

# Big plans for Gunboat Cairo

by: Edwin C. Bearss

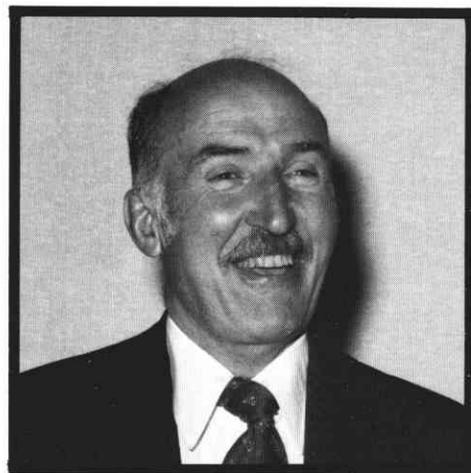
In June 1977, the Union ironclad *Cairo* returned to Vicksburg. This was as it should be, because of her long association with that area and the mighty Mississippi and its principal tributaries.

One of the first seven ironclads built in the western hemisphere, *Cairo* was launched at Mound City, Ill., in December 1861. Commissioned in January 1862, the 512-ton vessel joined the squadron the Union was assembling at nearby Cairo. *Cairo* and her six sisters, during the next 18 months, were vital cogs in the Union campaign which wrestled from the South control of the Mississippi from Cairo to the Gulf and doomed the Confederacy.

*Cairo* was a casualty in this fighting. On Dec. 12, 1862, while on a reconnaissance trip up the Yazoo, 8 miles northeast of Vicksburg, she ran afoul of Rebel torpedoes. There were two violent explosions, and within 15 minutes the proud ironclad disappeared beneath the muddy waters. She thus became a historical novelty, the first warship to be sunk by detonation of a mine, or torpedo — as they were then called. Her 175-man crew, abandoning everything except the clothes on their backs, were rescued by other vessels.

Soon buried under tons of silt and mud, *Cairo* was forgotten. The site of her sinking became conjectural. Then, in November 1956, a trio of Vicksburgers, including two Park Service employees, rediscovered the ironclad. Pinpointing the site proved to be far easier and much less complicated than what ensued.

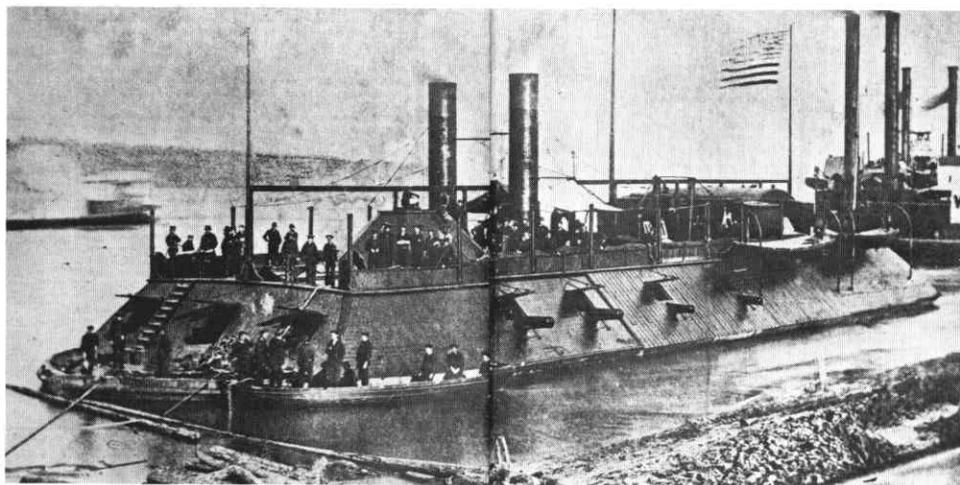
Local enthusiasm and interest in salvaging the ironclad were galvanized in September 1960 by recovery of the vessel's pilothouse, an 8-inch gun and its white oak carriage, and other artifacts. These had been perfectly pre-



served by the Yazoo mud. Funds were raised, and under sponsorship of first the Mississippi A & I Board and then the Warren County Board of Supervisors a 2-year struggle to recover *Cairo* from her grave began.

