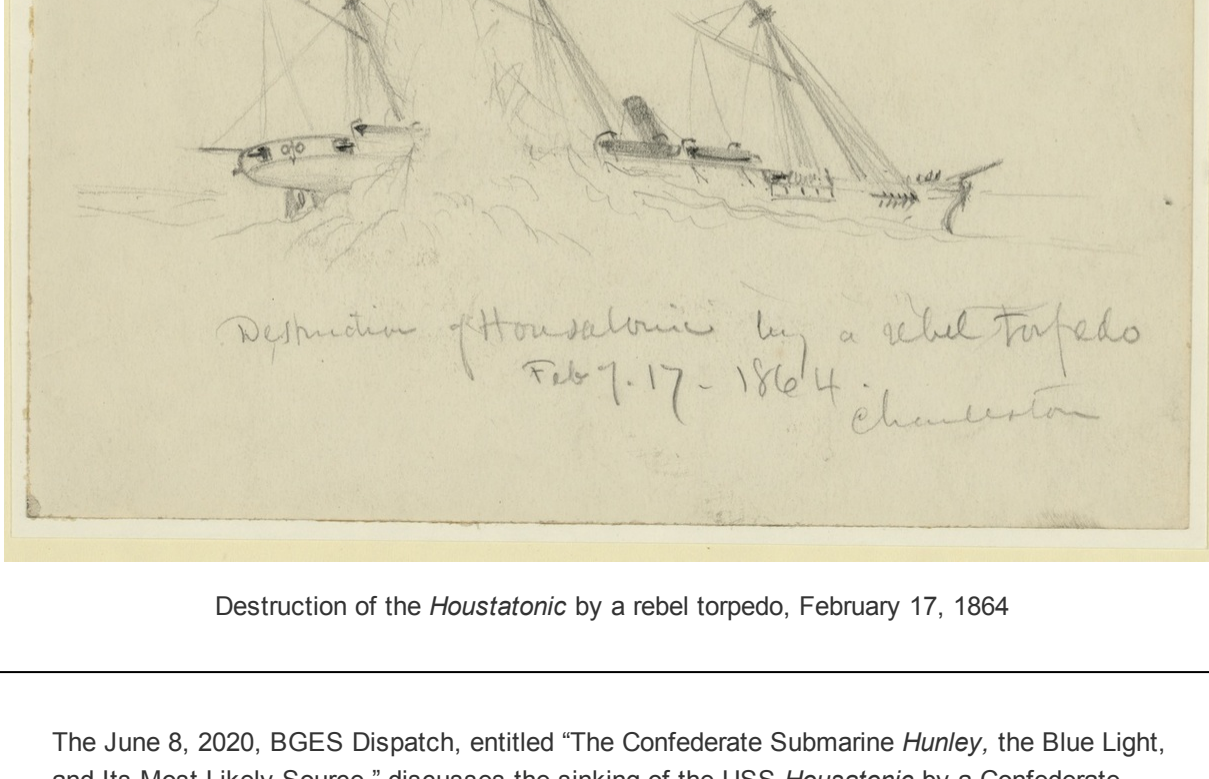




## A Different Conclusion to the CSS *Hunley* and the Blue Light Debate

By Christopher Rucker, June 19, 2020

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Destruction of the *Housatonic* by a rebel torpedo, February 17, 1864

The June 8, 2020, BGES Dispatch, entitled "The Confederate Submarine *Hunley*, the Blue Light, and Its Most Likely Source," discusses the sinking of the USS *Housatonic* by a Confederate torpedo on the evening of February 17, 1864, off the Charleston coast. In this article, the author concludes that the blue light observed by Confederate lookouts at Battery Marshall, and by a sailor on the sunken *Housatonic*, came from the Federal tug *Daffodil*, rather than the *H.L. Hunley*. Arguments that the blue light originated from something other than the sub are not novel, but they never gained traction because of the lack of evidence, and the preponderance of evidence that supports the *Hunley* as the signal's source.

We know for a fact that before the mission there were "signals agreed upon" between the *Hunley* crew and her shore base. We know for a fact that a newspaperman said that the signals were "two blue lights." Since the plan was to send signals, which were observed on shore by the Confederates who had agreed to look for them (another fact), logical researchers have concluded that the sub sent the blue light signals.

Let us examine the argument that the blue light came from a Federal vessel. *Housatonic* crewman Robert Flemming's testimony is critical, since he established the position of the blue light and the battlefield geometry. Flemming was 22-year-old African-American marble cutter from Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, who had enlisted in the Navy on either June 22, 1862, or May 14, 1863. That gave him between nine and 20 months of sea experience by the time the *Housatonic* was sunk, depending upon which enlistment date is accurate. His keen eyes were the first on his ship to detect the approaching sub (another fact), which should dispel any doubts about his observational skills. There was no social status so low as an African-American landsman on a U.S. warship, yet while deposed by a white superior officer in an investigation that might have assigned him some blame for the *Housatonic*'s loss, Flemming was unimpeached and offered his unsolicited comment about the blue light. I find him to be a courageous and reliable witness.

