



The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

USS PETERHOFF and UNCW's CIVIL WAR CANNON

By **David Norris**

Quietly sunning itself on a grassy lawn on the campus of UNC-Wilmington lays a very large souvenir of the Civil War—a 30-pounder Parrot rifle. The Parrot rifle was once part of the armament of the *USS Peterhoff*, a captured blockade-runner assigned to the U.S. Navy's North Atlantic Blockading Squadron.

The *Peterhoff* was British-built, iron-hulled sidewheel steamer. She left Falmouth, England on January 27, 1863, bound for Matamoros, Mexico by way of St. Thomas, Danish Virgin Islands. On February 20, the *USS Alabama* halted the *Peterhoff* just off the Danish island of St. John's by firing first a blank cartridge, then a shotted gun fired across her bow. Although the *Peterhoff* was flying the British flag, and was well within Danish waters, they were searched by a Union boarding party. The Federal sailors found nothing wrong and let the ship proceed to St. Thomas.

Also in the harbor at St. Thomas were two U.S. Navy ships commanded by Acting Rear Admiral Charles Wilkes, who had gained notoriety for his seizure of the British mail steamer *Trent* in December 1861. (Wilkes removed two Confederate diplomats on their way to Europe; the seizure of the *Trent* angered the British so much that there was a chance of war breaking out over the 'Trent Affair' before cooler heads defused the situation.) In 1863, Wilkes was no less aggressive in searching out potential blockade breakers. As the *Peterhoff* left St. Thomas on February 25, signals flew between Wilkes and the *USS Vanderbilt* offshore. The *Vanderbilt* ordered the *Peterhoff* to heave to, and another boarding party examined her papers, which stated that the steamer was bound for Matamoros. However, a sailor aboard the *Peterhoff* told the boarding that they were really headed for Brownsville, Texas (a port just across the Rio Grande from Matamoros.)

The sailor's testimony was taken as proof that the *Peterhoff* was intended to run the blockade into Texas, and the ship was seized and sent to Key West, Florida. The incident angered both Denmark and Great Britain, the latter particularly because the *Peterhoff* was carrying British mail. The *Times* of London believed that the prize court would quickly release the vessel after such 'discreditable proceedings', but the court condemned the ship, which was purchased by the Union Navy. Without a change of name, the prize was transferred to the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron to watch the approaches to the Cape Fear River.

At 5 a.m. on March 6 1864, the *USS MONTICELLO* was steaming to Beaufort for coal when they spotted a strange steamer in the dim predawn light. The *Monticello's* officer of the watch, Acting Ensign Joseph Hadfield, believed that they had seen a blockade-runner and set a course to

challenge the potential prize. Unfortunately, the *Monticello* was steaming closer in to shore than they should have been, and they were blundering into the inner line of blockaders watching the approaches to the Cape Fear at New Inlet. Hadfield thought he was closing in on a blockade-runner at anchor, but instead he was dead-set on a collision course with the blockader *Peterhoff*.

At 5:10 p.m., the *Monticello* plowed into the *Peterhoff*, striking her amidships. The *Monticello* was little damaged, but the *Peterhoff* sank in five fathoms of water within half an hour. All of her crew was saved, although they lost practically all of their possessions. One hundred and twenty officer and men were packed onto the *USS Florida* until other billets could be found for them. The *Peterhoff's* paymaster, Josia F. Dunham, told the *Florida's* paymaster and diarist William Frederick Keeler that he had just joined the navy, and thought he's had a 'a pretty hard start.'

After dusk on the night of March 7, several boats were sent from the blockaders *Mount Vernon* and *Nippon* to destroy as much of the *Peterhoff* as they could, to keep the Confederates from salvaging anything useful. The Union tars found themselves on a dangerous assignment. In the darkness with a 'considerable sea rolling over the wreck,' they could only work on the forecastle and quarterdeck, and even these were slightly awash even at low tide. They worried about the garrison of Fort Fisher, as there were a considerable amount of signal lights and fires burning busily on the shore all night. The Confederates never fired at the wrecking party. The Yankees cut down the masts and chopped up the rigging. The guns that they could reach, a 30-pounder Parrot rifle on the forecastle and a boat howitzer on the quarterdeck, were spiked and dumped overboard. Just after midnight, the work was done and the boats returned to their ships with some salvaged sails and rigging.

Famed naval raider Lt. William B. Cushing commanded the *Monticello* at the time of the wreck. Inquiries placed the blame squarely on Hadfield's 'inefficiency and carelessness,' but he was still on board the *Monticello* with Cushing in September. On the night of July 15, 1864, the *USS Cherokee* slammed into the wreck of the *Peterhoff*. The impact awakened most of the crew, but no serious damage was done. After the war, the United States Supreme Court overturned the prize court's decision regarding the *Peterhoff*, on the grounds that the sailor's testimony should not have invalidated the ship's papers, which were in order. After this rare reversal of a prize court ruling, the owners were reimbursed for their loss.

Acting Ensign H.S. Borden of the *Nippon* notified his superiors that the guns on the main deck of the *Peterhoff* 'might be taken off, provided there was suitable vessel for the purpose, if tended to immediately.' Borden's advice went unheeded until 1974. In that year, the 4.2-inch, 30-pounder Parrot rifle was raised by a joint effort of the North Carolina Division of Archives and History and UNC-Wilmington. Although on display on the UNC-Wilmington campus, the gun is on loan from the United States Navy, because it is still owned by that agency. The Visitors' Center at Fort Fisher and the Carteret County Museum of History at Morehead City also have guns from the *Peterhoff* on display.

Sources: Stephen R. Wise, *Lifeline of the Confederacy: Blockade Running During the Civil War*; Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion; 'The Capture of the *Peterhoff*', *The New York Times*, 15 April 1863-

-Editor's Note: *The Peterhoff* has yet another Wilmington connection. In 1862, Simon B. Kahnweiler, a German-born Wilmingtonian merchant ran the blockade and traveled to England and Europe to purchase supplies for the Confederacy. In a business partnership with Wilmington's Mayor, O.G. Parsley, Kahnweiler chartered the *Peterhoff* for that vessel's first try at running the blockade. She reached the Islands safely and discharged her cargo and returned to England. She was captured on her second run through the blockade and as an U.S. Navy man-of-war, was equipped with seven guns, was sent to the Cape Fear area where, less than a month later she was accidentally sunk. As for Simon, he remained abroad until after the war; it was later said that he made and lost a fortune during that conflict!-

