



## The Confederate and Union Navies in the Campaign for Mobile

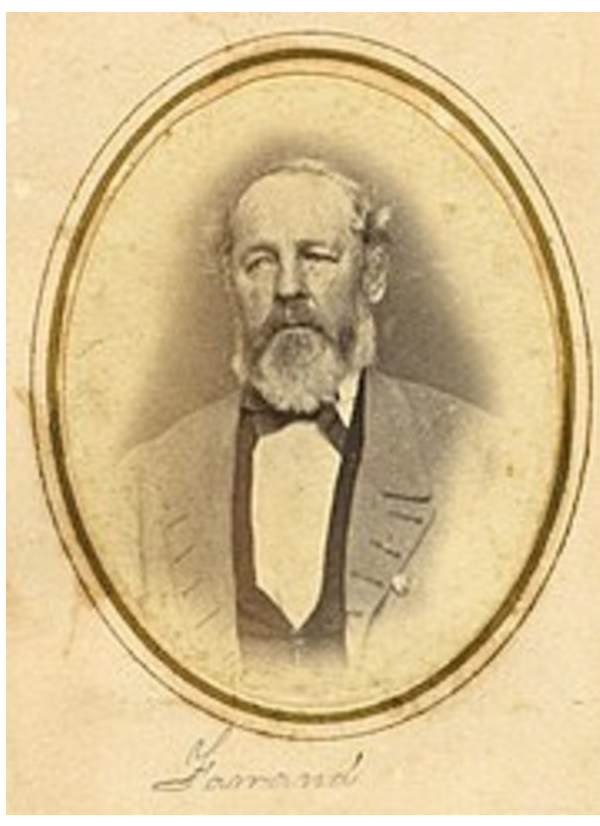
Mike Bunn, September 13, 2021

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Illustration of the Storming of Fort Blakeley, *Harper's Weekly*, May 27, 1865

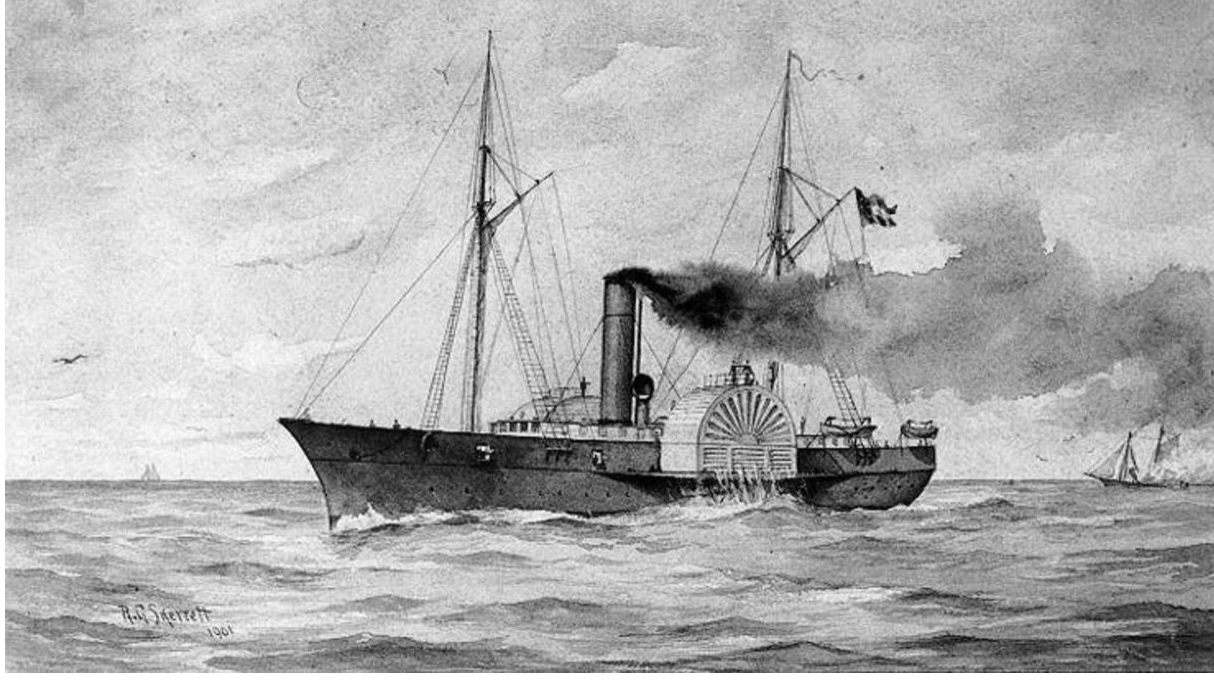
Most readers of Civil War history are aware that the Mobile Bay area witnessed some significant action between the Union and Confederate navies. The Battle of Mobile Bay, fought in August 1864, was, of course, the largest naval battle of the war, and closed off the bay—one of the last significant blockade-running ports in the Confederacy. Yet the city of Mobile remained in Confederate hands after that naval clash and would so until the last days of the war. A vital population and logistical center for what remained of the Confederacy in the final months of the war, after Richmond fell in early April 1865, it stood as the largest city in the South still in Confederate hands. While the Campaign for Mobile, a combined-forces operation featuring a total of nearly 60,000 men under arms, resulted in some of the largest land battles to occur in Alabama, it also featured a substantial but overlooked naval operations component.