Let us look at the testimony in its unedited form, which supports the submarine as the source of the blue light. The examining officer asked: "Did you see this object (the submarine) at any time after you fired at it?" Flemming answered: "I did not. When the *Canandaigua* got astern, and lying athwart of the *Housatonic*, about four ships lengths off, while I was in the fore rigging I saw a blue light on the water just ahead of the *Canandaigua*, and on the starboard quarters of the *Housatonic*." Flemming could have stopped his answer after saying "I did not," but he added, without being prompted, his statement about the blue light. He was obviously eager to tell the officer that he didn't see the sub itself, but he sure knew where it was, because its position was marked by the blue light. He couldn't see the sub for the same reasons he didn't see it approach his ship until it was too late for the *Housatonic* to defend itself or escape: The sub was black, quiet, its hull barely awash, and it was over 800 feet ("four ships lengths") from his observation point on the sunken ship. It was a stealth vessel, invisible to Flemming even on a night brightly lit by an almost full moon.

Could a tugboat in the vicinity of the *Canandaigua* be a plausible source for the blue light that Flemming believed marked the position of the *Hunley*? Look closely at the sequence of events, and we see that this argument is without merit. I have personally reviewed the original deck logs of the four ships in the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, which were within steaming distance of the *Housatonic*: the USS *Canandaigua*; the USS *Wabash*; the USS *Mary Sanford*; and the USS *Paul Jones*. We can dispense with the last two, which did not learn of the sinking until the next day. The *Canandaigua* was the closest, about a mile and a half to the southwest of the *Housatonic* (Fig. 1).

