, during the early fog of morning, or amidst murky clouds of rain. Approximately 75 percent of runners who tried to get through the blockade did so successfully. This totaled about 8,000 successful trips. And, as one historian famously claimed, blockade running was “the lifeline of the confederacy.”²⁸ Confederate agents would buy arms, ammunition, gunpowder, shoes, coffee, salt, wine, silk, hoop skirts, and more in Europe and ship them to Nassau, Havana, or Bermuda. There, they would transfer into fast steamers and make the run to Southern port towns. Until New Orleans fell, it was home port to over 300 blockade runners that transported southern cotton to Europe. And while the main purpose of blockade running was to supply the Confederacy, it proved an extremely lucrative enterprise.

One of the early blockade-running success stories was CSS *Florida*, a 191-foot-long British sloop-of-war purchased by the Confederates and outfitted in the Bahamas. Manned by Lieutenant John Newland Maffitt and a skeleton crew of eighteen, who were ill with a deadly fever, CSS *Florida* sailed from Cuba and ran the blockade in broad daylight at Mobile on September 4, 1862. Rather than waiting for the cover of darkness, they raised the English colors as a *ruse de guerre*. Flag Officer Edward Preble of the flagship USS *Oneida* tried to hail the “British ship” before firing a warning shot across the bow. Refusing to answer or slow down, CSS *Florida* sailed towards Mobile Bay—braving two more warning shots and an earnest fire fight before reaching the protection of Fort Morgan. CSS *Florida* was hit several times, and half the crew was wounded in the bold race. According to Maffitt, “The loud explosions, roar of shot and shell, crashing spars and rigging mingled with the moans of our sick and wounded, instead of intimidating, only increased our determination to enter the destined harbor.”²⁹ In the end, the superior speed of CSS *Florida* allowed it to reach safety and the warm welcome of Mobile. *Florida* captured 37 prizes over the course of two and half years’ service. On October 7, 1864, while refueling in Bahia, Brazil, the blockade runner was seized by USS *Wachusett*, violating international neutrality laws. A diplomatic crisis ensued but CSS *Florida* was towed back to the United States where it sank in Newport News after a collision with a troop ferry.

The blockade worked like a sieve, allowing some blockade runners to escape but capturing 1,500 Confederate blockade runners over the course of the conflict. Over time, the blockade crippled the Confederate economy, dropping its exports down to 15 percent of their prewar levels. On average, each Confederate blockade runner made five or more successful trips before being captured. The value of these captured or destroyed vessels and their cargoes, according to low estimates, was thirty-one million dollars.

²⁸ Stephen R. Wise, *Lifeline of the Confederacy: Blockade Running During the Civil War* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

²⁹ Emma Martin Maffitt, *The Life and Services of John Newland Maffitt* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1906), 254.

Privateering and Commerce Raiding

Initially, most Confederate blockade runners were privateers—creating a small but effective fleet that achieved early victories for the Confederacy and established the Confederate nation’s belligerent status. In fact, President Jefferson Davis began issuing *letters of marque* on April 17, 1861, less than a week after the fall of Fort Sumter.³⁰ By issuing official *letters of marque* to privateers, Davis effectively legalized piracy in the name of the Confederacy. The benefit to privateering was that it shifted the financial burden of building or acquiring ships and men to combat the Union Navy into private hands and allowed the Confederacy to build a maritime force quickly. Privateers struck quickly, panic seized many Northern merchants, and President Abraham Lincoln responded by changing the rules of warfare. Lincoln refused to recognize the Confederacy as a legitimate government—and refused to acknowledge the legality of any *letters of marque* issued by the Confederacy. On April 19, 1861, Lincoln issued a proclamation that all captured privateers would be treated as pirates, arrested, and thrown in jail.³¹ He quickly followed through on this threat.

On June 2, 1861, privateer *Savannah* left Charleston, the first Confederate ship to receive a *letter of marque* (dated May 18, 1861). The second day afloat, *Savannah* captured the brig *Joseph* before chasing down another ship, realizing too late it was the warship USS *Perry*. After a brief gun battle, *Savannah* surrendered and thirteen crewmen, including Captain Thomas Harrison Baker, were imprisoned, taken to New York, and tried for piracy. The trial began on October 23, 1861, in the United States Circuit Court for the Southern District of New York, drawing attention across the U.S. and Confederacy, whose leaders threatened retaliation. In fact, the Confederate government identified and named thirteen captured prisoners from the first Battle of Bull Run that they would execute should *Savannah*’s thirteen crewmen be sentenced to death. After a seven-day trial and one day of deliberation, the jury was deadlocked. *Savannah*’s crew was returned to prison to await a second trial. However, the United States rescinded the charges and reclassified the crew as prisoners of war. They were later exchanged, and no Confederate privateers were ever convicted of piracy.³² The decision again meant that the Federal government was conceding the rights of belligerency to the Confederacy. Later, Confederate naval Lieutenant John Yates Beall, who plotted various clandestine missions and acts of piracy along the Great Lakes in an effort to liberate Confederate prisoners, was ultimately charged and sentenced to death for “acting as a spy” and “carry[ing] on irregular and unlawful warfare as a guerrilla.”³³ He was not charged with piracy.

³⁰ Confederate States of America - Proclamation of April 17, 1861, The Avalon Project, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/csa_p041761.asp, accessed August 10, 2026.

³¹ “By the President of the United States of America—Proclamation,” April 19, 1861, in *O.R.N.* I, 5, 620.

