

# Big plans for Gunboat Cairo

by: Edwin C. Bearss

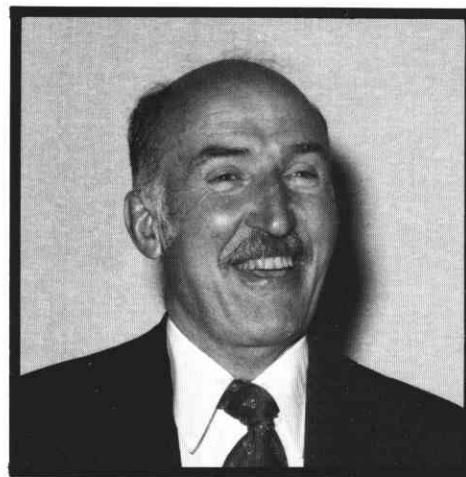
In June 1877, the Union ironclad *Cairo* returned to Vicksburg. This was as it should be, because of her long association with that area and the mighty Mississippi and its principal tributaries.

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.

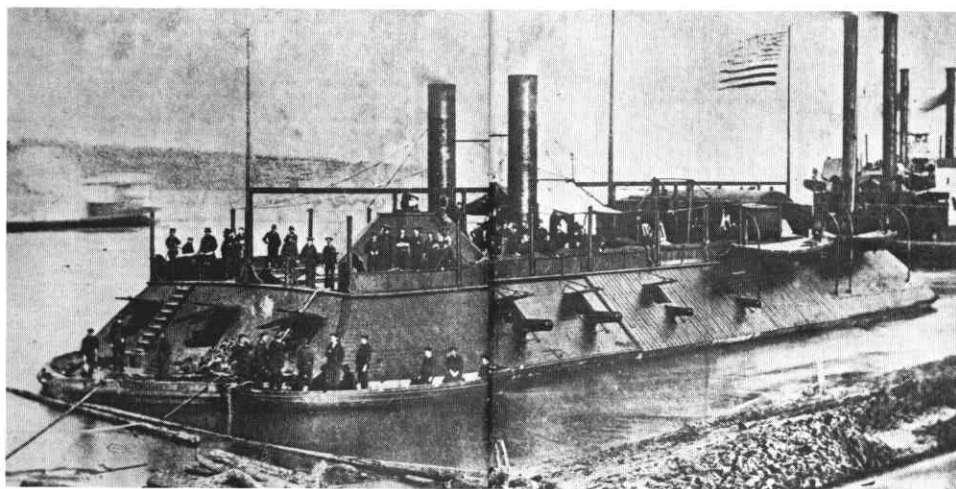
Local enthusiasm and interest in salvaging the ironclad were galvanized in September 1960 by recovery of the vessel's pilothouse, an 8-inch gun and its white oak carriage, and other artifacts. These had been perfectly pre-



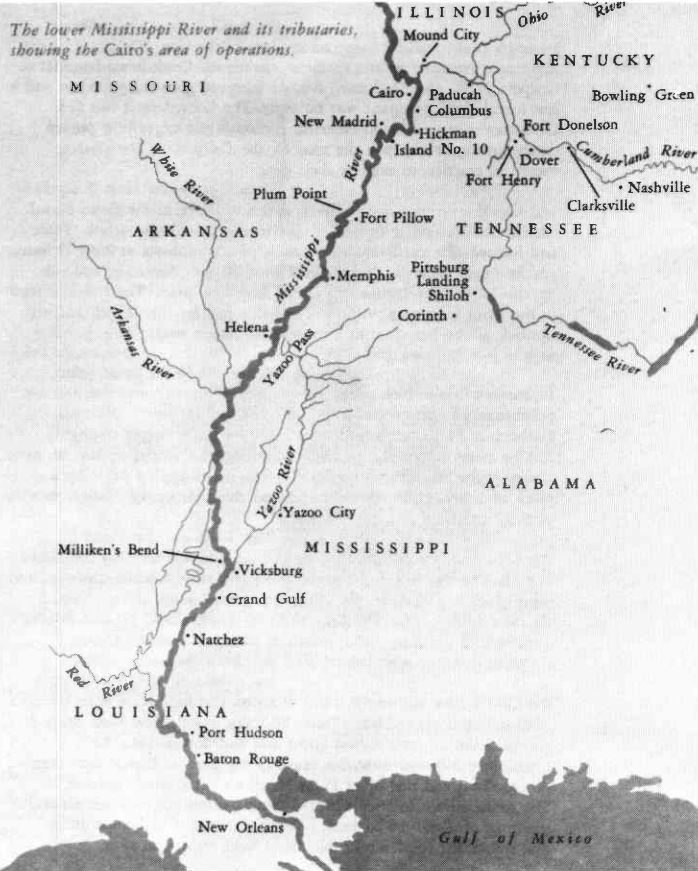
served by the Yazoo mud. Funds were raised, and under sponsorship of first the Mississippi A & I Board and then the Warren County Board of Supervisors a 2-year struggle to recover *Cairo* from her grave began.