### Charleston Harbor, 1864

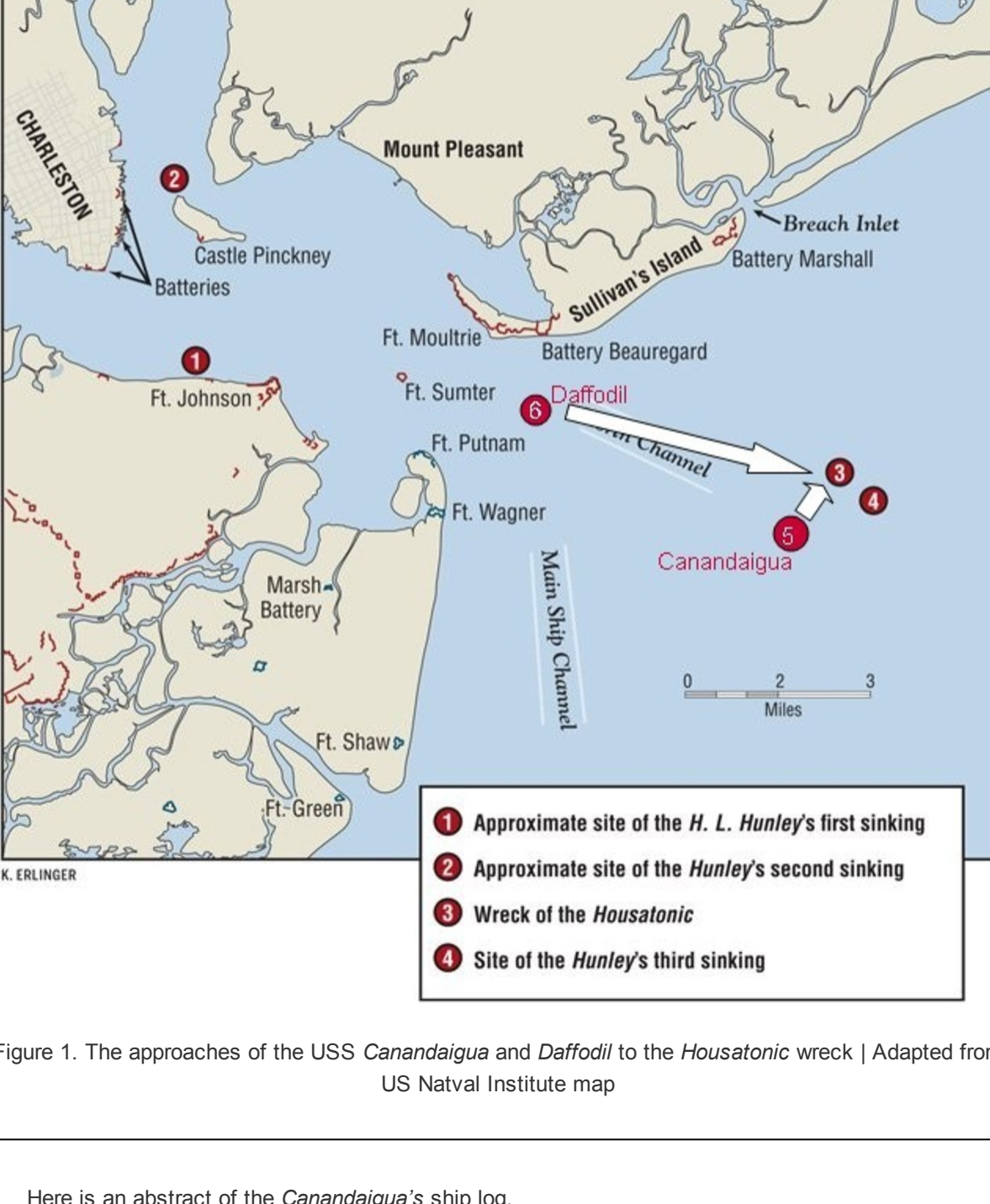


Figure 1. The approaches of the USS *Canandaigua* and *Daffodil* to the *Housatonic* wreck | Adapted from US Natval Institute map

Here is an abstract of the *Canandaigua*'s ship log.

Abstract Log of the USS *Canandaigua*, Captain Green, US Navy, Commanding

February 17, 1864. At 9:20 pm discovered a boat pulling toward us. Hailed her and found her to be from the *Housatonic*. She reported the *Housatonic* sunk by a torpedo. Immediately slipped our chain and started for the scene of danger, with the *Housatonic*'s boat in tow. At the same time sent up three rockets and burned Coston signals No. 82 and soon after burned 82 again. At 9:30 pm picked up another boat from the *Housatonic*, with Captain Pickering on board. At 9:35 arrived at the *Housatonic* and found her sunk. Lowered all boats, sent them alongside, and rescued the officers and crew, clinging to the rigging. At 10:30 all were brought from the wreck. Brought on board this ship, belonging to the *Housatonic*, 21 officers and 137 men. At 11:30 stood toward the *Wabash*, to the southward and westward. Made signal to the *Mary Sanford*. The tug *Daffodil*, from inside the bar, communicated with us, Lieutenant Commander Belknap on board. At 12 communicated with the *Wabash* and send on board of her 8 officers and 49 men belonging to the *Housatonic*. [1]

The *Canandaigua*'s log is unequivocal: The entire crew of the *Housatonic* was onboard by 10:30 p.m., well before the *Daffodil* arrived. Flemming could not have observed a blue light displayed from the tug while he was suspended in the rigging of the *Housatonic*. This fact alone disproves the theory that the tug displayed the blue light.

If it had been correct that the *Daffodil* burned a blue light, it begs the questions of "where" and "why?" Flemming clearly stated that the blue light was ahead of the *Canandaigua*, so the *Daffodil* would have had to be ahead of the *Canandaigua*, as well. There are two possible orientations of the *Canandaigua* relative to the sunken *Housatonic*, which had its bow directed into the tidal current and slight wind coming from the northwest (Fig. 2). In scenario A, the *Canandaigua* was situated with its bow facing to the southeast, having passed to the *Housatonic*'s stern as reported by Flemming. Since the *Daffodil* came from the near-shore bar outside of Charleston Harbor, it was proceeding offshore, arriving at the *Canandaigua* from the northwest, approaching it from behind. If *Daffodil* burned a blue light to herald its arrival, the signal would have been behind the *Canandaigua*, not ahead of it, where it was seen by Flemming. Clearly, in this arrangement of the two ships, the blue light observed by Flemming could not have come from the tug approaching the *Canandaigua*.