Hopes of lifting the vessel and her treasure trove of artifacts intact were dashed on Oct. 29, 1964, when the 3-inch wires being employed to position her onto a sunken barge slashed deeply into the fabric. It became necessary to cut the vessel into three major sections. Other mishaps followed. But by Dec. 12, the ironclad, her boiler and stern sections barely recognizable, had been placed on barges and towed down-river to Vicksburg.

Until now there had been no official NPA involvement in "Operation *Cairo*," although personnel of the Vicksburg National Military Park and their wives had contributed hundreds of hours of their time and energy to salvage of



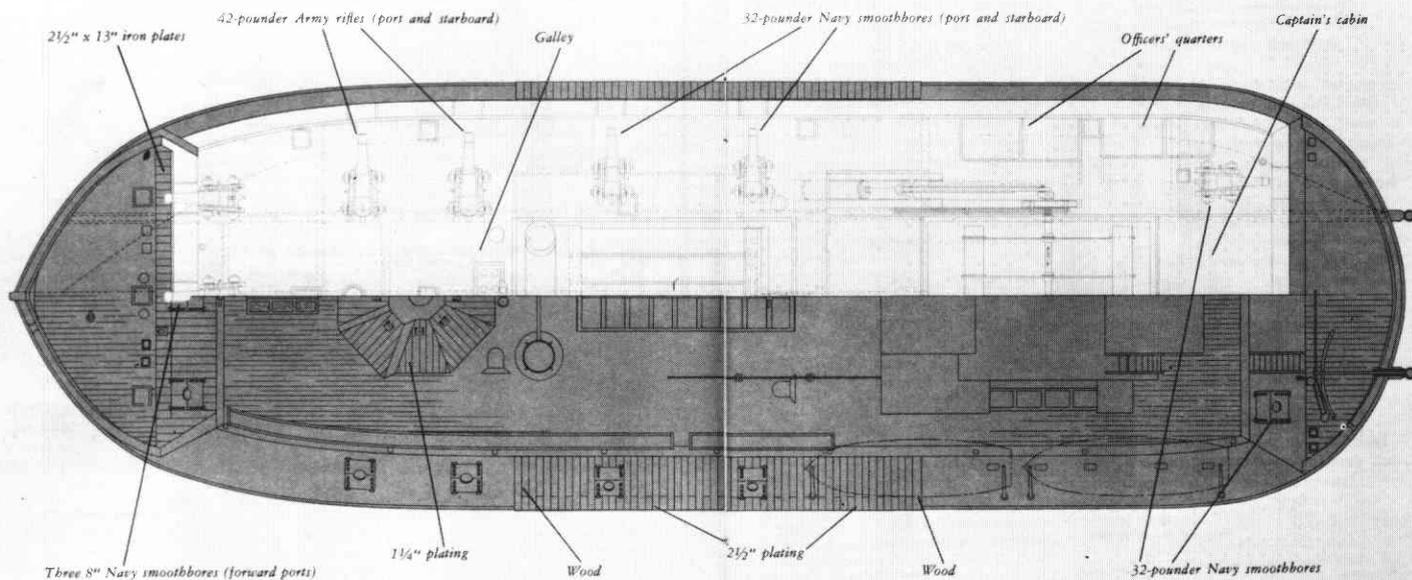
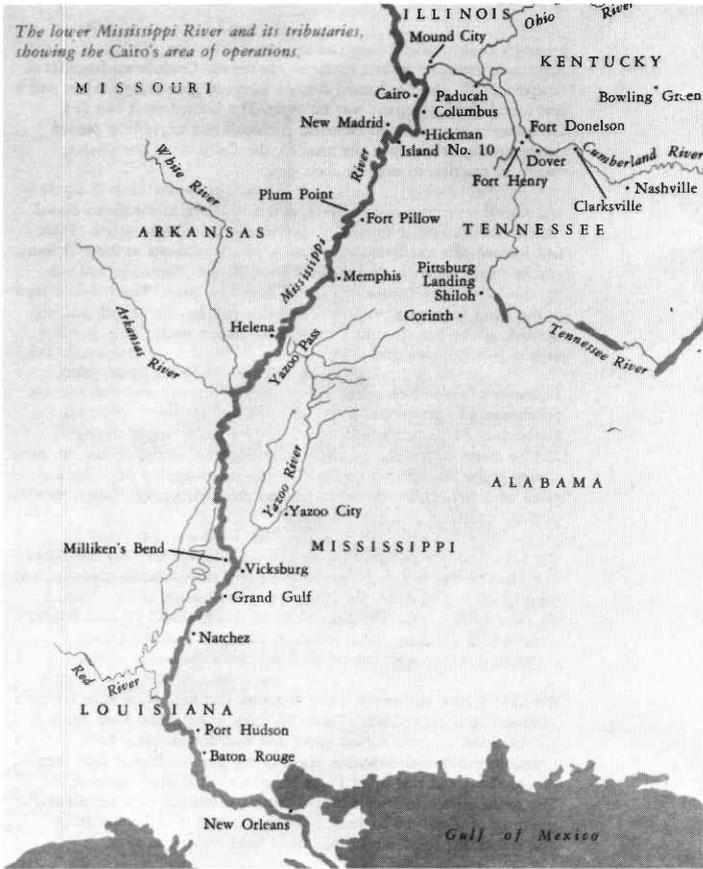
Only known photo of the U.S.S. *Cairo*, taken early in 1862 while she was being fitted at Cairo, Ill.

