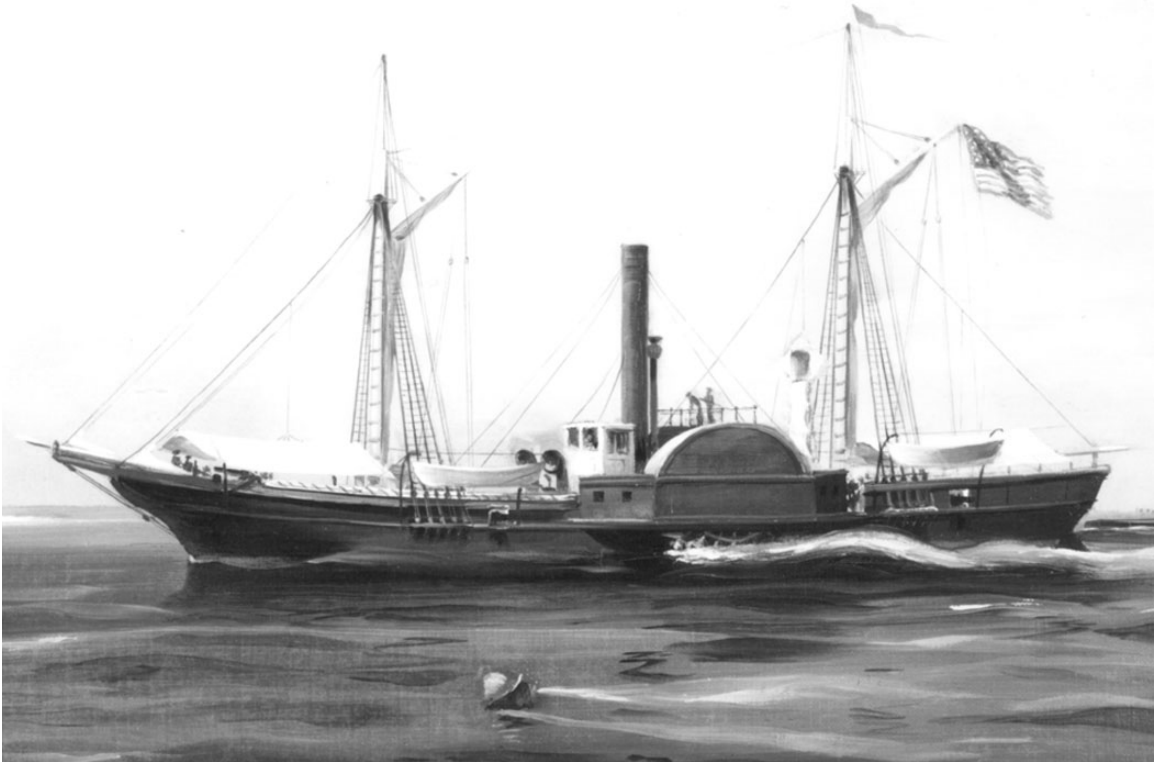


Irony Clad:
The Remarkable Odyssey of the
U.S.S. Water Witch

By: **Matthew Young**
Columbus State University



The United States Ship *Water Witch*

One June evening off the coast of Georgia, seven Confederate boats quietly pulled up along side the *USS Water Witch* in Ossabaw Sound. Several Confederate sailors quietly boarded the Union ship in an attempt to capture her. In a short but fierce fight, the officer leading the raid for the South, Lieutenant Thomas Pelot, was killed. In addition, a black slave who was a commissioned Confederate Naval officer named Moses Dallas, was also killed. The capture of the *Water Witch* was to be the beginning of a series of moves designed to help relieve the port of Savannah from the blockade, but it was not to be. Dallas, the pilot, was the only one who knew the waters well enough to guide the ship and Pelot was to be in command of the expedition. With their deaths, the capture of the *USS Water Witch* became an isolated and somewhat forgotten event. Despite that, the story of the *Water Witch* is filled with strange coincidences, odd incidents, and a peculiar irony.