³² See Mark A. Weitz, *The Confederacy on Trial: The Piracy and Sequestration Cases of 1861* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005) for more.

³³ “Proceedings in the Case of John Y. Beall,” in Daniel B. Lucas, comp., *Memoir of John Yates Beall: His Life; Trial; Correspondence; Diary; and Private Manuscript Found Among His Papers, including His Own Account of the Raid on Lake Erie* (Montreal, PQ: John Lovell, 1865), 95-96, see

The most successful Confederate privateer was *Jefferson Davis*, a former slave trade ship. Granted a *letter of marque* in June of 1861, *Jefferson Davis* featured substantial gunpower, a 90-man crew, and a seasoned mariner for a captain, Louis Mitchell Coxetter. Over the course of seven weeks, *Jefferson Davis* claimed ten prizes before running aground in St. Augustine. *Sumter* was another successful privateer, which ran the Union blockade at New Orleans before taking eight prizes off the coast of Cuba—though the prizes were ultimately forfeited to the Spanish. By mid-July 1861, just four Confederate privateers had captured twenty-four prizes, much to the chagrin of the American press and government. The impact on merchant vessels was noticeable and the corresponding fear over the privateers' effectiveness seemingly legitimized the Confederacy.

By 1862, privateering had faded away and commerce raiding (*guerre de course*) took its place. The inexperience of privateering crews, the lack of international recognition or ability to bring prizes into neutral ports, and the growing effectiveness of the Union blockade contributed to the demise of privateering. Whereas privateers were privately owned boats working on behalf of the government, commerce raiders were warships manned by navy personnel and designed to sink (not capture) commercial vessels. In some cases, privateers became commerce raiders, like CSS *Sumter*, which was the Confederate navy's first commissioned vessel. After being officially commissioned, CSS *Sumter* captured eighteen merchant ships before running out of coal near Gibraltar. Ultimately, the Confederacy's small but fearsome fleet of approximately twenty commerce raiders diverted considerable attention from blockade duty, substantially raised maritime insurance rates, and destroyed 284 Northern merchant ships. The success of Confederate commerce raiders also compelled commercial American ships into foreign registry as the U.S. government transported almost 800,000 tons of shipping via foreign ships during the war. Most importantly, the success of Confederate commerce raiding raised hopes and morale as they garnered international fame and attention. Most foreign nations denied Confederate vessels coal and/or disallowed the commerce raiders from claiming prizes in their ports so the Confederate raiders were not as effective as they could have been. By 1864, the U.S. Navy had committed 48 cruisers to patrolling international waters to stop commerce raiding but that was an ineffective strategy. Instead, the U.S. Navy began basing vessels in major ports along all sides of the Atlantic Ocean so that they could capture commerce raiders when they stopped to refuel. Notably, the Confederacy rarely had more than five commerce raiders traversing the high seas at any one time.

The most well-known and successful Confederate commerce raider was CSS *Alabama*, captained by Raphael Semmes, who had formerly captained CSS *Sumter*. Built in Birkenhead, England, CSS *Alabama* prowled international waters for two years, burning and ransoming 65 American merchant and whaling ships as well as one warship. The commerce raider met its demise during the famous duel with USS *Kearsarge* outside Cherbourg, France, on June 19, 1864. While thousands of spectators watched from shore, the two ships circled one another and exchanged shots for hours before *Alabama* sank. The raider's legacy endured as the *Alabama Claims* lasted until

<https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/gdc/gdclccn/04/02/42/23/04024223/04024223.pdf>, accessed August 10, 2026.

accessed June 4, 2025. See also William C. Harris, *Confederate Privateer: The Life of John Yates Beall* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2023).

1872. The Treaty of Washington and a payment of \$15.5 million from the British government to the United States acknowledged English culpability in constructing and selling such a successful commerce raider. In the end, Confederate privateering and commerce raiding allowed the Confederate Navy to go on the offensive, targeting U.S. ships in international waters and substantially impacting America's merchant marine and maritime trade.

Trent Affair

The blockade and the question of the Confederacy's belligerent or sovereign status also led to international controversy in the fall of 1861 courtesy of the Trent Affair. By the fall of 1861, the Confederacy was actively seeking diplomatic recognition and sent envoys to Europe: James Murray Mason, a former Senator from Virginia to England and John Slidell, a former Senator from Louisiana, to France. As Confederate Secretary of State Robert Mercer Taliaferro Hunter explained, Mason's and Slidell's mission was to appeal "to the nations of the earth not for material aid or alliances offensive and defensive, but for the moral weight which [the Confederate States] would derive from holding a recognized place [among nations] as a free and independent people."³⁴ The Confederate envoys successfully ran the blockade at Charleston aboard CSS *Theodora* and arrived at Nassau. They then traveled to Cuba before boarding RMS *Trent*, a British packet ship. U.S. Captain Charles Wilkes, of USS *San Jacinto*, learned of their plans. On November 8, 1861, *San Jacinto* fired several warning shots across the bow of RMS *Trent*, before stopping and boarding the British ship, capturing the two Confederate envoys, and sending them to Fort Monroe and later Fort Warren. Violating international law and long-standing naval custom, Captain Wilkes did not capture RMS *Trent* as a prize, nor did he take the ship or prisoners to a prize court for adjudication; instead, he allowed *Trent* to continue on its way to England. The American press hailed Wilkes a hero, but his actions infuriated Great Britain, which accused the United States of violating its neutrality. British Foreign Secretary Earl John Russell maintained that "it thus appeared that certain individuals had been forcibly taken from on board a British vessel, the ship of a neutral power, while such vessel was pursuing a lawful and innocent voyage—an act of violence which was an affront to the British flag and a violation of international law"³⁵ The British wanted a formal apology and the release of Mason and Slidell. A diplomatic crisis emerged; England began to ready fleets and sent thousands of troops to Canada. The Americans did not want to risk a potential conflict with England that could increase the likelihood that England and France might recognize the Confederacy, so the Lincoln government released the prisoners to the British and Secretary of State William H. Seward wrote a formal letter to England. Claiming that Wilkes had acted on his own accord and explaining that Wilkes had been justified in stopping *Trent* but not in flouting international law by failing to seize the ship, Seward ultimately held the U.S. Navy accountable for the Trent Affair. Mason and Slidell made it to London eighty days after

