

Blockade Running During the Civil War

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The American Civil War continues to be a source of both intellectual and emotional stimulation and excitement today, more than one hundred and twenty years after its end. Believed by many to have been fought to abolish slavery, the war in fact was a direct result of the failure of negotiations to resolve an escalating series of economic conflicts between North and South that began in the 1820s with the imposition of the early tariffs, continued through the Nullification crisis in the 1830s and the constitutional debates of the 1840s and 1850s, and culminated in the secession of South Carolina December 20, 1860 and the subsequent firing on Ft. Sumter on April 12, 1861. The initiation of hostilities brought clearly into focus the South's almost complete dependence on its Northern neighbors for manufactured goods, both military and domestic. Some Northern states, New York in particular, were concerned about the abrupt loss of the highly lucrative Southern trade (but their fears disappeared with the realization that supplies could be shipped into the South indirectly via Bermuda and the Bahamas). Lincoln rapidly declared a blockade of the Confederate coast in an attempt to prevent the importation of military and domestic supplies as well as the export of Southern cotton, tobacco, and naval stores necessary to finance the purchase of such supplies. Initially ineffective, the blockade was to become an essential factor in the final destruction of the dream of Southern independence.

By 1861, steam was well on the way to replacing sail as the source of marine power. The larger and deeperdraft steamers restricted severely the number of Southern ports available for use. Although significantly larger cargoes were brought in per vessel per trip, major business and financial capacity were necessary to process such volumes of goods, as were large storage and auction facilities. Finally, satisfactory railroad connections with the rest of the South were needed for distribution of materials brought in, as well as for transportation to the port of the necessary volumes of agricultural products for export. Only Wilmington, Charleston, Savannah, Mobile, New Orleans, and Galveston were effectively useful as ports, and two of these (Savannah and New Orleans) were closed in 1862. On the east coast, Charleston initially handled the larger volume of trade, but with the severely tightened blockade that followed Admiral DuPont's unsuccessful attempt to enter Charleston harbor on April



7, 1863, Wilmington became almost completely dominant.

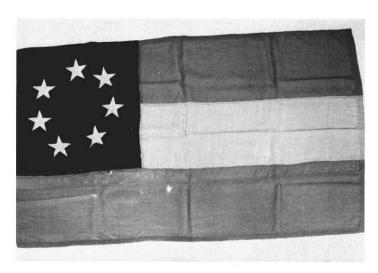
The vessels that ran the blockade were built in England, either before the war for the commercial trade (Denbigh) or during the war specifically for the business of blockade running (Let Her Rip and Whisper). Queen Victoria declared England to be neutral in the conflict, but that did not prevent the construction of sleek, fast unarmed steamers for running the blockade. However, it should be noted here that the Confederate cruisers Alabama, Florida, and Shenandoah were built in English yards and had predominantly English crews. These vessels, which developed economic warfare to a fine art, were subsequently, because of their birthplace, to cause England to pay economic damages to the United States.

Very early in the War, the intermediate port system was developed. Since the special design characteristics of the blockade runners were necessary only on arrival at the shallow bays and sounds of the Confederate coast, heavily constructed, ponderous, very deep draft oceangoing steamers brought huge volumes of cargo to St. Georges, Bermuda; Nassau, New Providence, Bahamas; and Havana, Cuba. The supplies were then transferred to the sleek greyhounds of the Confederacy for the final run into the South.

Many were captured, or run aground and destroyed (such as the *Bendigo*). Many, however, were successful in their never-ending quest to bring sustenance to the embattled Confederacy, and, as these dramas were played out one by one, blockade running became one of the most fascinating and romantic chapters in the American Civil War. Wonderful and exciting stories of