The *United States Ship Water Witch* began her life as a wooden hulled side-wheel gunboat built in the Washington Navy Yard in 1851. She was the third ship to carry the name *Water Witch*. Her two predecessors were also wooden hulled vessels, and the very first *USS Water Witch* was powered by a revolutionary propulsion system designed by Lieutenant William W. Hunter of the United States Navy. Hunter's system of "placing the (paddle) wheels inside the hull of the ship at a right angle to the keel making their rotations horizontal rather than vertical"

turned out to be less effective than he would have liked. The ship lost between 50 to 70 percent of its speed as a result of the design. The entire ship had to be reworked and the system of internal paddlewheels was eventually done away with all together.¹ Many years later, Lieutenant Hunter would resign from the service of the United States Navy to serve in the Confederate Navy. Commodore William W. Hunter would later command the Savannah squadron that was responsible for capturing the *Water Witch*.

The third *USS Water Witch* was “commissioned during the winter of 1852 and 1853, Lieutenant Thomas Jefferson Page in command.”² The hull measured 150 feet in length and displaced some 450 tons. She was propelled by a pair of overhung perpendicular paddle wheels, which had a total area of some thirty square feet. She was powered by one main steam engine that was fed by two iron boilers located at the center of the ship that weighed a combined 66,200 pounds.³

On February 8, 1853, the ship sailed from Norfolk, Virginia, and headed south for a voyage along the Atlantic coast of the southern portion of South America and of the rivers, which drain that part of the continent. Over the next few years, she conducted extensive surveys of the rivers in the countries of Paraguay, Argentina, and Uruguay. However, on February 1, 1855, a Paraguayan fort along the La Plata River fired upon the *Water Witch* and killed one of the sailors serving on the ship. This incident promptly ended the survey mission of

¹ Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships, Volume VIII, p.157

² Ibid

³ “The United States Steamer *Water Witch*”, Journal of the Franklin Institute, Vol.25, March 1853, p.179

the *Water Witch* in the La Plata. However, the ship continued on its mission in other parts of South America and eventually returned to the United States for repairs in May of 1856.⁴

The next active service that the *Water Witch* saw was in retribution for the attack that was carried out against her in 1855. Several ships from the “Brazil Squadron” sailed under the command of Flag Officer W. B. Shubrick to Asuncion, Paraguay to exact an apology from the Paraguayan government. Along with the *Water Witch*, the *USS St. Lawrence*, and the *USS Fulton* joined in the journey. The presence of such a large fleet so close to the seat of government “added eloquence to the arguments of the United States Special Commissioner James B. Bowlin. He promptly obtained a satisfactory apology, an indemnity for damages, and a new commercial treaty which established most cordial relations between the two countries.”⁵

The *Water Witch* continued her survey expeditions in South America until shortly before the start of the American Civil War. She put into the port of Philadelphia in November of 1860 for refit and repairs and was re-commissioned on April 10, 1861, only two days before the attack on Fort Sumter. Upon the news of war, the *Water Witch* steamed south around the coast of Florida to join the Gulf Blockading Squadron. She joined the squadron in Pensacola, Florida on May 2, 1861 and initially served as a mail steamer and dispatch runner between Key

⁴ Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships, Volume VIII, p.157

⁵ www.history.navy.mil/danfs/s/stlawrence.htm

West, Havana, and Pensacola. Later that summer, her primary duty station was changed from the Gulf coast to the mouth of the Mississippi River. During the months on station at the mouth of the Mississippi, the *Water Witch* made several trips up into the river and on one occasion engaged the Confederate ship *Ivy*.⁶

In January of 1862, the Gulf Blockading Squadron was divided into two sections to create the West Gulf Blockading Squadron and the East Gulf Blockading Squadron. The *Water Witch* was assigned to the Eastern Gulf Blockading Squadron and her assigned patrol area extended from Mobile to Pensacola. On March 5, 1862, the *Water Witch* chased the Confederate Schooner, *William Mallory*, for five hours before finally capturing the Confederate blockade runner late in the day. In April, the ship began another period of repairs that lasted until the beginning of September. She put to sea that month and sailed to join the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron at Port Royal, South Carolina. She served in various duties with the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron until her machinery broke down in early 1863. She was towed north, repaired, and returned to the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron in June of 1863.⁷