Commodore Ebenezer Farrand | Collections of the Alabama Department of Archives and History

A small Confederate naval squadron and a larger Federal fleet would each play important roles in the campaign that played out along the meandering waterways of the lower Mobile-Tensaw Delta. Commodore Ebenezer Farrand commanded the rebel squadron defending Mobile. One of the Confederacy's first naval officers, he served at various posts throughout the South, including at Pensacola, Savannah, and Selma, prior to being stationed at Mobile. The warships he had at his disposal included a partially armored wooden gunboat, the *Morgan*, which had participated in the Battle of Mobile Bay, and several ironclads of varying utility. The most impressive was the CSS *Nashville*, a casemated sidewheel ironclad laid down in Montgomery and finished in Mobile. A relative behemoth in comparison to its sister ships, the boat measured over 270 feet long, sported three Brooke rifles and a 24-pound howitzer, and was powered by adequate steam engines. The latter

fact proved significant to Confederate naval efforts around Mobile, as Farrand's other ironclads, the *Huntsville* and the *Tuscaloosa*, effectively served as floating batteries in front of the city—and across the delta from the main centers of action in the campaign—owing to the fact their weak engines could not reliably stem the current of the rivers emptying into the bay.



CSS *Nashville* | U.S. Naval Historic Center

The *Nashville* and the *Morgan* in particular played an important role in the Confederate defense of Fort Blakeley. They traversed the 8 miles of tangled labyrinthine waterways between Mobile and the fort, located along the Tensaw River on the delta's eastern shores, to add their firepower to the guns directed at Gen. Edward S. Canby's besieging Federal army in early April 1865. "We slept in our bomb-proofs when we did sleep," remembered one exhausted Yankee trooper, "out of the reach of the big shells which the rebel gunboats tossed over to us." A Federal officer remembered how the boats "annoyed the besiegers every day, striking quite close to the different headquarters..." Even at the time of the fall of Fort Blakeley on April 9, 1865, the *Nashville* was still operating in the Tensaw and nudged up to shore to rescue several dozen desperate rebels in the wake of the charge that overwhelmed their position.