these ships and men, and their adventures, have fortunately survived and have been incorporated into our heritage. Who can forget Capt. Louis Coxetter demanding more steam from his engineering officer on the Antonica with a loaded gun (and getting it); or the gallant Capt. Lebby braving a veritable hailstorm of Federal shot and shell to bring the Little Hattie safely into New Inlet? The Denbigh, built by Laird's in Liverpool as Hull #268 and shown in the oil painting by Confederate artist Thomas Cantwell Healy, acquired the name "The Packet" from Admiral Farragut because of the regularity and ease with which the vessel slipped through his blockading squadrons. First and foremost, however, blockade running was a business, whether on private or government account. Even as the Civil War itself was an economic being from its inception, so was blockade running economic to its very core — like father, like son. Whether carried out by private individuals for profit motives (or a combination of profits and patriotism, as with Fraser, Trenholm and Company) or by the Confederate government to obtain supplies to prosecute the war and later to obtain credit to purchase such supplies, blockade running was a business. The perception and understanding of the war in economic terms by the Confederate government was an evolutionary process that was reflected in the gradually increasing involvement in, and the regulation of, blockade running by that government. It may be said here that this perception became much more refined as supply and credit needs became more acute. Occurring in roughly parallel fashion were changes in vessel type, both blockader and blockade runner. This is the story of the Confederacy's attempts to control its own economic (and therefore political) destiny, from the early policy of laissez faire and no regulation to the almost complete regulation and control of the trade in 1864-65 coincident with the construction of a large fleet of government owned and operated blockade runners.

In the beginning the Confederate government paid little attention to blockade running (it even tried to buy military supplies directly from the North). The Confederacy had been founded on the principle of state's rights (as opposed to those of a central government), and government regulation was not politically possible. Furthermore, the "Cotton Is King" philosophy was widely believed, not only in the South but in Europe as well. This philosophy stated that the manufacturing economies of England, France, etc., required cotton as raw material, and further that without it those economies would collapse. It was thus expected that England and Europe would intervene on the side of the South, and that the war would not be long in duration. And so it was felt that the government itself did not need to organize and regu-



Confederate First National Flag raised by Captain Charles Barkley of the *Henry Middleton*.

late the blockade running trade, that private interests could manage very well indeed, and all government supplies could be shipped in private vessels. And since the Federal Navy had very few vessels to blockade some 3500 miles of Confederate coast, almost any vessel could function as a blockade runner, even a wooden sailing vessel like the *Henry Middleton*.

The Henry Middleton was built at Charleston in 1857-58, as a 77-foot schooner of 103 tons burden. She was bought by a group of investors in late July, 1861, documented as a Confederate vessel 8/6/61, and sailed from Charleston 8/21/61 with a cargo of naval stores. The plan was to sail to Liverpool, sell the cargo, and then use the money to outfit the vessel as a privateer. Similar vessels had been very successful as privateers operating out of Hatteras Inlet in the preceding months (which perhaps prompted the Union Navy to take Forts Hatteras and Clark in late August, 1861). Unfortunately, the Henry Middleton was almost immediately captured by the USS Vandalia, and sent North to a Prize Court.

Pre-war steamers were much more successful in running through the thin line of Union blockaders. The Bermuda (one of five vessels owned by Fraser, Trenholm of Liverpool) ran easily into Savannah on September 18, '61. The Fingal (owned by the CS government) ran into Savannah on November 13, '61, with James D. Bulloch, CSN and Major Edward C. Anderson. Anderson proposed to Secretary of the Navy Mallory a system of Confederate owned and officered vessels to run the blockade. For multiple reasons, one of which was the fragmented (rather than organized) state of the Confederate government in Richmond at this time, this plan was rejected.

However, as time passed, experience was gained with the high rates charged by private interests for

shipping government freight, and it also became apparent that European intervention would not be immediately forthcoming and that the war was going to last significantly longer and be more extensive in scope than initially expected. Moreover, private shippers were reluctant to carry munitions and heavy equipment: the first heavy weight resulted increased draft and also decreased speed (which increased the risk of capture as both the number and speed of Union blockaders was increasing as fast as Gideon Welles could manage it), and second, there was always the risk of explosion. Thus, by late 1862, Confederate government supplies were piling up in Nassau for lack of vessels to take them in to the south.