the vessel and cleaning and preservation of thousands of artifacts. Local officials, taking cognizance of the immensity of the problem faced in restoring and displaying the battered hulk, called for Park Service assistance. Director George B. Hartzog responded by sending a team of experts to Vicksburg to study the craft and make recommendations.

After submission of the team's report, the Mississippi A & I Board, in the summer of 1965, had the *Cairo* barged to Ingalls Shipbuilding Corporation, at Pascagoula on Mississippi's Gulf Coast. There, the wreckage was unloaded. Under supervision of Ingalls' Chief Naval Architect Clyde Leavitt, the 2½-inch armor was removed, cleaned, matchmarked, and stored. The two huge engines were disassembled, cleaned, and reassembled. Leavitt, on examining the engines, pronounced them, except for damage caused by the salvage, as in better condition than many of those he had seen on 20th-century vessels brought into yards for repair. The segments of the hull were braced internally and sprayed with brackish water to keep the white oak structural timbers from checking and warping.

State officials had difficulties formulating an acceptable plan for *Cairo's* restoration and display. In 1966, the historical significance of *Cairo* having been recognized, Director Hartzog sent a second planning team to Mississippi. This group recommended that the craft be returned to Vicksburg, and be restored and displayed as a feature of the national military park, to interpret the vital role of gunboats and Navy in the Civil War on western waters.

Then, in 1968, Congress earmarked \$50,000 in advance planning funds for *Cairo*. This money was used by the Service to underwrite a number of projects — the building



Thickness of plate armor: 2½ in.  
 Total weight of plate armor: 122 tons  
 Plate armor material: Cheval iron  
 Wood backing for armor on three front panels of pilothouse: 19½ in.