³⁴ R.M.T. Hunter to James M. Mason, Sept 23, 1861, *O.R.N.*, II, 3, 258.

³⁵ Earl Russell to Lord Lyons, January 10, 1862, Papers Relating to Foreign Affairs, Accompanying the Annual Message of the President to the Third Session Thirty-Seventh Congress, Department of State, Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1862/d203>, accessed August 10, 2026.

their capture. Subsequent efforts to achieve diplomatic recognition from England or France failed. Other Confederate agents, Matthew Fontaine Maury and James Dunwoody, were more successful in commissioning the construction of naval vessels in Liverpool, London, and Glasgow for the Confederate Navy and organizing the running of supplies through the Union blockade.

Coastal Battles

From the start, the United States Navy focused on the Atlantic Coast, blockading the shoreline, securing shipbuilding yards, and targeting key ports and barrier islands. The Confederates gained early control of many pre-war forts along the southern coast and established blockade runners on islands and inlets from Cape Hatteras down to Key West, which remained under Federal control. The U.S. Navy achieved early victories, capturing privateer *Petrel* off the coast of South Carolina on July 28, 1861, and gaining control of the Outer Banks of North Carolina. On August 29, 1861, the poorly manned and hastily constructed Fort Clark protecting Hatteras Inlet fell to the Union and 700 Confederate defenders became prisoners of war. This allowed Federal warships to access the Pamlico and Neuse rivers.

A more significant victory was at Port Royal, SC on November 7, 1861. The newly appointed commander of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, Flag Officer Samuel Francis Du Pont, and Brigadier General Thomas West Sherman coordinated an amphibious landing at Port Royal Sound. The joint army-navy forces met at Hampton Roads in October. Their combined forces totaled 77 vessels, including 17 warships and several specialized ships to carry horses and cattle. Weather delayed the expedition before hurricane force gales devastated the convoy; several army transports returned home, *Union*, *Peerless*, and *Osceola* sank (along with their ammunition and supplies), seven men aboard *Governor* died, *Peerless* sank with a full cargo of horses, and a major leak sprung in *Winfield Scott*. The army abandoned the expedition, but the navy sailed on. On November 7th, Du Pont's fleet of eleven gunboats, six armed-merchant vessels, and a combined 151 guns attacked Fort Walker at Hilton Head. The gunboats remained in constant motion, encircling the fort, which fell after four hours. CSS *Savannah* attempted to challenge the Federal fleet but was easily overwhelmed so it withdrew. The Confederate troops at Fort Walker retreated while Union troops took over the fort and nearby Fort Beauregard. More importantly, the Union achieved much-needed victories thanks to the navy, which in turn benefitted from a key base of operations at Port Royal Sound, close to Charleston and Savannah. As Du Pont celebrated, "It is not my temper to rejoice over fallen foes, but this must be a gloomy night in Charleston. I shall soon stop all connection between it and Savannah by the inland sounds. This is a far better harbor than either and will enable us to command both in the blockade."³⁶

Early 1862 brought additional victories along the Atlantic Coast. In early February, Major General Ambrose Everts Burnside led a combined army-navy expedition with Flag Officer Louis Malesherbes Goldsborough (and his nineteen gunboats) at Albemarle Sound and Roanoke Island.

³⁶ Captain Samuel F. Du Pont, to his wife, Sophie, November 1861, *Samuel Francis Du Pont: A Selection from His Civil War Letters, Volume I: 1860-1862* edited by John Daniel Hayes (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969), 226.

The 2,500 Confederates in three forts and two batteries surrendered quickly. The nearby ports of Plymouth, Elizabeth City, and Edenton fell in quick succession. Burnside then set his sights on New Bern, NC, which sits at the intersection of the Trent and Neuse rivers. Benefitting from Commander Stephen Clegg Rowan's gunboats, which shelled Fort Thompson, Beauregard and his 12,000 soldiers captured the town on March 14th. The navy and army continued southward, shelling nearby Fort Macon, which fell on April 26th, and soon ushered in the surrender of Beaufort and Morehead City. The culmination of Burnside's combined operations with the navy allowed the Union to gain access to the interior of North Carolina and vital transportation networks in Virginia. The only North Carolina port still in Confederate control was Wilmington. Meanwhile, the Union Navy captured Fernandina, Florida, on March 3rd, allowing the Federals to capture Jacksonville and St. Augustine. By April, the Union controlled all the coastal islands of Georgia and Florida. Charleston, South Carolina was another story. Not only did the Confederates retain control of the city but they successfully launched two ironclads, CSS *Chicora* and CSS *Palmetto State*, to threaten the nearby Federal fleet. Interestingly, in both Charleston and Savannah, Ladies Gunboat Associations raised the funds to construct CSS *Palmetto State* and CSS *Georgia*. As Josephine Cordes explained, such fundraising opportunities allowed women to contribute to the Confederate cause: "We hope we will have the pleasure of subscribing to many more [ironclads], and most of them, built by our *patriotic women*, with the fervent hope that our people will once more *hail freedom*."³⁷ In the pre-dawn darkness of January 31, 1863, *Chicora* and *Palmetto State* attacked USS *Mercedita* and USS *Keystone State*, resulting in 20 deaths and 27 injuries for the U.S. Navy. Four Union warships attempted to counterattack, but the Confederate ironclads retreated safely back to Charleston Harbor. Two more ironclads, CSS *Georgia* and CSS *Savannah* were built in nearby Savannah but saw little action.