Through the foresight of Josiah Gorgas, the Ordnance Department in the late fall of 1862 and early winter of 1863, via its agent in England Caleb Huse, purchased 4 vessels:

- 1. Columbia Cornubia Lt. Richard N. Gayle, CSN, captured November 8, '63.
 - 2. Eugenie Lt. Joseph Fry, CSN, retired Sept. 7, '63.
 - 3. Merrimac captured July 24, '63.
 - 4. Phantom

Also, in November, '62, Lt. John Wilkinson, CSN, bought the *Giraffe* (renamed the *Robert E. Lee*) for the government.

In December, 1862, Secretary of War James Seddon made loose agreement with Capt. W.G. Crenshaw, who then contracted with Alexander Collie and Company so that in March, '63, Crenshaw, Collie and Company negotiated a contract with James Mason so that the purchase price was divided: 3/4 CSA and 1/8 each Crenshaw and Collie, and the cargo space would be used 1/2 by C.S. War Department, 1/4 by C.S. Navy Department, and 1/4 by Crenshaw, Collie and Co.

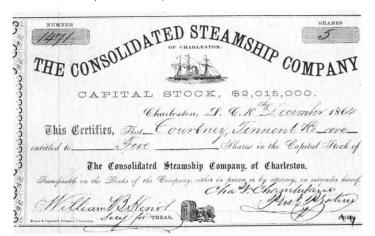
In the spring and summer of 1863, the following ships were purchased:

1. Hebe

4. Vesta

2. Dee

- 5. Venus (sidewheel)
- 3. Ceres (twin-screw)



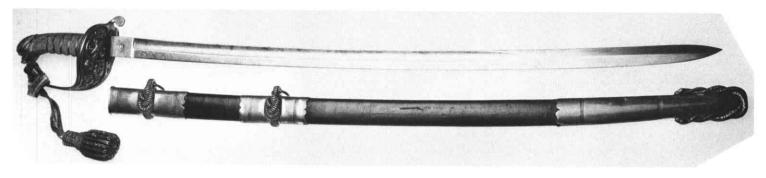
Stock certificate of The Consolidated Steamship Company of Charleston, showing that Confederate importers Courtney and Tennent (Charleston) had purchased five (5) shares of stock in the company, perhaps in an attempt to guarantee at least some cargo space on the company's ships.

These efforts by various departments and bureaus of the government, as opposed to an organized and efficient program sponsored by the Confederate government as a single powerful entity, functioned well enough for short periods. However, as the war increased in scope and duration, more and more supplies were used, captured, and destroyed, thereby escalating demands for military supplies by the Confederate government. This resulted in the ever increasing need for credit to buy and to transport supplies, a vicious circle. More about credit needs later.

Late 1862 and early 1863 also saw the rapid increase of ships from the private sector. Multiple companies, both Confederate and English, were formed to run the blockade. Shares of stock were sold to investors who hoped to share in the enormous profits already being realized by others. At least 11 different stock companies were formed in Charleston, the certificates of some being shown here. Again, war is an economic being — many issues are settled in the counting houses and auction rooms in addition to the battlefield. By this time, the Union blockading squadrons were both larger and more efficient than ever before, requiring ever faster blockade runners and ever more skillful captains to command them.

The Banshee #1, built at Liverpool by Jones and Quiggin, was the first in a long succession of vessels built specifically to run the blockade. The builder's model shown is in the Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool. They were constructed along the lines of the Clyde River steamers, the success of this general type having been shown by the Herald, later Antonica, owned by Fraser, Trenholm. Long and narrow, with a beam to length ratio of approximately 1/9; shallow-draft; large cargo capacity; usually sidewheel steamers, but occasionally propeller steamers; low pressure steam engines, less than 50 psi; fast as the wind (minimum 13 -15 knots, some as fast as 18 - 19 knots); low freeboard, low silhouette: difficult to see on the horizon. Some were equipped with telescoping funnels and hinged masts. Painted smoky or lead gray, or grayish white, like a fog (or perhaps a bluish-green to blend with the ocean). Smokeless anthracite coal further enhanced the necessary cloak of invisibility.