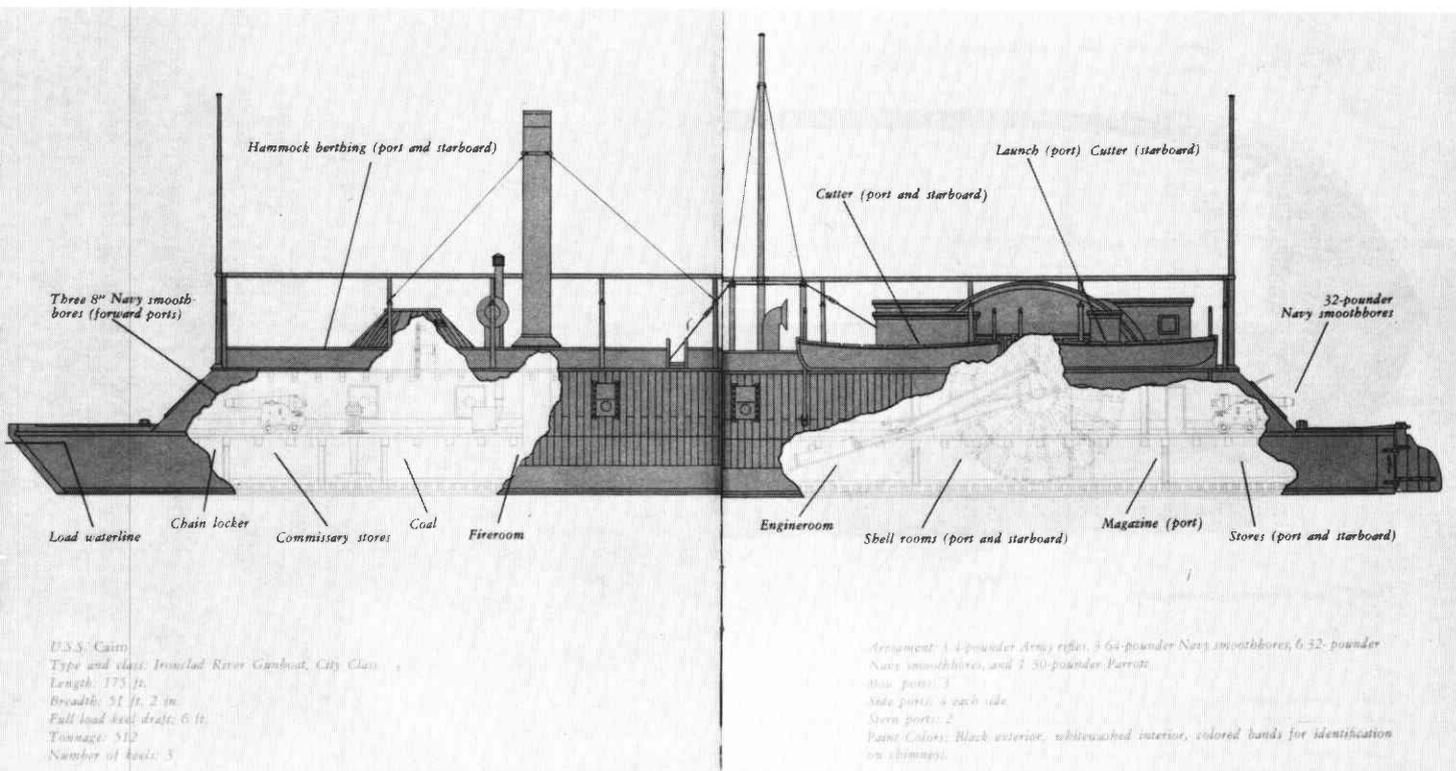
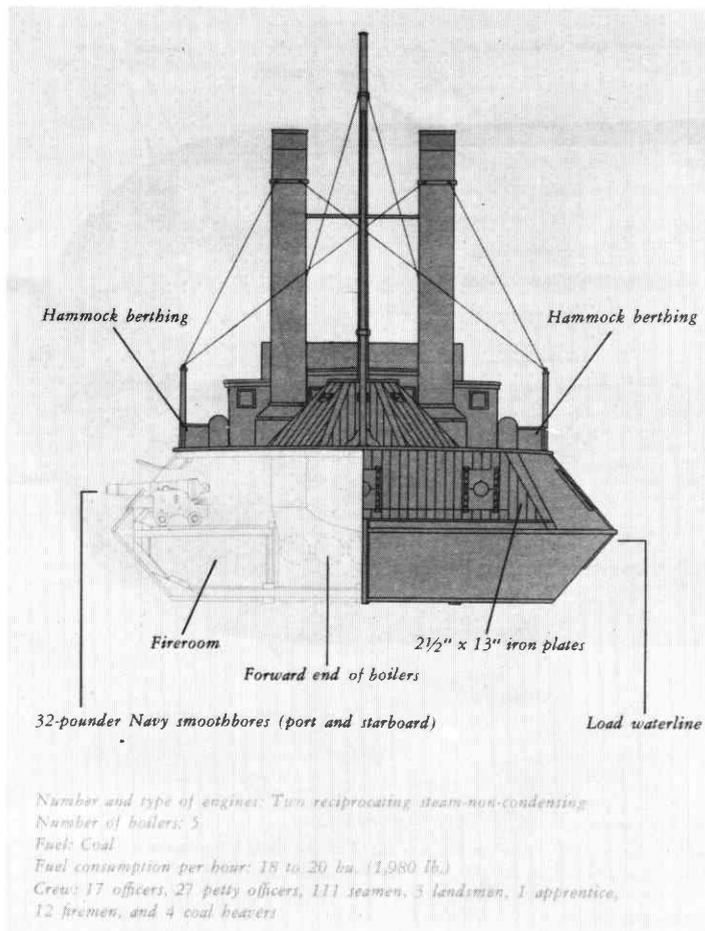
Wood backing for armor on fire side and back panels of pilothouse: 12 in.  
 Thickness of casemate timbers and sheathing: 26 in.  
 Location of plate armor: Casemate front and casemate side abreast machinery