In 1863, the Union Navy refocused attention on Savannah and Charleston, but the latter was well defended with guns, torpedoes, and floating or sunken obstructions. By April, nine ironclads, including USS *New Ironsides* and USS *Keokuk* were outside Charleston Harbor to help Rear Admiral Samuel F. Du Pont's South Atlantic Squadron. On April 7th, the nine ironclads attempted to attack Charleston Harbor, but the leading vessels got tangled in obstructions blocking the channel between Fort Sumter and Sullivan's Island and several other monitors crashed into each other courtesy of the swirling currents. Confederate batteries ringing the harbor struck the vessels dozens of times; *New Ironsides* alone endured 50 hits while *Keokuk* sank on April 8th after being hit 90 times in half an hour. The Union attack had failed. On the evening of August 20th, the Confederates went on the offensive, embracing new naval technology. CSS *Torch*, a spar torpedo boat, snuck out of the harbor and attempted to destroy USS *New Ironsides* but an engine failure prevented a successful attack. A better designed torpedo boat, CSS *David*, was sent to destroy *New Ironsides*. In the evening hours of October 5, 1863, *David* sailed out of Charleston Harbor, fired on *New Ironsides*, killing an officer, and ignited a torpedo alongside the Union ship. Both *New Ironsides* and *David* reeled from the explosion and *David*'s engine was waterlogged. *New Ironsides*' crew attacked *David*'s crew with rifle fire, but the Confederate ironclad was able to

³⁷ "Gunboat Responses, *The Charleston Daily Courier*, March 13, 1862, 2. See also Charles J. Wexler, "Palmetto Navy: Ironclad Construction and the Naval Defense of Charleston During the Civil War," Ph.D. diss., (Auburn University, 2015).

return to Charleston. *New Ironsides* did not fare as well and required substantial repairs. In September, the Union Navy launched a prolonged bombardment of Charleston. The South Atlantic Blockading Squadron captured Fort Wagner and reduced Fort Sumter but failed to take the heavily defended harbor. On March 6, 1864, *David* unsuccessfully attempted to repeat its successes and destroy USS *Memphis* with a 95-pound torpedo, but the charge never detonated. The successes of the Confederate torpedo boats emboldened the Confederates to embrace other innovative technologies, explaining the development of the *Hunley* and its February 1864 attack on USS *Housatonic*. Ultimately, the harbor defenses at Charleston proved too daunting for the U.S. Navy and the “cradle of secession” would not officially surrender until February 18, 1865.³⁸

Further south, on January 27, 1863, Federal gunboats *Wissahickon*, *Seneca* and *Dawn* and ironclad USS *Montauk* shelled Fort McAllister, 12 miles south of Savannah, but failed to destroy the Confederate fort. On February 28th, USS *Montauk* sank CSS *Nashville*, a blockade runner who had run aground. Meanwhile, CSS *Atlanta*, a four-gun casemate ironclad, and two wooden gunboats attacked USS *Weehawken* and USS *Nahant* in Wassaw Sound on June 17th. *Atlanta* ran aground, allowing *Weehawken* to assault the ironclad, crush the pilothouse and gunports, and ultimately, capture it. Further north, Confederate commerce raiders continued to capture merchant vessels off the New England and mid-Atlantic Coasts.

1864 brought forth Confederate attempts to reclaim vital North Carolina ports, especially those close to the Virginia theatres of war. The repaired ironclad CSS *Albemarle* traversed the Roanoke River and attacked Union defenders at Plymouth on April 19th. *Albemarle* rammed and sank USS *Southfield* before scaring off USS *Miami*. Union gunboats unsuccessfully engaged *Albemarle* two weeks later, but the Confederate ironclad continued to pose a threat. Union Navy officers resorted to sabotage. On October 27, 1864, Lieutenant William Barker Cushing and 15 other sailors slipped upriver and approached *Albemarle*. They fired on the ironclad and rammed it below the waterline with a spar torpedo. An explosion sank *Albemarle* and led to the Union recapturing Plymouth, although several of Cushing’s men were captured. Once again, the Union controlled the North Carolina coastline save Wilmington. CSS *Chickamauga* and CSS *Tallahassee* ran the blockade from there, capturing or destroying 40 merchant ships in three months.