Another excellent example of a privately built, owned, and operated blockade runner was the *Ella*, shown in a watercolor from the Sir Stanley Spurling collection in Bermuda, and in an oil painting by William Mitchell in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. The *Ella* was Hull #105 of William Denny and Brother in Dumbarton, Scotland. She was 235 x 28 x 13 feet; 868 British metric tons, with a 200 nominal HP engine by R. Napier and Son in Glasgow, just up the Clyde. Shallow-



Regulation Confederate States Naval Officer's sword imported by Courtney and Tennent.

draft, drawing 4 feet 4 inches after engine, boiler, and fresh water were on board. She was built at Denny's North Yard on the River Leven.

The original contract for constructing the Ella, "to be adopted in every way for blockade running," is in the Bee Company papers in the South Carolina Historical Society. It was negotiated by Peter Denny, senior partner in the shipyard, and Captain James Carlin, a blockade running captain for the Importing and Exporting Company of South Carolina since 1862 when William C. Bee lured him away from Fraser, Trenholm. Carlin was very successful, and well paid, whether in gold, Confederate money, or stock in the company. Again, this was clearly seen by all, including Carlin, to be a business; as a prudent businessman, when Carlin and his wife bought a house at #43 Church Street in Charleston in 1863, it was held in trust such that it could not be sold to satisfy business debts. The trustee, Rev. William Black Yates, had married Capt. Carlin and his wife Ella on May 5, 1857 in Charleston; I suspect that James Carlin named the ship for his wife. The house he bought for her still stands, across the street from my own home in Charleston.

Today, the *Ella* lies in approximately 20 feet of water near Old Inlet and Bald Head Island below Wilmington, N.C., where she was run ashore and destroyed on December 2, 1864, by the Union blockading squadron. This is the kind of clear water diving we all know and love. Her government-account cargo manifest, from the records of Col. T.L. Bayne of the Bureau of Foreign Supplies of the War Department, reveals that she carried pork and beef sorely needed by Lee's army in Virginia. These bones from the forward cargo hold tell the story, repeated many times during the war, of supplies that never reached the Confederate soldier.

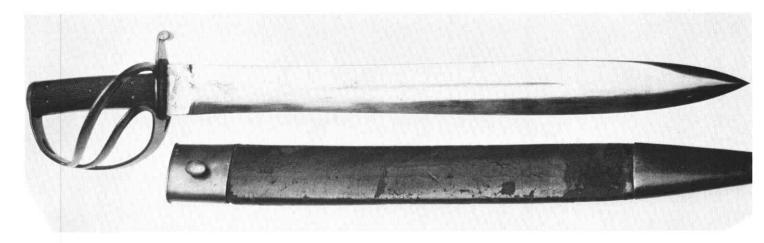
Also, from the ship's stores section of the *Ella*, came a keg of unknown contents, recently shipped from New York to Bermuda. Northern merchants had no illusions about the War — it was a business. Doing research in Bermuda, Gordon Watts recently found that a dramatic increase in the volume of shipping from New York to

Bermuda had occurred during the war. Brass padlocks from the forward cargo hold of the *Ella* lend further credence to our previous assertions.

It is clear that the Confederate government had recurring and increasing difficulties finding cargo space for military supplies as the war continued. A stock certificate suggests that private importers may have experienced similar problems, and may have bought stock in blockade running companies in an attempt to insure that their goods were brought in. Courtney and Tennent were Charleston-based importers of military supplies for the Confederate Navy. A regulation CSN officer's sword is shown; made by Robert Mole in Birmingham, England, the workmanship is of the highest caliber. Please note the crossed cannon/fouled anchor insignia of the Confederate Navy as well as the cotton that was the lifeblood of its homeland. The name of the importer is stamped on the blade. Cutlasses of two types were also imported, as well as Confederate Navy buttons.



Detail of hilt of the sword above, showing the crossed cannon and fouled anchor (official emblem of the Confederate Navy) as well as the economic lifeblood of the Confederacy: a cotton plant.

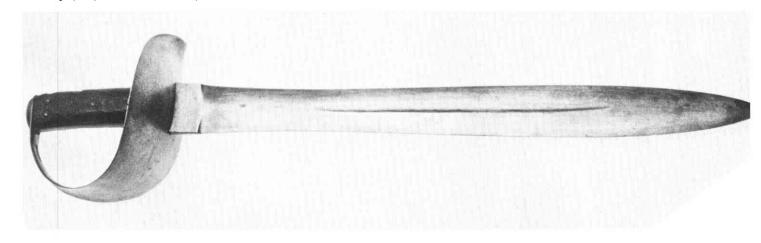


Confederate Navy cutlass imported by Courtney and Tennent, branched brass guard.