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.

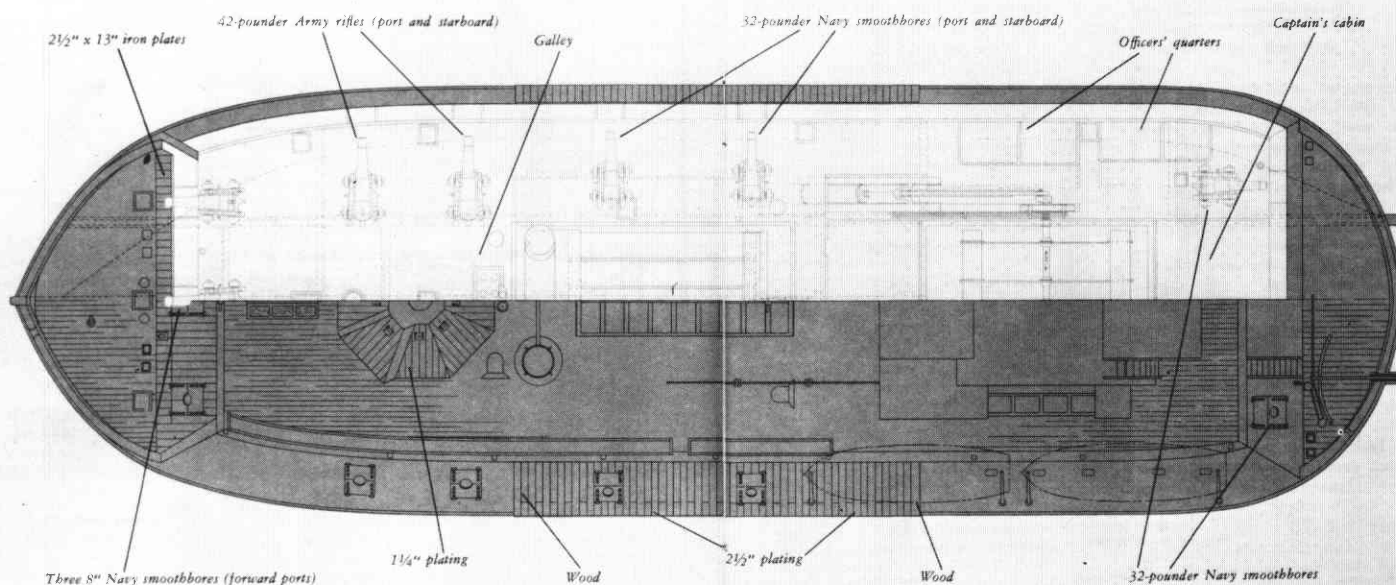


the vessel and cleaning and preservation of thousands of artifacts. Local officials, taking cognizance of the immensity of the problem faced in restoring and displaying the battered hulk, called for Park Service assistance. Director George B. Hartzog responded by sending a team of experts to Vicksburg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