of a handsome scale model of the ironclad; preparation and publication of a *Cairo Handbook*; cataloging of thousands of artifacts; production of a *Cairo* interpretive film; and a study of the proposed site for the vessel's display.

When the State of Mississippi found the project beyond its capabilities, Congress, in 1972, enacted legislation authorizing the Park Service to accept title to *Cairo* from the State and to restore the vessel as part of the Vicksburg National Military Park. No funds, however, were appropriated by the 92nd Congress to underwrite the project.

In 1973 personnel of the Harpers Ferry and Denver Service Centers held meetings to determine guidelines for restoration and display of the ironclad. Plans had to be molded to fit within the monetary constraints established by Congress. It was decided to place the vessel on a huge bathtub-like concrete pad, on commanding ground, near the Vicksburg National Cemetery. The vessel, below the knuckle or waterline, would be supported in the recess. The forward one-third of *Cairo* — mounting 7 of her 13 cannon, the two chimneys, and pilohouse — would be restored. The remainder of the port one-half of the vessel, to the centerline, would likewise be restored, while the starboard one-half of the casemate, much of which had been lost in the salvage, would be left open and serve as a viewing area. A visitor center and parking area were needed.

During the next 3 years, A & E contractors designed a visitor center complex and prepared plans for interpreting the vessel and displaying the priceless collection of artifacts. Some of the latter are to be placed aboard *Cairo*. Barry Howard Associates, the interpretive planners, also developed guidelines for restoration/preservation of the



most valuable artifact — the 175-foot-long ironclad.

In the autumn of 1976 Ingalls' management informed the Service that they needed the facilities where *Cairo* was stored. Placed on short notice, the Service responded with alacrity. Dave Wright, deputy regional director of the Southeast Region, was given the task of coordinating the project. Lt. Col. Robert Calland, a retired Marine officer and transportation specialist, was placed in charge of moving the gunboat back to the selected Vicksburg site from Pasacagoula. His principal assistant was Architect Jim Smeal of the Denver Service Center. Dan Lee, a long-time *Cairo* enthusiast, and superintendent of the Vicksburg National Military Park, detailed men from his maintenance staff to assist Colonel Calland.

Work began in the bitter cold of January and continued until late spring at the Gulf Coast site. All parts of the battered and broken hulk were matchmarked, photographed, diagrammed, and braced. They were then loaded aboard two barges. By mid-June this phase of the operation was completed. The Corps of Engineers' tug *M. V. Lipscomb* took the barges in tow. And on June 19 *Cairo*

returned to Vicksburg.

Meanwhile, construction of the concrete pad had been pushed to completion. The task of transferring the carefully braced parts of the craft from the barges at the Harbor Project to the site began. On arrival at the park, the sections constituting the hull, below the knuckle, were positioned on the pad. As funds become available, work will continue, with the goal of salvaging and utilizing as much of the original fabric as possible. A management decision will then be made on the extent of the restoration.

The Denver Service Center has awarded contracts for a *Cairo* visitor center, parking facilities, walkways, and utilities. To ensure that the visitor center harmonizes with the scene, much of the structure will be underground. The Harpers Ferry Center will prepare the interpretive exhibits. Superintendent Lee hopes to see the *Cairo* facility open to the public by the spring of 1979. When this occurs the hardluck ironclad will be the central attraction in a dynamic exhibit interpreting the role of the Mississippi Squadron and its men in the Civil War struggle for America's heartland.

**Editor's note:**

Those who were at Vicksburg will know this is not the explosive, exciting, exuberant talk given by Mr. Bearss. There was no way to transcribe his talk, and no more can one describe it in words than the explosion that sank the *Cairo*. This tells the story: to hear it, you should have been at Vicksburg. Photos reproduced from the National Park Service booklet, *U.S.S. Cairo*.