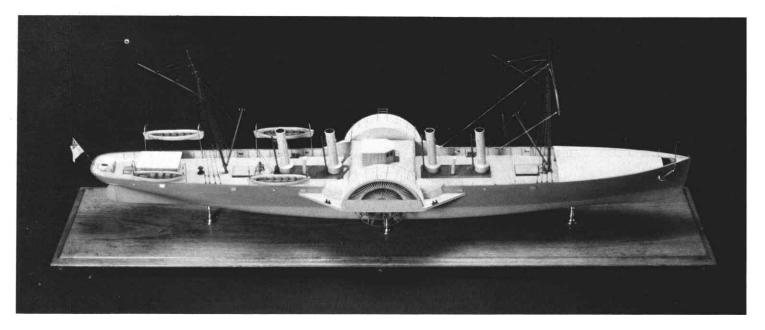
Despite the rapid growth of private companies and the fragmentary efforts of individual segments of the government, it was still not possible to satisfy the increasing needs of the military, both army and navy, for supplies. Supplies had to be bought overseas, and that required either cash (long since exhausted) or credit. Credit instruments based on cotton met with only limited success until the Erlanger bonds were offered to the public at £90 in March, 1863. With the military disasters at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in the summer of 1863, however, confidence in the government (and therefore the Erlanger bonds) rapidly fell. By the fall of 1863, Erlanger bonds were selling at £37! Thus, when the Confederacy most needed to buy military supplies and equipment in large amounts (to replace that lost on the beaches and on the battlefield) as well as cargo space to ship it in, their credit was at a low ebb. Clearly, the old system was not working; a new plan was needed, one that would utilize efficiently the limited resources available, provide transportation for cotton out of the Confederacy as well as for supplies into the South, and finally one that would result in increased European confidence in the ability of the South to control its own economic destiny (i.e., to obtain credit).

In August of 1863, Secretary of War James Seddon promulgated regulations from his department that required all blockade runners "to devote 1/3 of their tonnage to the use of the government." At about the same time, James Mason, Confederate Commissioner to England, urged government control of blockade running as well as direct cotton shipments to Europe. Henry Hotze in his London *Index* called for a "strict monopoly of blockade running" by the government. In a letter to Judah P. Benjamin dated January 17, 1864, Hotze presented his own brilliant analysis of the problem:

If blockade running was constituted an arm of the national defense each would perform only its appropriate work which therefore would be well done. The Treasury would procure without competition the raw materials and regulate the disposition of the proceeds; the Navy — abandoning the hope of breaking the blockade and throwing all its available energies into eluding it — would purchase, build, and man the vessels for this purpose; the agents of the War Department instead of having all these incongruous duties to perform themselves, could give their undivided attention to the important matter of supplies . . . Our financial transactions will then have acquired such a magnitude that we can command the services of the highest and oldest financial houses, instead of as at present, being left to the mercy of commercial adven-



Confederate Navy cutlass imported by Courtney and Tennent, sheet metal guard.



The builder's model for the P.S. Rosine.

turers.... It is the only hope of striking the imagination and rousing the action of Europe.

Earlier in 1863, Colin McRae had been appointed chief financial officer abroad. On October 1, 1863, he stated that the government ought to take *complete* control of exporting cotton and on October 17, 1863, he proposed a multi-point plan:

- 1. Revoke or annul all foreign private contracts involving either profits or commissions.
- 2. Appoint one head agent for each, War and Navy Departments.
- 3. Appoint one general head agent over all foreign purchasing.
- 4. That the government should take the exports and imports into its own hands, and no cotton, tobacco or naval stores should be allowed to leave the country except on Government account or for account of holders of produce bonds...
- 5. To purchase or take possession of all cotton and tobacco in the country at a price to be fixed by Act of Congress

Then, on October 21, 1863, the Secretary and Assistant Secretary of War called for "an absolute control of the trade in cotton — and I may add in tobacco and naval stores — to be assumed by the Government."