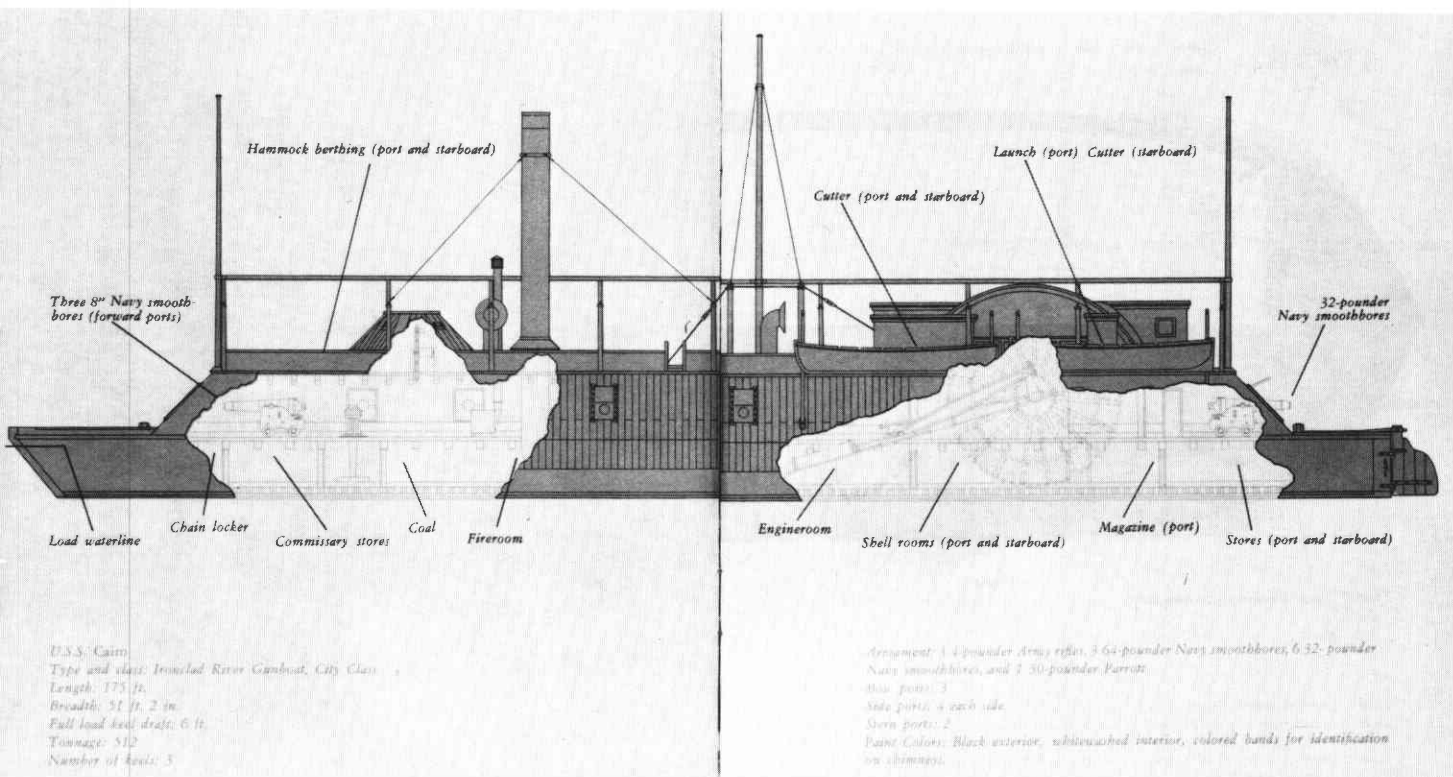
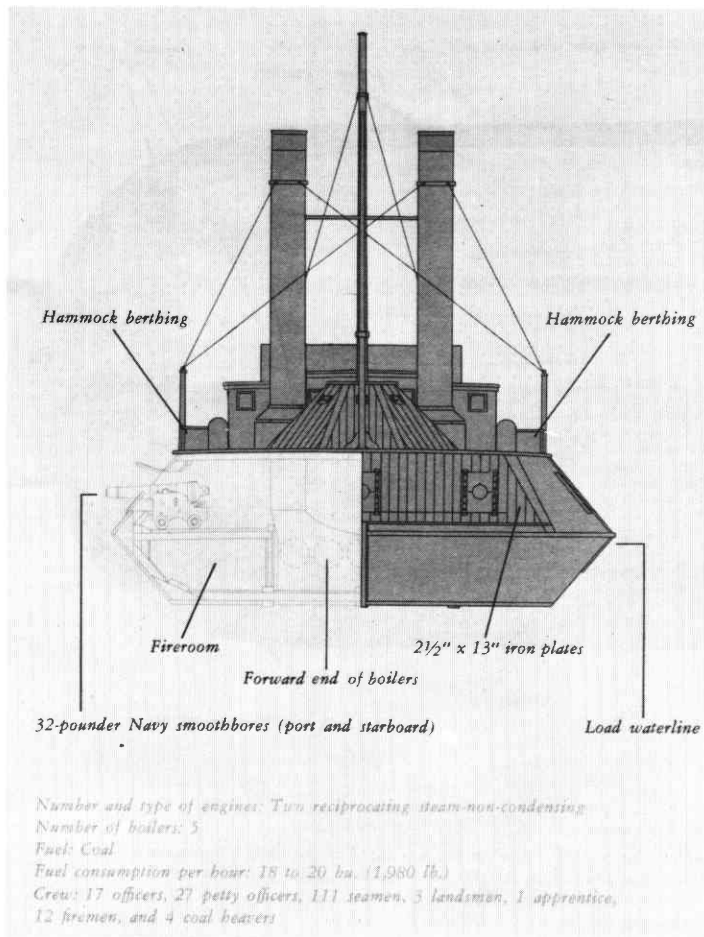
Wood backing for armor on fire side and back panels of pilothouse: 12 in.  
 Thickness of casemate timbers and sheathing: 26 in.  
 Location of plate armor: Casemate front and casemate side abreast machinery