“She (*Water Witch*) performed blockade duty at several points along the coasts of South Carolina, Georgia, and northern Florida, but most frequently at Ossabaw Sound between Ossabaw Island and the Georgia mainland about 15

⁶ Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships, Volume VIII, p.158

⁷ Ibid

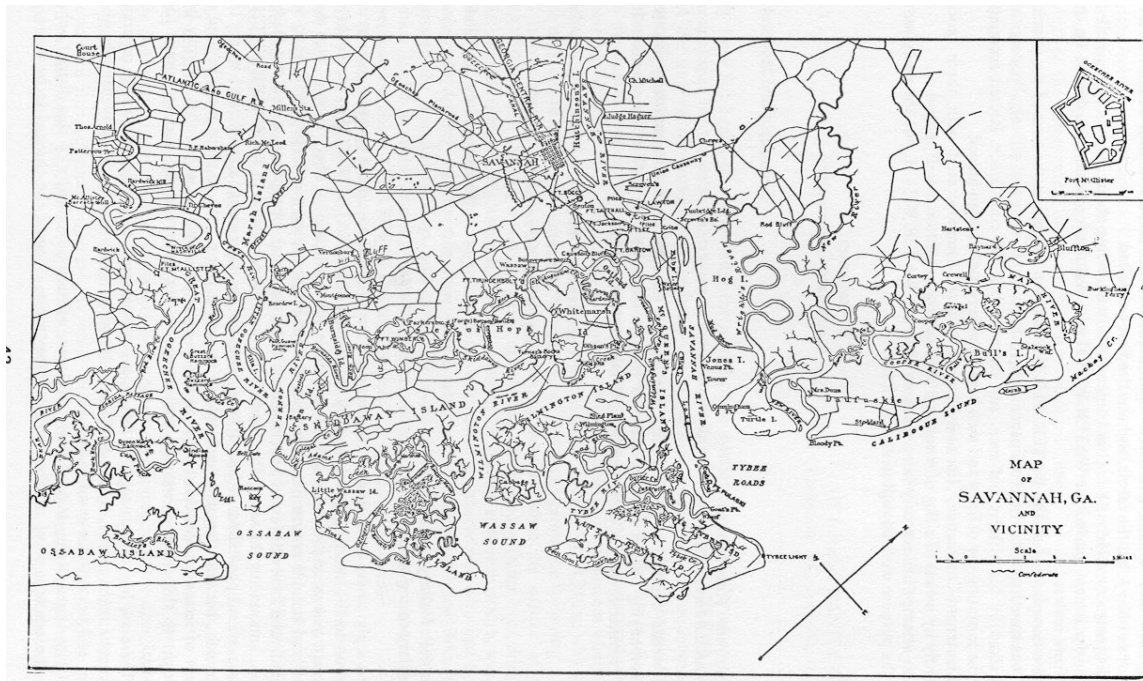
miles due south of Savannah. That remained her primary duty station well into 1864.”⁸

This is where we meet one of the primary characters in the story of the capture of the Water Witch, Lieutenant Thomas Postell Pelot of the Confederate States Navy. Thomas Pelot was not yet thirteen years old when he received his appointment by Senator John C. Calhoun to the United States Naval Academy on June 21, 1849.



⁸ Ibid

Pelot (*seen above*) graduated from Annapolis and served in the United States Navy from the time of his graduation until he resigned in January of 1861. On June 21, 1861, less than three months after he received a commission of Lieutenant in the Confederate Navy, Pelot commanded a small ship, *Lady Davis*, and captured a much larger commerce ship, the *A. B. Thompson* off the coast of South Carolina. Pelot later commanded the *C.S.S. Atlanta*, *C.S.S. Savannah*, *C.S.S. Oconee*, the ironclad *C.S.S. Georgia*, and the steamer *Resolute*.⁹