At long last, a number of government personnel had realized that a strict business approach to the problem was mandatory if the Confederacy was to survive; furthermore, they were speaking more or less publicly about it.

On December 24, 1863, "An Act to Establish a Bureau of Foreign Supplies" was passed. Under this act, the War Department moved to centralize the exporting of cotton, the importing of military goods, and the ownership and management of blockade runners currently operating for the various bureaus within the Department.

Colin McRae's comprehensive plan to provide a single agency to carry out all of these functions for the entire Confederacy was approved by President Davis and his cabinet in January, 1864. By January 23, '64, it had passed both houses in the Confederate Congress, and was signed into law by the President February 6, '64. In the preamble it states:

Whereas, the Confederate States are engaged in a war, upon the successful issue of which depend the integrity of their social system, the form of their civilization, the security of life and property within their limits as well as their existence as sovereign and independent states: and whereas, the condition of the contest demands that they should call into requisition whatever resources of men and money they have, for the support of their cause, and to faithfully administer the same: therefore as a part of the system of the public defence —

Here, for the first time publicly stated in a public law, was full recognition of the absolute necessity to approach the war in a no-nonsense, business-like fashion. The war had to be fought (and won or lost) in economic terms. Thus, the legislation strictly forbade the exportation of cotton, tobacco, military and naval stores, sugar and rice from the Confederate States except under Presidential regulation. A companion act prohibited the importation of a wide variety of luxury items.

Presidential policy included the following regulations:

- That every vessel owned by private persons shall be considered on every voyage as chartered to the Confederate Government for one-half of her tonnage, outward and inward.
- 2. That all private owners of cargo exported from the Confederacy shall bring in return supplies equal to one-half the proceeds of their expected cargo.
- 3. That the several states shall remain at liberty to charter the other half of each vessel, and shall be free to

carry out or bring back on that half without being subject to the regulations.

State-owned vessels, such as the *Advance*, were exempt from the regulations as long as state ownership was 100% bona fide.

On April 14, 1864, an agreement was made between the Navy, Treasury, and War Departments (with Presidential approval on April 18th), for the purchase and transportation abroad of tobacco, cotton, and naval stores. Col. Thomas L. Bayne was appointed to manage the business, since he was already functioning in the same capacity for the War Department.

To provide the necessary ships to carry out the new plan, Colin McRae and James D. Bulloch negotiated an agreement (July 7, 1864) with Fraser, Trenholm to purchase eight blockade running steamers, and later that month arranged to buy six more steamers through J.K. Gilliat and Company. The last of these vessels were to be delivered in the spring of 1865.

As a temporary measure until these vessels could be completed and placed into Confederate service, McRae contracted with Alexander Collie and Company to provide four large and powerful new steamers.

Thus, a total of 18 steamers were provided by McRae for the Confederate Government's line of steamers.

Rosine, with her sister ship Ruby, was the queen of the Confederate government's fleet of blockade runners. On September 15, '64, James D. Bulloch reported to Secretary Mallory that she has "been designed and modelled with great care ... (She) will carry, I think, three days' fuel and 1500 bales of cotton, on but little over 9 feet draught, and (is) expected to make fourteen

knots thus loaded." Further description comes from the Thomas Dudley papers in the Huntington Library. Dudley, the United States Consul in Liverpool, reported in great detail on *Rosine* on March 15, 1865:

Steel plated, four funnel, paddle steamer built by Jones, Quiggin and Company at Liverpool in 1864. Fore and aft schooner of Liverpool, 500 tons register, 1390 tons burden.

Length 270 feet, breadth of beam 33 feet, depth of hold 15 feet, marked draught of water 11 feet fore and aft, engine fitted by James Watts and Company of London, 300 horse power.

Hull slate color, plain stem, round stern with mouldings, name in yellow letters and the figure of a female's head in centre, 3 dead lights in port and starboard sides aft and 5 each side forward, 2 boats upon each side in iron swing davits.