By the end of 1864, the Union blockade was quite effective; U.S. gunboats and ironclads seemed omnipresent, ensuring little more naval action along the coast. On December 14, 1864, the U.S. navy launched an ill-timed bombardment of Fort Fisher, which sat 17 miles below Wilmington at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. Even worse, a Union ship loaded with explosives blew up at sea rather than destroying the fort. On January 13, 1865, Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter coordinated a second assault on the fort with Major General Alfred Howe Terry. Porter’s 58 warships bombarded the fort before the army amphibiously landed, stormed ashore, and established a beachhead in the famous Second Battle of Fort Fisher. The grueling battle lasted two days but ended with the successful capture of the Confederate fort and the fall of Wilmington a

³⁸ Jacob Dolson Cox, *Military Reminiscences of the Civil War*, Volume II (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1900), 420; Rossiter Johnson, *A History of the War of Secession, 1861-1865* (New York: Wessels & Bissell, Co., 1910), 307.

month later. 51 sailors, soldiers, and marines earned a Medal of Honor for their action at Fort Fisher. In sum, naval combat along the Atlantic Coast and nearby rivers raged for the entire Civil War but more importantly Union naval successes along the coast aided the army and contributed to the outcome of the war.

Riverine and Joint Warfare in the East

Riverine warfare in the East centered along the Potomac and James Rivers as the United States Navy embraced an offensive strategy and attempted to reach the Confederate capital via the water. Unfortunately, the James River Flotilla never reached beyond Drewry's Bluff, seven miles down river from the capital. They never made it to Richmond via water and many Union sailors spent more time fighting heat, humidity, and mosquitoes than Confederate sailors along the James. The Confederate Navy, on the other hand, took a decidedly defensive approach, taking advantage of shallow river bends, sunken obstructions, and effective shoreline defenses. The James River squadron was raised in defense although its often-idle sailors were frequently reassigned to augment shore batteries or army units.

Key naval and amphibious actions occurred during McClellan's 1862 Peninsula Campaign. The Battle of Hampton Roads paved the way for the Confederate evacuations of Yorktown and Norfolk. Only CSS *Virginia* defended the lower James River, but it could not navigate the shallow stretches of the river. Commodore Josiah Tattnall III scuttled the famous ironclad on May 11, 1862, preventing its capture but opening the James River to Federal gunboats. Meanwhile, McClellan's slow start to the Peninsula Campaign had enabled the Confederates around Richmond to build both water and land defenses. Atop the 100-foot Drewry's Bluff stood Fort Darling, a key Confederate defense manned by twelve Confederate cannons and 1,800 Confederate marines and soldiers at a bend in the James River. Down in the water, the Confederates sank numerous obstructions to slow incoming Federal ships and make them closer for attacks by shoreline artillery. On May 15, a federal flotilla of three wooden gunboats (USS *Aroostook*, USS *Port Royal*, and USS *Naugatuck*) and two ironclads (USS *Galena* and USS *Monitor*) arrived, engaging the Confederate batteries stationed at Drewry's Bluff in a four-hour firefight, with mounting casualties on both sides. Finally, the badly damaged Union gunboats steamed away, the ironclads retreating behind them. William Izard Clopton recalled that "A glorious victory over the hitherto invincible navy of the United States was achieved and the fall of Richmond was prevented, for if the Federal gunboats had succeeded in passing Drewry's Bluff on that day the capital of the Confederacy would have at once been at their mercy, and the Confederate troops would have been compelled to retreat from Richmond, and probably from Virginia."³⁹

While Union and Confederate soldiers fought in the trenches around Petersburg, January 1865 brought one of the final naval battles of the war. A squadron of Confederate warships, including ironclads *Virginia II*, *Richmond*, and *Fredericksburg*, descended towards City Point,

³⁹ William I. Clopton, "New Light on the Great Drewry's Bluff Fight," *Southern Historical Society Papers*, 34, (January-December 1906).

Virginia, a vital supply depot for the besieging Union army. Reports indicated that a recent storm had washed away riverine obstructions and only USS *Onondaga* and a handful of wooden vessels protected the city. Initial Confederate gains dissipated after *Richmond* and *Virginia II* ran aground near Trent's Reach and a minefield deterred further progress. A Federal counterattack forced the Confederate ships to withdraw, abandoning any efforts to aid or resupply Robert E. Lee. After the fall of Richmond in April 1865, Admiral Raphael Semmes destroyed all remaining ships in the James River squadron. The river war in the East was infrequent but did show the utility of a brown water navy for the U.S. and for combined operations between the army and navy.

Riverine and Joint Warfare in the West

Substantially more riverine warfare arose in the West, where rivers like the Mississippi ran North/South and were vital transportation, trade, and communication networks. A key component of the Anaconda Plan, the river war in the West encompassed more combat than in any other maritime theatre, demonstrating the evolution of naval warfare, the impact of troublesome environments, and the importance of the Mississippi River as a maritime theatre of war. This theatre also demonstrated the utility of combined army-navy operations, as Brigadier General Ulysses S. Grant and Commodore Andrew H. Foote and later Grant and Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter achieved key victories due to their coordinated efforts and effective working relationships. Both sides needed to build or convert shallow-draft steamboats into gunboats with heavy guns that could traverse the brown waters of the west, transport troops and supplies, and either reinforce or attack fortifications along the riverbanks. The Union also benefitted from superior warships as it defended and conquered the western waters. Meanwhile, the Confederacy hastily converted commercial steamers into rams and ironclads, established the ill-fated River Defense Fleet, and utilized torpedoes and riverine obstructions to try and defend the waterways. When that failed, they employed naval guerrilla warfare to thwart commercial and military maritime travel.

Along the Mississippi River and its tributaries, the naval war was relatively quiet at first. The only major engagement was the aforementioned Battle of the Head of the Passes of October 12, 1861. Confederate Commodore George Nichols Hollins commanded the mosquito fleet (six lightly armed riverboats) and ironclad *Manassas* in a bloodless battle against U.S. Captain John Pope and four U.S. blockading ships: USS *Richmond*, USS *Vincennes*, USS *Preble*, and USS *Water Witch*. The Confederate attack was mounted after moonset when CSS *Manassas* rammed USS *Richmond*, though the impact injured the Confederate ironclad more than her target. The Federal fleet retreated, fearful of the Confederate riverboats' rifled canons, thereby giving the Confederacy a notable naval victory and causing much embarrassment for the Federals.