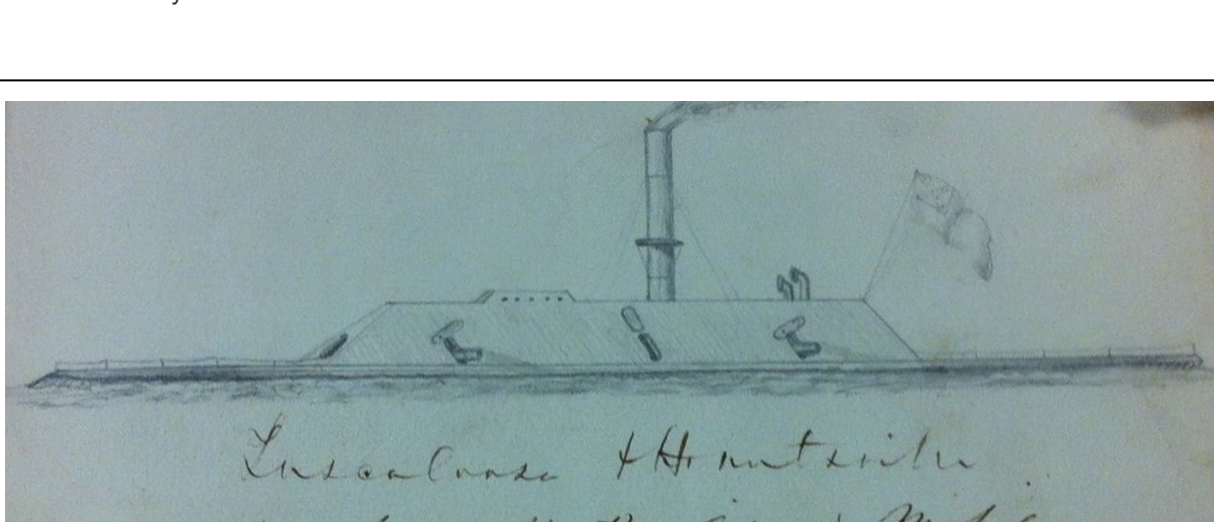
Rear Adm. Henry Knox Thatcher commanded the Federal fleet of over 30 warships that took part in the campaign. A native of Maine, he became a midshipman as a teenager and would ultimately spend nearly half a century in the United States Navy. During the war he served with the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron before being given command of the West Gulf Squadron in early 1865. At Mobile he commanded a fleet of over two dozen vessels, several of which had bozen the guns of Fort Morgan and the Confederate navy in the Battle of Mobile Bay months earlier. His fleet included the double-turreted ironclads *Milwaukee*, *Winnebago*, *Kickapoo*, and *Chickasaw*; the single-turreted *Osage*, the tinclad *Rodolph*; and gunboats *Genesee* and the *Octorara*—



Rear Adm. Henry Knox Thatcher

survivor of an attack by a semi-submersible Confederate "torpedo boat" known as the *St. Patrick* in lower Mobile Bay in January 1865.

Thatcher used his fleet to fire on Confederate land positions, prevent resupply of enemy outposts via the rivers, and to transport supplies. Unlike the Battle of Mobile Bay, in which the Federal fleet was battered and suffered the loss of only one major warship, making its disputed entrance into the bay, the Union navy lost at least six boats in the murky delta waters between Spanish Fort and Mobile during operations in the campaign for Mobile. One (*Octorara*) suffered a boiler explosion that temporarily put it out of action, but the others (*Milwaukee*, *Osage*, *Rodolph*, *Ida*, *Althea*, *Sciota*, and a launch from the Cincinnati among them) fell victim to torpedoes, or underwater mines, which Confederates had lined area waterways with to hinder the fleet's progress and help offset their disadvantage in manpower and machinery. These devices were essentially floating barrels of gunpowder designed to detonate upon contact with a ship's hull. A few dozen sailors lost their lives as a consequence aside from the material damage suffered in these incidents, a somber and often forgotten part of the casualty lists resulting from the campaign. Most of these vessels were either salvaged or refloated in short order, and there are few physical reminders of the Civil War Union navy's presence left in the lower Mobile-Tensaw Delta today.



CSS *Huntsville* | National Archives

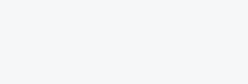
Not so with the Confederate squadron. After the fall of Spanish Fort, Fort Blakeley, and Batteries *Huger* and *Tracy* in succession between April 8 and April 11, 1865, Mobile was surrendered to Federal forces on April 12. Farrand and most of his squadron fled upriver to central Alabama, where they hoped to find a way to continue the struggle. But within days, they also were captured as the last organized Confederate military forces remaining. The *Tuscaloosa* and the *Huntsville*, though, unable to attempt the upriver journey with their underpowered and unreliable engines, were scuttled just off Mobile in the Spanish River. There they yet lie today, perhaps the best preserved of all Confederate ironclads, under several feet of mud.

*Mike Bunn is the Director of Historic Blakeley State Park and author of The Assault on Fort Blakeley: The Thunder and Lightning of Battle*



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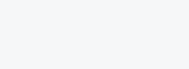
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