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 pilothouse — 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*

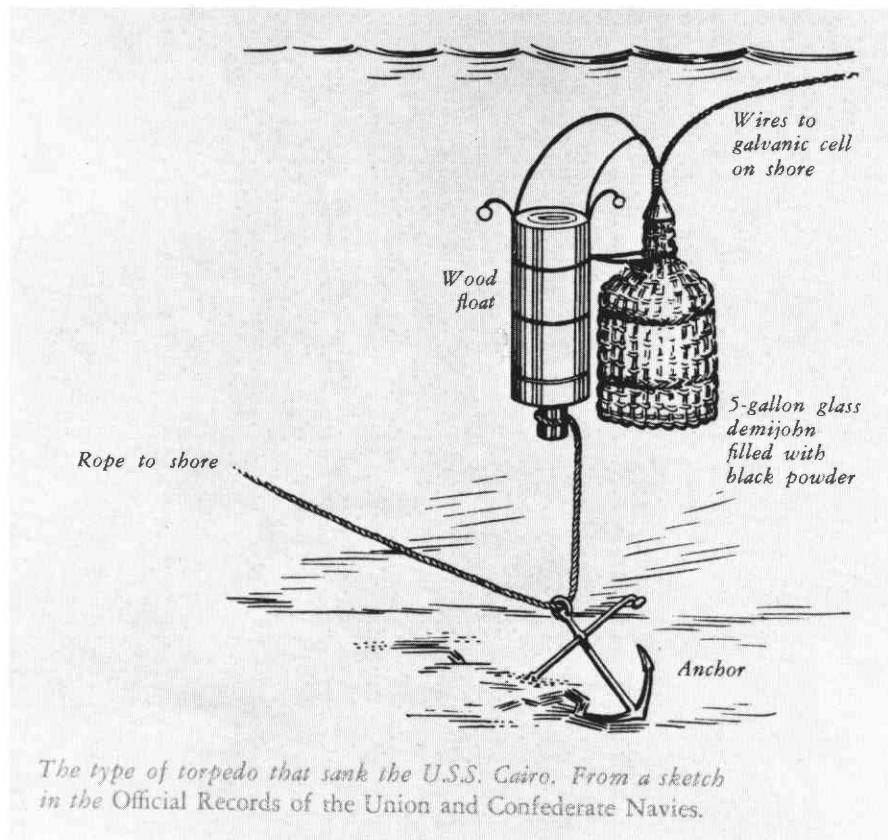
returned to Vicksburg.