In 1862, the Federals launched a two-pronged assault, coming down south from Cairo, Illinois (a strategic base for launching and repairing gunboats located at the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers) and traveling North from the Gulf of Mexico via New Orleans (a key port and blockade running base.) Initially, the Union army's Western Gunboat Flotilla, with its ironclads and "timberclads" (side-wheel river steamers featuring 5-inch-thick oak planks for protection), defended the western waters as riverine warfare was seen as an extension of army

efforts. On September 30, 1862, the Mississippi River Squadron was formally established, and the Union Navy took over.

One of the earliest combined army-navy operations in the West was the Union's assault on Forts Henry and Donelson. On February 4-5, 1862, Brigadier General U.S. Grant landed his divisions in two different locations: one on the east bank of the Tennessee River to prevent the garrison's escape and the high ground on the Kentucky side which would ensure Fort Henry's fall. Meanwhile, Flag-Officer Andrew H. Foote's seven gunboats bombarded the fort. Confederate Brigadier General Lloyd Tilghman, commander of the Confederate garrison, realized time was not on his side so he escorted his own forces out, sent them to Fort Donelson (10 miles away), and quickly surrendered. The fall of Fort Henry was an easy victory for Grant and Foote, paving the way for the fall of Fort Donelson a week later. Admiral Foote was so excited by the victory that he sent part of his flotilla north to Alabama, destroying railroads, disabling Confederate gunboats, and confiscating material along the way.

On February 12, 1862, Grant advanced towards Fort Donelson. By this time his reinforced force numbered 27,000 as they marched 10 miles south to the fort. Meanwhile, Foote and his flotilla chugged back north to the Ohio River and then entered the Cumberland River. The Confederates had reinforced the fort with 21,000 Confederate soldiers. Fort Donelson's powerful guns assaulted Foote's flotilla. Mother Nature also proved a fateful foe for the Federals as a blizzard swept through the area. The Confederates initially repulsed Grant's and Foote's forces and a three day siege ensued. On February 15th, the Confederates made a surprise attack, opening a gaping hole in Grant's thinly stretched 5 mile long line but inexplicably, the Confederates returned to their original positions. Grant counterattacked, successfully breaching their line on the 16th and forcing the fort's garrison to surrender unconditionally. The successful army-navy operation at Forts Henry and Donelson opened up Tennessee to attack and allowed Federal forces to penetrate the Confederate heartland. While Grant received much praise and a promotion for his role in the attacks, the U.S. Navy played a pivotal role and paved a pathway for several more army-navy combined operations in the West.

The success at Henry and Donelson was soon followed up by a federal assault on the lower Mississippi River. The Union army and navy set their sights on hairpin double bends of the Mississippi River at Island No. 10 (so named because it was the tenth island below the mouth of the Ohio) and New Madrid. The Confederates were awaiting an attack, so they placed 52 canons on the Island and the nearby Tennessee shore. New Madrid was also flanked by Forts Thompson and Bankhead which combined boasted 3,000 Confederate soldiers and twenty-four heavy guns. An improvised Confederate naval squadron took up residency nearby. The combined operations began February 28th when U.S. General John Pope's troops set up in front of New Madrid and below Island No. 10, shelling the Confederate positions. On March 15th, Flag Officer Andrew Foote's ironclad flotilla arrived and began attacking Island No. 10 on March 17th. The siege was a stalemate, so Foote reluctantly agreed to run an ironclad past the Confederate batteries on April 4th and another on April 6th. Foote and Pope were then able to unite forces, transport U.S. soldiers to the east bank, and utilize the two ironclads to scatter some of the Confederate troops. Pope's army advanced and captured the garrison on April 8th while Foote's sailors cut off any potential

for a Confederate retreat. 4,500 men and substantial military stores were captured. More importantly, the first Confederate position along the Mississippi River had fallen. The Union was quickly gaining control over the upper river.

As the Federal advance down the Mississippi continued, the Confederates created the River Defense Fleet: fourteen merchant steamers converted into rams, manned by civilian crews, and under the nominal command of riverboat captain James E Montgomery. Meanwhile, Flag Officer Charles Henry Davis commanded the Western Gunboat Flotilla, including timberclads *Conestoga*, *Lexington*, and *Tyler*, as well as city-class casemated ironclads, including *Carondelet*, *Cincinnati*, and *Mound City*. The Federal Ram Fleet, nine fast steamers converted into rams by Charles Ellet Jr., supported the Federal mission but were a separate force. On June 6, 1862, the two maritime forces clashed outside Memphis, Tennessee, for two hours in front of hundreds of civilian onlookers. Incoherent command structures on both sides resulted in little coordinated action and a swirling melee of firepower. The Union's superior arms and armament removed seven of the eight participating Confederate rams from action, thereby destroying the River Defense Fleet and causing Memphis to surrender a day later. More importantly, the victory at Memphis further solidified Federal control of the Mississippi, all the way down to Vicksburg.