Wheel, binnacle, skylight, a square built house, with rooms and entrance to lower cabin, capstan on the head of which is engraved with the ship's name, port and aft. Main mast, main hatch, patent steam winch, after funnel, steam pipe abaft, coal bunkers and middle after funnel, steam pipe abaft, bridge between paddle boxes, iron railed round, a lookout house on the top of same containing a wheel and binnacle. A bell on the fore part of bridge, house underneath bridge with rooms and entrance to engine room. Middle fore funnel, steam pipe abaft, coal bunkers and fore funnel, steam pipe abaft, forehatch, patent steam winch, foremast, storm top gallant forecastle, a fore and aft iron railing on top of same in centre, iron swing davit for fish tackle, 2 iron stocked anchors. Masts, booms, gaffs, and skylight bright. Mastheads funnels, boats, bulwarks, house - white.

Despite McRae's magnificent planning and herculean efforts, his dreams were realized only in part. Only six of the vessels he bought or contracted for were completed in time to actually run the blockade. *Rosine* and



The central part of the model, showing the careful detail of its construction.

Ruby never left Liverpool; when Penguin (built by Laird's) reached Bermuda in April, 1865, the war was over. Ft. Fisher fell on January 15, 1865, thus closing the port of Wilmington. Charleston was evacuated February 17, 1865, and the last east coast Confederate port was no more. Only vessels drawing effectively less than six feet of water were able to work at Galveston for 2 additional months, but the volume of goods transported was necessarily limited by this reduction in vessel size and cargo capacity.

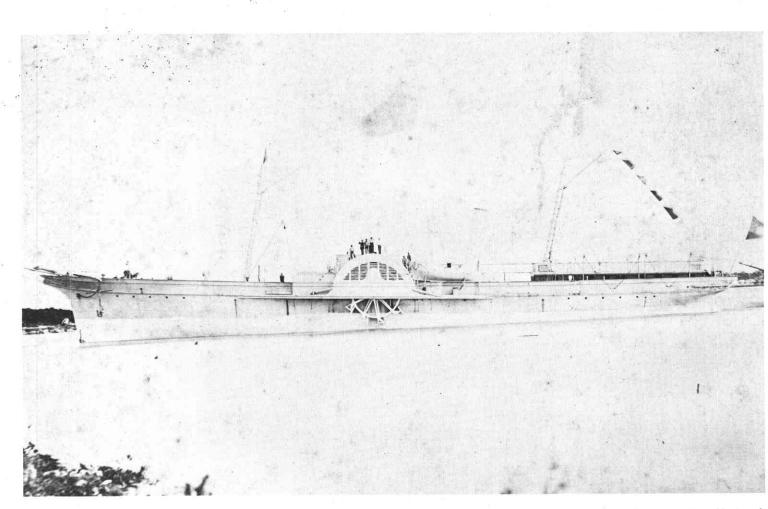
What was accomplished? First, a dramatic improvement in the Confederacy's credit. By the fall of 1864, Erlanger bonds were selling at £77, as opposed to £42 the preceding spring. In fact, European bankers were so impressed with the new plan (and it's prospects for Confederate economic and political stability) that negotiations began in the summer of 1864 toward the establishment of a bank in the Confederacy itself. The fact that

the purchasing power of 100 bales of cotton brought out under the new Confederate system was that of 600 bales exported privately speaks volumes of praise for McRae and his confreres. Time simply ran out for the Confederacy.

What if — what if the new plan had been instituted in 1862? Or even late 1861? Suppose Confederate leaders had been farsighted enough to allow political and departmental differences to take second place to the over riding need for the long-term economic stability absolutely imperative to the survival of the young nation? At one point, Ft. Sumter was defended by four Whitworth rifles — rifles, not cannon. Four rifles, and a bloodied but still defiant pile of rubble keeping Quincy Gillmore's legions out of Charleston.

Logic dictates that this question, as many others about the war, must forever remain unanswered.

And yet, what if?



P.S. A.D. Vance. Ca. 1863 photograph taken in Nassau shows North Carolina's state-owned blockade runner flying the First National Confederate Flag. She has been run up on the beach to facilitate scraping and painting the hull, repair-work, etc.