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*.



# Small Arms of the Cairo

by Margie Riddle Bearss

(Editor's note: Through the efforts of Dr. R. L. Moore, we were able to get this material from Mrs. Bearss just before going to press. We thought you would appreciate reading her story.)

These guns, as antique guns, are not special. It is that they were handled by their owners in December, 1862, and then were lost under the black waters of the Yazoo for 98 to 102 years. The first one was salvaged in 1960 and the last came up in 1964. The photos were all done by me except the one where the boot pistol is being salvaged: that one must be credited to Ingalls Shipyard.



After the *Cairo's* pilot house was raised from the Yazoo River in 1960, scuba divers went down and explored the cone-shaped pile of hard packed sand left from the inside of the pilot house. River currents rapidly washed this sand away but divers Ken Parks and Jamies "Skeeter" Hart were able to salvage most of the relics which had been in the pilot house. Among these relics was an Army Colt .44. It looked in good condition and it was loaded.

At this time, ownership of *Cairo* was in doubt and no one had any idea of ever being able to raise her. Consequently, there was no one in authority about the artifacts brought up. A well-meaning amateur cleaned the gun as he would have a modern weapon and started to unload it.

The Colt .44 from the pilot house has suffered over the 18 years it has been up. Further deterioration has occurred since it was not originally treated properly. Four chambers are still loaded. It is a four screw New Army model. On top of the barrell is found \_\_\_\_\_ COL SAM COLT NEW YORK U S AMERICA. On the cylinder is COLTS PAT NO 16 \_\_\_\_\_ over U S PA \_\_\_\_\_ 1850. On the guard is the number 16220. It carries the inspector's mark T.



The second Army Colt .44 was brought up during the 1963 efforts. Navy diver Chief Boatswain's Mate Wesley Collins brought it up. As he came up, he pulled the pistol and aimed it toward the spectators. It was cleaned by Vincent Canizaro, a Vicksburg gun collector who did a beautiful job — even preserving some of the original bluing on some of the guns and short swords. This Colt was found on the gun deck near number 2 starboard cannon in an area where the artifacts were covered in mud which preserved — unlike the artifacts found in the area of the quicksand which were subject to much more wear and deterioration.

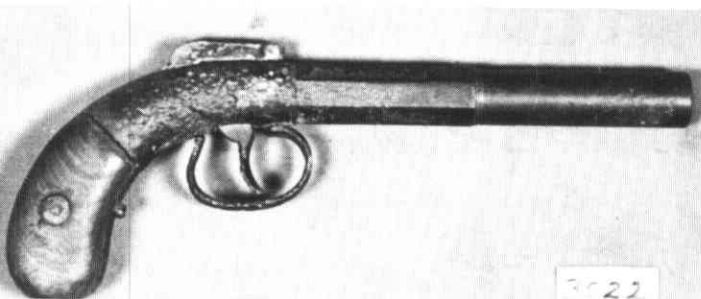
This Colt was also a four screw New Model Army Colt .44 with a ratchet type hammer that is workable. The cylinder is engraved with a lovely seascape which Mr. Canizaro was able to save. It is notched next to the cylinder and on the butt strap so a carbine stock can be added.



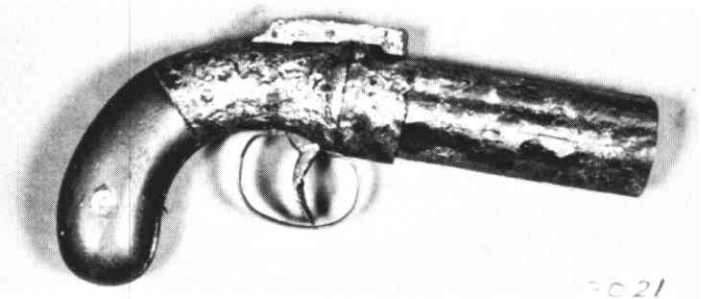
The third Colt .44 was found in the *Cairo* after she was raised in 1964. It also is a four screw New Model Army Colt .44. It is engraved on the cylinder but its condition when salvaged was not as good as the second one and we were unable to tell what the engraving was. This pistol was not cleaned except for superficial cleaning on the outside. I

1968 it could not be broken down so interior initials and markings could not be read and the wedge could not be removed.