Further south and before the fall of Memphis, the United States had also begun conquering the Mississippi from New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. By April 1862, the Union's way to New Orleans was open save for Fort Jackson and Fort St. Philip which sit approximately seventy miles below the city. Flag Officer David Glasgow Farragut and the West Gulf Blockading Squadron also faced various obstructions placed in the river, a handful of Southern ships, and two ironclads, CSS *Manassas* and CSS *Louisiana*. Federal operations began in earnest on April 16th when mortar schooners bombarded Forts Jackson and St. Philip. As the shells rained down for a week, sailors from USS *Itasca* and USS *Pinola* opened a gap in the riverine obstructions. On the morning of April 24th, Farragut ordered his fleet to pass the forts and head for New Orleans. After several trials and tribulations, they succeeded with minimal losses and headed upstream to New Orleans. Once Major General Mansfield Lovell, the Confederate commander at New Orleans, realized that the Union Navy had broken through his defenses, he prepared to evacuate and surrender the city. As Lovell's troops retreated, the Confederates burned all military stores, ships, warehouses, and anything considered useful to the Union. Meanwhile, panic-stricken citizens broke into stores, burned cotton and other supplies, and destroyed much of the waterfront. At 2:00 p.m. on April 25th, Farragut formally accepted the surrender of New Orleans. The loss of New Orleans, with its factories, ordinance complex, and shipbuilding facilities, was devastating to the southern war effort. More importantly, Confederate blockade runners lost a viable route to the sea and the Confederacy lost control of the lower Mississippi River.

In January of 1863, the Union assault along the Mississippi River continued, paving the way for the siege of Vicksburg in late spring and early summer. David Dixon Porter partnered with infantry commander Major General John Alexander McClernand to attack Fort Hindman situated at a bend in the Arkansas River not far from its confluence with the Mississippi. The fort served as a key base for Confederate ships as they launched raids on Northern shipping, including the December 1862 capture of *Blue Wing*, a Federal supply ship carrying supplies and munitions

allocated for William T. Sherman's command. Therefore, in a successful combined operation from January 9-11, 1863, Porter's flotilla fired upon and suppressed the fort's batteries, allowing McClelland's soldiers to deploy. The Confederate fort fell on January 11th, resulting in the surrender of 5,000 Confederates—the largest surrender of Confederates west of the Mississippi River until war's end. Porter later recalled that "The fight at Fort Hindman was one of the prettiest little affairs of the war...In the battle, everything went on so smoothly, there were no mistakes made, and the officers and seamen gained confidence in the gun-boats which they lacked before."⁴⁰

The Federal fleet's successes along the Mississippi River set the stage for the siege of Vicksburg (May 18 – July 4, 1863). Known as the "Gibraltar of the Confederacy," Vicksburg sits high above the Mississippi river bluffs and at a sharp hairpin turn of the river; it boasted a formidable array of Confederate artillery in a highly defensible spot against Union gunboats. Previous attempts to take the city had failed so Major General Ulysses S. Grant teamed up with Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter for a combined operation against the Confederate stronghold. Prior to the siege, U.S. army and naval forces rendezvoused on the West side of the river so that Porter's fleet could help transport Grant's Army of the Tennessee onto Confederate territory. When the forty-seven day siege began in earnest, Porter's gunboats often shelled the city, providing a distraction so Grant's troops could attack. With no Confederate naval vessels in the area, the only opposition to the Union fleet were Confederate fortifications along the shore. Porter typically kept his vessels in an ongoing rotation so they could refuel and remain out of range but on May 27th, ironclad USS *Cincinnati* was sunk with the loss of twenty-five sailors. The Union army, meanwhile, approached closer and closer to the city. Finally, on July 4, 1863, the city fell, giving the Union seemingly unfettered access to the Mississippi River.

But while conventional naval battles on the Mississippi may have been drawing to a close, irregular naval warfare was just beginning. The Confederates had failed to defend or maintain control of the Mississippi River but that very failure revealed the extent to which they might employ naval guerrilla warfare to thwart federal jurisdiction. During the final two years of the conflict, the Confederates quite literally blazed a path of resistance up and down the 1,190 mile stretch of the Lower Mississippi from St. Louis to New Orleans. Naval guerrillas, including an organized gang of boat burners, intentionally destroyed at least forty commercial steamboats along the Mississippi River—many of which had been in service to the U.S. army transporting men and materiel.

While the Union Navy had several key victories and supported numerous combined operations along the Western waters, the Second Battle of Sabine Pass was an overwhelming failure. The battle arose out of increased military operations in Texas and a desire to deter France, which had established a colonial government in Mexico, from aiding the Confederacy. On September 8, 1863, four Federal gunboats from the Western Gulf Blockading Squadron transported 5,000 soldiers to the mouth of the Sabine River along the Gulf of Mexico: a location known as Sabine Pass. At Sabine Pass, the Federals encountered punishing gunfire from the recently constructed Confederate fort, Fort Griffin which was garrisoned by only forty-six men.

⁴⁰ David D. Porter, *The Naval History of the Civil War* (New York: Sherman Publishing Company, 1886), 292.

The Confederates successfully disabled two vessels, captured USS *Clifton* and approximately 200 prisoners, and ultimately stopped the Federal invasion.

