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# The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

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## A Civil War Celebrity in Wilmington

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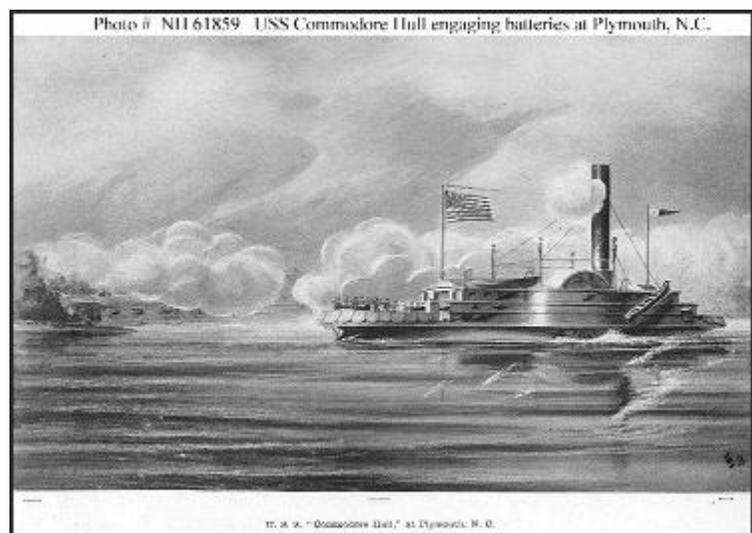
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**Eagle's Island**

The mysterious woods and waters of Eagle's Island, across the Cape Fear from Wilmington's waterfront and the River Walk, hide a wealth of maritime history in the form of sunken boats and ships. Some of you may have seen Gareth McGrath's article in the *Star-News* (back on November 25, 2007) about the archaeological treasures of Eagle's Island. Not least among the 30 or more wrecks hidden there is a real Civil War celebrity – the *USS Commodore Hull*, a Federal gunboat that spent much of its wartime career in the waters of eastern North Carolina.

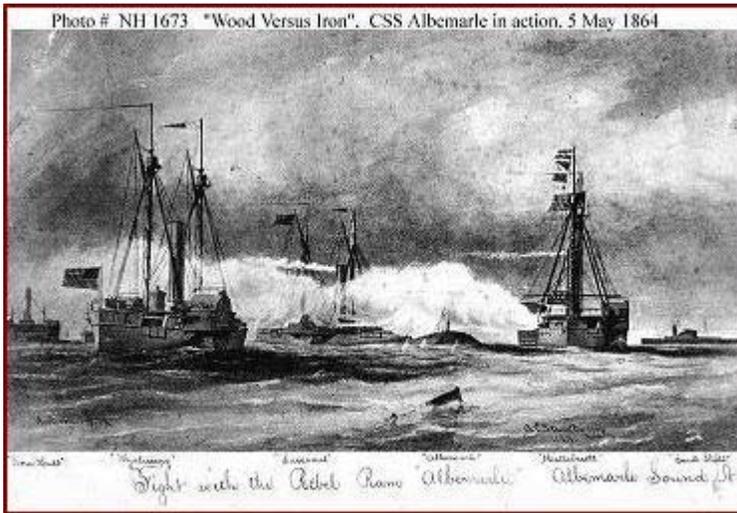
The *Commodore Hull* was built in 1860 in New York City. Originally named the *Nuestra Senora de Regla*, the 376-ton,



141-foot long steamer was built to be used as a ferryboat at Havana, Cuba. Like just about anything else that floated, the US Navy bought the ferryboat at the beginning of the war. On November 27, 1862, the steamer was commissioned as the *Commodore Hull*. Carrying a pair of 30-pounder rifles and four 24-pounder smoothbore guns, the gunboat headed south under the command of Acting Master W. G. Saltonstall to join the North Atlantic Blockading squadron.

During D. H. Hill's siege of Washington, North Carolina (March 30-April 16, 1863), the *Commodore Hull* was hotly engaged with Confederate shore batteries. While aground in the Pamlico River, the gunboat was hit over ninety times, according to Saltonstall. The Confederate shot failed to do fatal damage to the hull or machinery.

On May 5, 1864, the *Commodore Hull* was the first to sight the CSS *Albemarle* during the Battle of the Albemarle Sound, and survived trading shots with the Rebel ironclad during that engagement.



The *Commodore Hull* joined in the fighting as the Union Navy moved to recapture Plymouth, North Carolina after Lt. William B. Cushing destroyed the CSS *Albemarle* on the night of October 27-28, 1864.

On October 31, the *Commodore Hull* led the way upstream from Plymouth. Acting Master G. W. Barrett of the gunboat *Whitehead* came aboard, and rowed out ahead in a small boat to check for “torpedoes” (as nautical mines were called then).

The Confederates had no torpedoes in the channel, but blocked the way with two shore batteries and infantry. Two 9-inch guns and some field guns opened fire on the Union vessels, concentrating on the *Commodore Hull*. Steaming ahead at full speed, Acting Master Francis Josselyn ordered his guns to return fire with “shell, grape, and canister”. 300 yards away, Rebel infantry in rifle pits peppered the gunboat with musket fire.

The musket fire was deflected by the *Commodore Hull*'s iron plating. The “tinclad” gunboat was no match for the 9-inch shore guns, though. A large Confederate shell killed one man and wounded another at the starboard bow gun; tore through the berth deck and the wardroom; “cut away the railing of the after hatch and killing 1 man, mortally wounding 2, and 3 slightly, struck the after pivot gun carriage, where it lodged, disabling it for a time”. Josselyn added, “This shell fortunately did not explode.”

Another shell ripped through the boat, but doing little damage other than to the officers' cabins. Yet another shot smashed the bow of the second cutter and the stern of the dinghy.

The *Commodore Hull* ceased fire at midnight. “The upper works of this vessel”, wrote Josselyn, “are considerably shattered by shot and her frame much racked by the constant firing and by the explosion of a magazine on shore & the decks need caulking badly.” The boilers and engines were in bad shape, and the aft pivot gun was unusable.

Coxswain Patrick Colbert was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions that day. Colbert, at his post at the forward pivot gun, was wounded by the shell that killed a man beside him. The coxswain remained at the gun until the firing ceased. Josselyn marveled that Colbert “appeared as cool as if at mere target practice”.



Despite the damage, Josselyn took the steamer to Edenton on November 8, where they broke up a county court which the “so-called Confederate authority had the impertinence to hold under my very guns”, he wrote.

After damage to the boiler in December, the *Commodore Hull* headed for New Bern. On January 24, Commander W. H. Macomb wrote that despite a month of repair work, the “Hull” was “almost entirely broken down”.

After the war, the *Commodore Hull* was sold for \$16,000 at the New York Navy Yard on September 27, 1865. Oddly enough, she headed back to North Carolina, this time as a Cape Fear River steamer. For her career on the Cape Fear, the *Commodore Hull* was renamed the Waccamaw.

As the Waccamaw, she lasted until she “was burned at Wilmington” on September 6, 1886, according to a Raleigh News and Observer bulletin two days later. The steamboat, which was “not in use” at the time of the fire, was burned to the waterline. Today, the remnants of the *Commodore Hull* remain buried.