On May 31st of 1864, Lieutenant Pelot was placed in command of an expedition to capture a US Navy vessel that was at anchor at the mouth of Little Ogeechee River. This ship turned out to be the *USS Water Witch*. He was given 2 boats and 40 men from the *Savannah*, 2 boats and 50 men from the *Georgia*, and 1

⁹ South Carolina Patriot Magazine, Thomas Postnell Pelot, p.5

boat and 25 men from the *Sampson*.¹⁰ Some 11 officers and 120 men ended up in the expedition, which left from Fort Jackson and traveled down the Savannah River on Tuesday May 31st, 1864.¹¹

Pelot's plan of capture was well thought out and seemingly simple to execute. When night fell, he would take the lead boat, and pull it up along side the steamer followed by the other boats in his small fleet. Lieutenant Price from the *CSS Sampson* would lead the raid on the starboard side while Pelot led the men from the port side of the ship. In all, seven boats and some one hundred and fifty men took part in the expedition.¹²

In the early morning hours of June 3rd, 1864 on a moonless night, Lieutenant Pelot and his expedition quietly made their way through Ossabaw Sound toward the *USS Water Witch*. A black slave pilot named Moses Dallas was piloting the lead ship in the expedition. According to the *Historic Register of Confederate Naval Officers*, Moses Dallas was listed as a Confederate Naval Officer with the rank of pilot. "Skilled pilots on Confederate gunboats were well paid (\$80 to \$100 per month) and held an officers rank, albeit without the authority. One such pilot was Moses Dallas, who served with the Savannah Squadron from 1862 to 1864. A letter from the Savannah Squadron commander to the Secretary of the Navy displays this extraordinary situation of a slave in the position of authority: "I have also been compelled to increase the pay of Moses

¹⁰ The *USS Water Witch*, *The Georgia Historical Society*, p.5

¹¹ *South Carolina Patriot Magazine*, Thomas Postnell Pelot, p.5

¹² *Civil War Times Illustrated*, Volume XIII, Number 8, December, 1974, p. 24-28

Dallas from \$80 to \$100 per month in order to retain him. He is a colored pilot and is considered the best inland pilot on the coast.”¹³

Pelot and his forces approached the *Water Witch* early in the morning hours of June 3rd, 1864. According to the Acting Assistant Paymaster, Luther G. Billings, the night had been, “sultry and oppressive, with frequent rain and intermittent heat lightning. During the day, the monthly ship had arrived, bringing us out mail and fresh provisions, and in honor of this event I had “broken out” in an unaccustomed white shirt, which I still wore when I turned in for the night. There was nothing to interrupt my pleasant slumber until just before dawn, when a strange noise aroused me.”¹⁴

What Billings heard were Pelot and his men attempting to board the *Water Witch*. Several boats had pulled up along side the paddlewheel and Confederate sailors were now climbing up the side of the ship in an attempt to get to the top deck. The total force of the Confederate raiding party is believed to have been between 120 and 140 men. Pelot requested rations for 130 men on June 2nd, although not all of the men were able to pull their boats up along side the ship. The crew of the *Water Witch* was around 65 men according to an after action report sent by Lieutenant Joseph Price to Commodore William W. Hunter, commander of the Savannah Squadron. This is the same Hunter who had

¹³ www.nmlha.org/ondeck/1862blackCSN.htm

¹⁴ Billings, Luther, Asst. Paymaster, USS *Water Witch*. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. p.37, 38

previously served in the US Navy and designed the side wheels for the original *Water Witch*.

As Billings came onto the deck with a pair of loaded revolvers, he heard the commander of the *Water Witch*, Lieutenant Commander Austin Pendergrast yell, “All hands repel boarders! Slip the cables – go ahead, full speed!”¹⁵ The only detailed account of what happened next comes from the manuscript of the Acting Assistant Paymaster, Luther Billings. Billings was appointed an Acting Assistant Paymaster from the state of New York on October 24, 1862. He was made Assistant Paymaster later in the war on March 3, 1865. Billings remained in the US Navy until well after the war and was placed on the retired list on March 14, 1898.