Likewise, one of the last decisive Confederate victories of the war was stopping the Red River Campaign (March 10-May 22, 1864), a joint Union army-navy operation. The campaign targeted Shreveport, a key gateway into Texas, the headquarters of the Army of the Trans-Mississippi, and home to armories, foundaries, and a naval shipyard, and aimed to take control of the Red River in Louisiana and Texas. Rear Admiral David Dixon Porter assembled a fleet of 90 vessels (ironclads, tinclads, timberclads, rams, monitors, and support vessels) to aid Union Major General Nathaniel P. Banks and Major General Frederick Steele in the campaign. Initially, the Federal fleet helped to take Fort DeRussy and Alexandria but Confederate troops led by President Zachary Taylor's grandson, General Richard Taylor, routed Banks' troops soon thereafter. The sailors and soldiers retreated down river before reaching Shreveport. Unseasonably low water levels delayed Porter, Banks' troops fell behind, and personality conflicts amongst the commanders led to problems. Porter faced the possibility of having to destroy his ships to prevent them from falling into Confederate hands but Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Bailey, who had an engineering background, supervised the construction of wing dams to raise the water levels high enough for the ships to escape to safety. Despite the survival of Porter's fleet, the campaign ended in failure.

Also in 1864, the Union Navy set its sights on Mobile Bay, one of the last ports along the Gulf of Mexico still in Confederate hands. The four hour engagement that occurred on August 5th was one of the most iconic naval battles of the Civil War. Rear Admiral David Glasgow Farragut's West Gulf Blockading Squadron famously faced off against Confederate Admiral Franklin Buchanan, ironclad CSS *Tennessee*, the twin Confederate forts, Fort Morgan and Fort Morgan, and a channel lined with dozens of torpedoes. Risking his fleet, Farragut famously ordered his ships to "damn the torpedoes," running through the channel to engage the awaiting Confederate ships.⁴¹ The Federals promptly captured or drove away most of the Confederate gunboats. Only Buchanan and CSS *Tennessee* directly engaged the Federal Fleet but they surrendered after three hours of fighting. The Union Navy won a key victory at Mobile Bay, gaining control of the area, closing the port to Southern blockade runners, and providing Abraham Lincoln with a much needed victory.

The *Sultana* Disaster

As the Civil War came to an end, the United States suffered one of the worst maritime disasters in history. On April 27, 1865, less than two weeks after the Lincoln Assassination, *Sultana*, a commercial steamboat carrying 2,300 passengers, including just-released Union prisoners of war, exploded and sank seven miles north of Memphis, Tennessee. The ship could only carry 376 people but a lucrative military contract, a desire to return veterans and former prisoners home, and some bribery resulted in an overloaded passenger list to almost six times the legal limit. The accident itself occurred at 2:00 a.m., when three of the steamship's four boilers exploded; at least one had been hastily patched when *Sultana* docked at Vicksburg. Longstanding

⁴¹ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Admiral Farragut* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1893), 278.

estimates claimed that approximately 1,700 people died from either the explosion, the corresponding fire, or from drowning in the icy Mississippi River; historian Gene Salecker's latest research lowers that number to less than 1,200.⁴² Either way, the demise of *Sultana* was the worst maritime disaster in U.S. history to date—yet it received little press coverage at the time because Lincoln's Assassination dominated the newspapers.

The Final Flag surrendered: CSS *Shenandoah*

The final Confederate ship to surrender was CSS *Shenandoah*, a 1,160-ton steam cruiser launched at Glasgow, Scotland, in August of 1863 as the civilian steamer *Sea King*. The Confederacy secretly bought the vessel and put it to sea in October of 1864. *Shenandoah* traveled through the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, hunting the Pacific whaling fleet and sinking seven vessels and capturing two more. The Confederate raider made periodic port calls along the way to Australia, and even temporarily acquired a penguin for a pet.⁴³ In January of 1865, *Shenandoah* docked in Melbourne before heading out to the Pacific Ocean to target more whaling vessels. Unaware that the war ended in April, *Shenandoah* captured and destroyed 32 whaling vessels before finally learning in August that hostilities had concluded. *Shenandoah* returned to Liverpool and was handed over to the British on November 6, 1865. In sum, CSS *Shenandoah* sailed for 12 months and 17 days, traversed 58,000 miles, and had sunk or captured 38 ships, making it a highly successful commerce raider and the final group of Confederates to surrender.

Conclusion

The Civil War naval war was marked by technological innovation, a sizeable blockade of the Confederate coast, a significant naval buildup by both sides, international combat, and acts of piracy, privateering, and commerce raiding. By war's end, the United States had amassed one of the largest navies in the world, spending \$587,000,000 to build 671 warships carrying 4,610 guns. The Confederacy, meanwhile, fought an asymmetrical war, relying on creativity to build a maritime force from nothing. The Confederate Navy constructed or purchased 121 warships carrying 400 guns, including 20 ironclads, 8 torpedo boats, and 2 submarines. Notable combat occurred in five oceans, amidst dozens of port towns, and on multiple rivers, but the most famous was the Battle of Hampton Roads. Both navies played a pivotal role in the successes of their side, contributing to joint operations, securing victories of their own, and impacting the duration of the conflict. Perhaps, that is why Abraham Lincoln stated, "Nor must Uncle Sam's web-feet be forgotten. At all the watery margins they have been present. Not only on the deep sea, the broad

⁴² For more, see Gene Eric Salecker, *Destruction of the Steamboat Sultana* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2022).

⁴³ Extracts from Notes on the C.S.S. *Shenandoah* by her commander James Iredell Waddell, C.S. Navy, *O.R.N.* I, 3, 808.

bay, and the rapid river, but also up the narrow muddy bayou, and wherever the ground was a little damp, they have been and made their tracks.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Abraham Lincoln to James C. Conkling, Wednesday, August 26, 1863, *Abraham Lincoln Papers: Series 1. General Correspondence*, 1833-1916, Library of Congress, available online at <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mal.2584600/>, accessed August 10, 2026.
