

## The Blockade Runner *Cornubia*

### Bill Jayne

The *Cornubia* was one of the most successful of all Confederate blockade runners. She made about 20 successful runs through the blockade before being captured by US Navy ships *Niphon* and *James Adger* on November 8, 1863. According to *Lifeline of the Confederacy* by Stephen R. Wise, she made 18 successful runs. The Naval History and Heritage Command credits her with 22 successful runs. According to Mr. Wise, almost 300 steamers made about 1,300 attempts to run the Union blockade and approximately 1,000 attempts were successful. The average lifetime of a blockade runner, however, was just a little over four runs, or two round trips. Of the 300 steamers engaged in the risky but profitable enterprise, 136 were captured and 85 destroyed. It should be noted that not all blockade runners were steam ships but as the war progressed sail driven ships had less success.

The *Cornubia* was built in Cornwall, England, in 1858 as a ferry and packet running along the rugged southwest coast of England. “*Cornubia*” is a Latinized form of the name “Cornwall.” The builder and owner was Haney and Son of Hayle, England. She was 190 feet long, a twin sidewheel steamer with a shallow draft of 12 feet, six inches. She was purchased by the Confederacy and primarily ran the blockade between Bermuda and Wilmington, a distance of about 675 miles. She was fast, making about 18 knots, and painted white to make her hard to spot. A typical cargo was 314 bales of cotton, 29 casks of tobacco and two casks of turpentine. That was the cargo reported in the *New York Times* when *Cornubia* arrived in Bermuda on March 22, 1863 outbound from Wilmington. A “cask” was about 250 gallons and a “bale” of compressed cotton weighed 400 to 500 pounds. Other ships, typically British, transported the cargo to England where it was sold and the money, or credit, was used to acquire weapons, ammunition, medicine and other war materiel for the Confederate war effort. Some blockade runners were owned by the Confederate government, some by the states and some were privately owned. In addition to military supplies, private blockade runners typically brought luxury items and valuable foodstuffs such as coffee and wine back to the Confederacy where it was sold at a huge profit. *Cornubia* was owned by the Confederacy.

According to the U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command, the *Cornubia*’s 23rd voyage was disastrous, having repercussions far beyond those stemming from the loss of a desperately needed cargo. Blockader USS *Niphon* gave chase as *Cornubia* sought to run in to Wilmington and Lieutenant Richard H. Gayle, Confederate States Navy, beached his ship at 2:30 a.m., 8 November, 1863. She was beached 11 miles north of New Inlet and out of range of the friendly guns at

Ft. Fisher. The captain, carpenter and one seaman remained on board while the officers, crew and passengers escaped to shore. By 3:00 a.m., USS *James Adger* had towed *Cornubia* free on the flood tide still intact and she and the three captives were duly sent to Boston as a prize, along with a bag of watersoaked mail that one of her officers had tried to dispose of in the surf.

The *Cornubia* papers quickly became a Rosetta stone to unlock the management secrets of the official Confederate blockade-running program. The most immediate result was a new, tough policy toward British seamen caught challenging the blockade. U.S. District Attorney Richard Henry Dana, Jr., at Boston, was designated to receive a sealed packet of all papers taken in the prize. Transmitting them to Secretary Welles, 26 December, after study, Dana wrote: "We have found in the prize steamer *Cornubia* letters which prove that that steamer, the *R. E. Lee*, and *Ella & Annie* and others of their class are the property of the Confederate Government and that their commanders are in the service of the Confederate Navy Department. This raises the question whether, in like cases, the Government will detain foreign seamen found on board as prisoners of war. The letters also show that they are under orders to conceal these facts while in neutral ports, in order to escape the rules applicable to public vessels of belligerents." Welles endorsed the letter, writing: "The persons captured on the boats mentioned and others in like cases to be detained as prisoners."



RICHARD H. DANA, JR., IN 1842

Richard H. Dana, Jr., author of *Two Years Before the Mast*, in 1842

Comdr. Thomas H. Patterson, USN, of *James Adger* noted, "Her captain remarked to my executive officer that 'though the *Cornubia* is a small vessel the Confederate Government could better have afforded to lose almost any other vessel.' " He was not referring merely to essential cargo. The papers the captain tried to destroy revealed the operational pattern of the Confederate Army transport service. The ship's Confederate register showed the Secretary of War, "James A. Seddon, of Richmond, Va., is her sole owner." Commanders of these transports were CSN officers who reported to Col. Josiah Gorgas, Chief of Ordnance, CSA, through special War Department Agent J. M. Seixas in Wilmington, N.C.

The Confederacy was buying other ships in addition to the *Cornubia* and the ships were initially commanded by British captains in order to give the appearance of British ownership and conceal their identity as Confederate ships until after they had left British ports. One British captain advised Confederate Navy Secretary Stephen Mallory: "I would suggest that as fast as the ships are paid for, [Confederate States] Navy officers be put in command as a general rule," adding that such vessels "ought to be kept registered in the names of private individuals, otherwise serious embarrassment may arise, as Lord Russell [foreign secretary during the Civil War] has stated in the House of Lords that if it could be shown that the steamers trading between the Confederate States and the British Islands were owned by the Confederate States Government, they would be considered as transports and would be forbidden to enter English ports, except under the restrictions imposed upon all men-of-war of the belligerent powers."

Following this pattern, orders and letters from the summer of 1863 from Col. Gorgas to Lt. Gayle, via Agent Sexias, stated: "You [that is, Lt. Gayle] will assume command of the Steamer *Cornubia* relieving Capt. J. M. Burroughs ... (whose contract) terminates on reaching Bermuda...Take immediate steps to change your flag and register under Confederate colors." The intent of the whole system was revealed by the following sentence: "Being in the Confederate service, they [crew members] are entitled to be exchanged as prisoners-of-war."

As the war progressed, the Confederate government realized that it needed to gain more control over blockade running in order to ensure a flow of desperately needed military supplies, including weapons. Typical of the Confederacy's reluctance to exercise centralized control, however, it wasn't until February 1864 that President Jefferson Davis was authorized to exercise control over all foreign commerce. In essence, it was too late by that time, as the Union Navy's blockade had become more and more effective as the war ground on.

After her capture, the *Cornubia* was adapted to US Navy use as a warship and ended the war in far-off Galveston, Texas, where she captured several Confederate ships and assisted in the sinking of the Confederate steamer *Denbigh*. She was sold after the war.

Painting below by Clive Carter, courtesy of Robert Jones, First Light Gallery, Camborne, Cornwall, U.K. Titled *Cornubia* coming up the Cape Fear River, spring 1863.