The serial number 17092 appears in two places. This pistol is pitted but COLTS PATENT NO 17092 is readable on the cylinder.

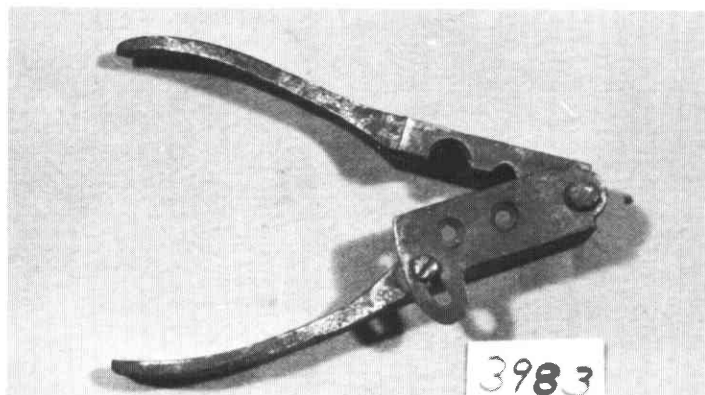


After the section of the gunboat housing the officers' quarters was crushed in the salvage, that area was cleared of mud and the relics it contained were salvaged. A bar hammer pistol came from that area. It is 36 caliber and the hammer and trigger are moveable. The barrel is 5 inches long. Two and a half inches is round and two and a half inches is octagonal. On the left side of the hammer is stamped ALLENS PATENT. On top of the barrel is stamped ALLEN AND WHEELOCK. On the barrel is also stamped 2—2. The number between the twos looks like 4 but it is not clear enough to be certain. This pistol is pictured in H. H. Thomas's book *Allen and Wheelock Firearms*.



The first personal pistol found on the *Cairo* was brought up before the vessel was salvaged. Ken Parks discovered it by feel while exploring the gun deck. He found it hanging by its trigger guard on a coat hook screwed into a bulkhead. By its side was a glass negative photograph in a fancy copper frame. Below it was a man's personal box holding sewing gear.

The pepperbox was loaded for all six barrels. Vincent Canizaro who cleaned it was able, even after its hundred year stay under water, to preserve its original blue. The grips were of walnut; the metal part was ornately engraved. The barrels are 31 caliber and they still revolve. Overall length is 7<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches. The marks on the barrel are \_\_\_\_\_ PATENT over 1845 \_\_\_\_\_ CES. No serial number could be found.

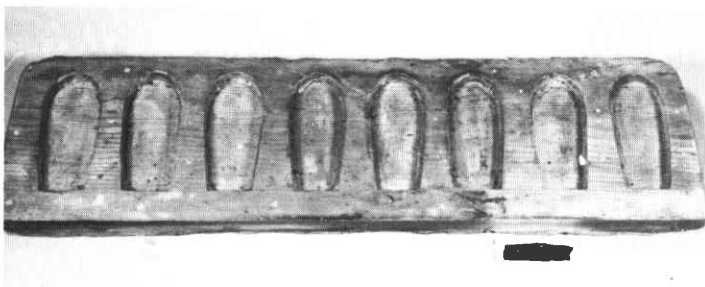


Bullet mold for a .44 caliber weapon. This mold has two cavities: one for round ball, one for a conical bullet. The mold has a sprue cutter, is probably for one of the Colts.