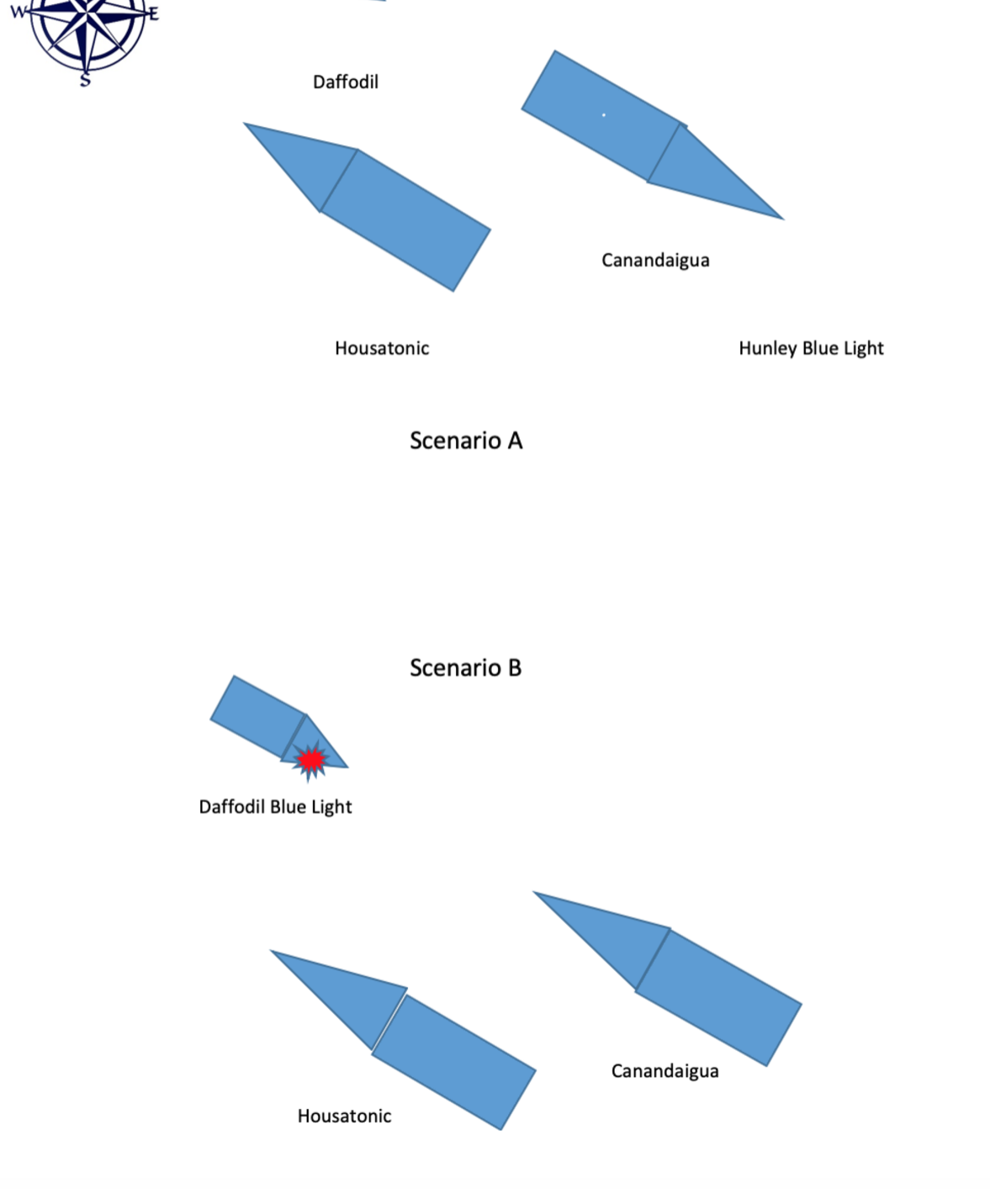


Figure 2. Two possible orientations of the USS *Canandaigua*, not to scale.

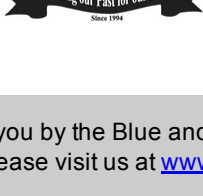
In scenario B, the *Canandaigua*'s bow was positioned to the northwest, parallel to the *Housatonic*. In this position, the approaching *Daffodil* would be ahead of the *Canandaigua*, and it is correct that if it burned a blue light, Flemming's report of it would be consistent with his testimony. However, there is an obvious problem with this scenario. A 110-foot-long steam-powered tug is not a stealth vessel: Its approach is heralded by the coaming at its bow and the splash of its side wheels, the noise of its engine, the odor of the coal smoke plume from its prominent stack, and the running lights of its lanterns. Had the *Daffodil* burned a blue light "just ahead of the *Canandaigua*" (Flemming's words), he also would have seen the very visible tug. He wouldn't have testified that he "saw a blue light on the water," but instead would have said that he saw the tug burn a blue light.

The theory that a vessel other than the *H.L. Hunley* burned the blue light doesn't hold water. Unfortunately, we will never find a log of the *Daffodil* to provide any new evidence. National Archive staff can't find one because she was not a commissioned vessel, and therefore wasn't required to keep a log. Everything in the historical record fits the conclusion that the *H.L. Hunley* signaled to shore after sinking the *Housatonic*. The *Daffodil* was a bit player that didn't figure in the main plot.



*H.L. Hunley* recovery in 2000 | U.S. Government

[1] Brian M. Thomsen, *Blue & Gray at Sea: Naval Memoirs of the Civil War* (New York: Tom Doherty Assoc., 2003), 431.



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