Boarders were now jumping onto the deck and Billings encountered one of the first men on the deck. The southerner struck Billings with part of his drawn saber and ended up striking one of the pistols that Billings had. The paymaster grabbed the man, placed the muzzle of the pistol into his side, and pulled the trigger. The attacker fell to the deck face up. Billings, and another officer, Acting Ensign Stover, shot down several men who were appearing on the deck. As Billings turned around, another boarder was there to meet him. The “rebel climbed over the rail, reached in and pressed his pistol against my breast, pulling the trigger – once, twice and three times – but no explosion followed. With a curse he struck at me, using the treacherous weapon as a club. Dodging the blow,

¹⁵ Ibid, p.38

I grabbed one of my revolvers and shot him through the head. As his body disappeared, a grinning Negro face appeared at the port opening. I remember now how ghastly his face grew when his gaze met the leveled pistol I held only a few inches away from it. Again the deadly flash and Moses (the only pilot the invaders had to depend upon), also passed away.”¹⁶

The Union crew of the *Water Witch* put up a good fight, but they were now beginning to be overwhelmed by the great numbers of southern sailors boarding their ship. The Union crew now began to fall back to the interior of the ship and went to the arms chest under the hurricane deck where they could find loaded weapons. After a short and desperate fight, Billings killed another two men before he was struck in the head with the base of a short sword. According to Billings, there was no one left to officially surrender the ship as the entire crew was either wounded or killed.

Billings states that there were some forty casualties between the two sides during the fight. However, other reports list casualties for the Confederates as nine killed, and fifteen wounded. Billings states that he believes the casualties to be much higher because the rebels did not factor in the number of men shot who fell into the water and were officially listed as missing. Lieutenant Joseph Price, who took command of the raid after Pelot was killed, lists the Union casualties at one killed and eleven wounded.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid, p.39-40

¹⁷ The USS *Water Witch*, [The Georgia Historical Society](#), p.11

The ship was manned by several of the men who had captured her and they were able to steer her closer to shore in order to unload the prisoners. Unfortunately, without a qualified pilot to steer the ship, it ran hard aground in one of the river channels. It was at this point that Lieutenant William Watts Carnes of the Confederate Navy was placed in command of the captured steamer *Water Witch*. Carnes, a native of Tennessee, had been an acting Midshipman in the US Navy before the war. He had just been promoted to First Lieutenant on June 2, 1864 and had previously served in the Army. He would later command the *CSS Savannah*, the *CSS Sampson*, and was slated to be the first commander of the ironclad *CSS Jackson* that was being constructed in the Confederate Naval Yard in Columbus, Georgia.

Carnes and a platoon of Confederate Marines took several small boats and boarded the *Water Witch*. Price turned command over to Carnes and they were quickly able to free the ship, despite the lack of cooperation from the Union Engineers below deck. Because the fires in the engines had been allowed to extinguish after the *Water Witch* ran aground, Carnes had the rowboats placed in front of the ship and had the oarsmen row and tow the vessel with the tide, running upstream, after raising the light anchor. It later turned out that Lieutenant William Watts Carnes and Lieutenant Joseph Price were related through Price's grandfather.¹⁸

¹⁸ Carnes, William Watts. Unpublished memoirs of Lt. W.W. Carnes donated to the Confederate Naval Museum by R.S. Carnes, January 1986

Back in Savannah, Lieutenant Pelot and Pilot Moses Dallas were given a heroes farewell. The Confederate government even paid for the casket and funeral for Moses Dallas which cost over eighty dollars.¹⁹ The capture of the steamer was widely reported in newspapers all along the Southern Atlantic Coast, from Jacksonville to Wilmington. The captured Union Navy prisoners were first sent to a Confederate hospital, then shipped to Macon, Georgia.²⁰

Over the next few weeks, the Union Navy made several attempts to find the captured steamer and either re-capture her or destroy her entirely. Hunter wanted the ship to get to Savannah as soon as possible, but this was never accomplished for several reasons. First of all, the *Water Witch* drafted too much water, up to eight and a half feet, to be transported through inland waterways to the port city. She could not enter the Ossabaw Sound for she would immediately be attacked by Union warships. So, the Confederate Navy seemed to be willing to let the *Water Witch* stay in the Vernon River.²¹