After *Cairo* had been taken to Ingalls Shipyard, there was still much mud and many artifacts in her holds. While washing mud out of a large amount of coal, a worker found an underhammer pistol. Its handles were gone and it consisted of a barrel, firing system and a brass backstrap. The backstrap was dangling so to keep it from being broken Vincent Canizaro took a scrap of walnut which had been broken from the guard rail of *Cairo*. From this he made handles using an illustration in a book and the configuration of the backstrap.

This "boot" pistol is .36 caliber. Its barrel is heavy octagonal and is 4<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches long. The sights are the open notch kind.



The bottom of the gun rack in which the muskets stood. Butts fit into the depressions. Rack bottom is 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>x6<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>x1<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches. Depth of the rifle butt holes is 1/2 inch.

# Modified Harpers Ferry Muskets

Seven modifying Harpers Ferry muskets were found. Five of them were found together in an upright rack. It is easy to tell by looking at these five weapons how deep the mud was. The portions that had been under the mud were preserved well. The last few inches of the barrels which were out of the mud and subjected to the currents show deterioration. One musket had fallen out of the rack and was lying on the gundeck under the mud. It is in better condition than any of the others. It still had its bayonet and hickory ramrod intact.

The musket which had fallen out of the rack is a .69 caliber musket converted from flint lock to percussion. The hammer is moveable. It has all barrel bands and springs. The ramrod was attached and has the button on the end. This musket was salvaged with its bayonet attached so that the point was toward the breech of the gun.

Markings were MILLBURY over 1834 on rear of lockplate. U S over A. Waters on front section of lockplate. U S over A on barrel. U S on butt plate.

The attached bayonet is marked U S over T A.

I received help in finding the markings and in describing the weapons from James Parker, a seasonal historian with the National Park Service.

The second Harpers Ferry musket is also a converted flint lock. All parts of it are present. The bayonet is attached but is broken 5¾ inches above the socket.

Markings are: Rear of lockplate 1833 over MIDD CONN. MIDD CONN is written in the shape of a shallow

U. The fore part of the lock is marked U S above an eagle that faces left holding arrows. To the right under the eagle and written in a curve is JOHNSON. 1833 is found on the breech plug. The barrel is marked with initials N W P over P.

The third musket was the only one found topside. It was near the chimneys at the place where the blacksmith had his fire, his tools, anvils and other equipment. Perhaps he had this musket close at hand in case he needed it. This musket was in very poor condition. When salvaged it was covered with much rust. The trigger guard is broken and the bands are missing. No markings could be found because of long established rust. The stock was badly warped and split.

The fourth gun was found standing in the gun rack. About one inch was rusted away from the end of the barrel. All springs and the front sling swivel is missing. Also missing is the bayonet lug.

The markings are: Base of lockplate 1833 with MIDD CONN under it in the same curved U shape as previously described. On the butt plate is U S On the breech plug is 1833. Markings on the barrel are A H over P. This musket has no eagle but otherwise the markings are like those on the second musket.

The fifth Harpers Ferry conversion also came from the gun rack. James Parker pointed out on the musket that "the indenture in the lockplate for the flashpan has been filled with a brass plug and the nipple has been added



The hands of an unidentified Ingalls Shipyard worker hold the salvaged remains of the underhammer pistol. Ingalls Shipyard photo.

to the piece by tapping the barrel on the top near the breechplug and inserting a nipple of musket size in the hole. The hammer has been changed from the straight flint type to a curved percussion type that can strike the nipple in the center of the barrel." The end of the barrels in poor condition. Rust has taken most of the metal from the front barrel band to the end of the barrel including the front barrel band. Markings are: Lockplate MILLBURY over 1835. On the fore section of the lockplate forward of hammer is U S over A Waters. The butt plate is marked with the number 49.

The sixth musket was in poor condition through it was standing in the gun rack. About 8 inches of this weapon is missing from the end of the barrel showing almost exactly where the mud level was in this area of the gun deck. It was pitted and rusted but after Vincent Canizaro cleaned it the date 1833 could be read on the rear of the lockplate. On the barrel just to the left of front of nipple is U S over NW P. Under these is P.

I do not have the marks on the 7th musket because it had not been cleaned when I catalogued the *Cairo* artifacts in 1968.