The captured Union officers and sailors were eventually turned over to Northern officials and an enquiry into the circumstances surrounding the capture of the ship was held in Washington DC in November of 1864. Later that year, on December 15th, Lieutenant Commander Austin Pendergrast, who was Captain of the *Water Witch* at the time of her capture, was court-martialed for “culpable inefficiency in the discharge of duty.” He was found guilty of the charge and was

¹⁹ Kennington, John. “Gray Jackets in Savannah”, Masters Thesis for East Carolina University, 1993

²⁰ Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Manuscript of Asst. Paymaster Luther Billings, p.55, 56

²¹ The USS *Water Witch*, [The Georgia Historical Society](#), p.22

sentenced to be suspended from duty for two years, on half pay, with loss of rank from the date of sentence of January 16, 1865.²²

As for the *Water Witch*, she remained in the shallow Vernon River until December 19th, 1864 when the *Water Witch* was burned by the Confederates to prevent it from being captured by the advancing Union Army under the command of General William T. Sherman.²³ In the end, the Confederates had possession of the ship for a little more than six months, but were unable to make use of her because the Confederate Navy was not able to get the ship to a suitable port.

The *USS Water Witch* served the U.S. Navy proudly from the time of her first mission in 1853, through the coastal surveys of South America, into the War Between the States, and up to the time of her capture in June of 1864 at the hands of a daring Confederate commando raid, piloted by a slave. Several artifacts from the *Water Witch* are on display at the National Civil War Naval Museum in Columbus, Georgia including the original boat flag and the ships bell that was sounded as the Confederate raiders boarded the paddle wheeled ship. These artifacts survived only through the hands of some Southern sailor who retrieved the items off the ship before she was scuttled. Historians and researches have been trying to locate just where the ship sank, but to this day, no one knows the exact final resting place of the United States Ship, *Water Witch*.

²² Ibid, p.63

²³ Ibid, p.48

Works Cited

- Billings, Luther, Asst. Paymaster. Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.
- Blocker, John R. "Capture of the Blockader Water Witch." Confederate Veteran Magazine, Volume XVII, No. 12, December, 1909. Nashville, Tennessee.
- Carnes, William Watts. Unpublished memoirs of Lt. W.W. Carnes donated to the Confederate Naval Museum by R.S. Carnes, January 1986.
- Carrol, John M. Register of Officers of the Confederate States Navy 1861-1865. J.M. Carroll & Company, 1983. Reprint of Original published by the US Navy Department, Washington D.C., 1931.
- Featherstone, Douglas. "Thomas Postnell Pelot," South Carolina Patriot Magazine.
- Holcombe, Robert. Interview at the National Civil War Naval Museum, February, 2002.
- Isherwood, B. F., Chief Engineer, U.S. Navy. "The United States Steamer Water Witch," Journal of the Franklin Institute, Volume 25, March 1853, p.179.
- Kennington, John. "Gray Jackets in Savannah", Masters Thesis for East Carolina University, 1993.
- Lawrence, Alexander A. A Present for Mr. Lincoln, The Story of Savannah from Secession to Sherman. The Oglethorpe Press, Inc. Savannah, 1997.

Minor Jr., Hubbard T. "Diary of a Confederate Naval Officer;" Civil War Times Illustrated, Volume XIII, Number 8, December, 1974, p. 24-28.

Mooney, James L. Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships, Volume VIII, Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, Washington DC, 1981.

Mosier, Joe. "The Germ experiment- Lt. William Hunter's Horizontal Wheel." The Daybook Magazine, Volume 6, No. 2, Winter 2000.

"The USS Water Witch", The Georgia Historical Society; Savannah, Georgia, 1974.

www.history.navy.mil/danfs/s/stlawrence.htm USS St. Lawrence History.

www.nmla.org/ondeck/1862blackCSN.htm Black Americans in the Confederate Navy and Marine Corps.