

A Pier Honors Her Name—

# Blockade Runner Is Beached

By EUGENE FALLON

The year 1864 was a bitter year in Dixie. New Bern fell to a Union assault party; in the summer of that year the Army of Lee fell back from the barren fields of Gettysburg and a stubborn General Meade. The glorious cause was staggering and already lost. In Brunswick County the action was, if relatively minor, none the less dramatic and heartening.

From the harbors, coves and inlets of Brunswick, brave men slipped out to sea, daring the Union blockade to carry cotton and naval stores to England and France. And those who succeeded in getting under the tight lid of ships and guns found it even more difficult to get back in, bringing cannon, muskets, munitions and money to the hard-pressed Confederacy.

On the early morning of January 11, 1864, just as the east turned red a sleek double-propeller steamer, low in the water and obviously built for speed, raced desperately for land. And there was urgent need for speeds. The Vesta was being hotly pursued by the flagship of the Union Blockade fleet, the U. S. S. Ariels, whose base was Shallotte Inlet. The Yankee cruiser was under the command of Capt. Edward F. Devens, a native of Boston.

Perhaps Devens was exercising his New England thrift when he directed that the "Rebel scouter" be not blown from the water, but, if possible, stopped dead in the water and salvaged whole (cargo and vessel alike). Then again, New England boasted some pretty good sailors, and it may have seemed a pity to Devens, to blast such beauty to the bottom.

The Vesta was a pretty ship at that. Records show she was of

some 500 tons; 250 feet long and built on a 31-foot beam. These specifications allowed for shallow draft—probably about 10 feet—whereas the Union warships averaged 24-foot draft. This enabled the Vesta to dash through shallow waters while the cumbersome Yankee frigates could do nothing but lurk out farther and await the next move. Black smoke poured from the three funnels of the Vesta as she dodged this way and that, while miniature waterspouts appeared astern of her and across her bow where federal shot splashed.

The 40 men aboard the Vesta were tired and grim-lipped. This was the second day of hide-and-go-seek. The day before the Vesta had slipped within view of another ship, the Blockade Runner Ranger, smashed and battered and nearly awash some 8 miles west of Fort Caswell. As the Vesta swirled by the wrecked Confederate vessel, the Vesta crew may have wondered, perhaps, of the fate of the Ranger's men. Were they drowned and dead, or worse still, contained in chains in some Yankee warship?

But conjecture itself was short-lived. Sighted, the Vesta was chased by three Union cruisers: The Quaker City, Tuscarora and the Keystone State. She had given them the slip, aided by darkness and her superior speedup to 20 miles per hour. Attempting to make a landfall the next morning, the Vesta was observed by Devens aboard the "Ariel" and the chase was on once more.

The Ariel, as flagship, was more heavily-gunned and perhaps a mite faster than her sister ships, and the Vesta was running short of coal. It was now nip and tuck with the odds lengthening against

the green-painted vessel carrying arms for the gallant fighters-in-gray. And she was loaded down with guns, British and Belgian rifles, bandoliers, bayonets, kegs of gunpowder and grape shot and canister; all bad news for the boys in blue.

The master of the Vesta ordered that the last ounce of steam be put on. "If it busts her boilers," he told his engineer sadly, "it is better than falling into the hands of the Yankees." And slowly, ever so slowly, the Vesta drew away from the Ariel. Searching the skies desperately, the skipper of the blockade runner could see not the faintest vestige of cloud. He knew his hours were numbered. Darting around headland, the Vesta steamed straight for Tubbs Inlet. The master decided the time had come to do or die.

"Drive her up on the sands!" he told the man at the wheel. "We'll have perhaps two hours to unload the cargo before they can reach us in their boats."

The Vesta swept along to her doom. The crewmen who lined its deck marveled at the way she went to execution. "Like a gud lassie," said one Scotch sailor. Strong men wept, as her twin screws drove her deep into sand which broke her back and sent her listing like a drunken thing at grotesque angle.

Unknown to the men aboard the runner, the drama which closed the annals of the good ship Vesta had not gone unnoticed. No sooner had she beached when a dozen soldiers dressed in Confederate gray appeared from nowhere. All hands worked like maniacs to unload the boxed rifles and other armaments. Several wagons awaited, were loaded, and lumbered off.

Before the job was half-completed, the Ariel hove into view, swung around and dispatched two boats, one of which carried Capt. Devens. The men on the beach retreated behind some trees and, waiting until the boats came into range, unleashed a fusillade of rifle fire which drove the Union-

ists back to their ship. The Ariel hoisted anchor and steamed away, presumably in quest of a company of riflemen. Looking back from his stance on the Ariel's bridge with something like admiration in his eyes, Capt. Devens saw that the Vesta had been set afire. The Yankee shipmaster watched the oily smoke rise like a distress signal from the receding beach, and wondered anew upon the futility of war.

The following morning saw the Ariel converging again upon Tubbs Inlet. On her decks stood a detachment of Union sharpshooters, bayonets bristling in the bright sun. But nothing remained to threaten the peace of that particular section of Brunswick County. The landing party, headed by Devens of course, found the beach deserted. Boarding the stranded smoke-blackened vessel, Devens with difficulty ascertained her name Vesta. Her holds gaped empty. Whatever she had carried, thought Devens, is now in enemy hands.

Although he'd been outrun and outwitted, Devens had no desire to abandon the rich prize to what a New England poet had only recently called: "the harpies of the shore". Ordering a hawser to be made fast to the magnificent ruin, Devens attempted to pull the brave ship from her unyielding bed, but it was no go. The Yankees discovered that the starboard side of the Vesta was ripped apart and several of her plates were awry. When the long boats pulled for the Ariel they carried only two anchors as salvage from the dead ship. Later, Devens was to write:

"I left the Confederate blockade runner, the Vesta, a complete wreck with five feet of water in her. Her boats lay on the beach, stove in. There was not a sign of her crew, who undoubtedly made their escape to a Rebel sanctuary and, it is to be expected, eventually to their homes."

Exactly where those homes lay

## Strange Catch



B. C. BRAMBLE of Fayetteville is shown here with a strange-looking fish he caught recently while surfcasting at Long Beach. Looking at the strange fish is his daughter, Mrs. Blount Whiteside and her daughter, Margaret, both of Dunn. Is it a trigger fish? Pigfish? Or is it a Sailor's Choice?

is open to speculation after some 97 years. The name of the man who commanded the Vesta is lost in time. This is not so surprising as it may seem since the Vesta was built on the Clyde River in Scotland, and was manned by British seamen. If she were built to Confederate order, or whether she was the product of British individual commercialism, is also unknown.

What is known is that she set forth on the last stage of her fatal sortie from a point in the Bahamas, British West Indies, probably the island of Nassau, and that the Vesta's maiden voyage was also her last. Leaving British waters the Vesta never made a Southern port, unless you can call Tubbs Inlet a port of call. But she tried with all her oaken heart, even if she foundered within sight of her goal. Who is to say her contest was in vain?

Today the Vesta has been reincarnated. In memoriam of this gallant ship, Mannon C. Gore, proprietor of Sunset Beach,

Brunswick County, North Carolina, has erected a pier as long in length as the sailormen of the ill-fated British ship were in purpose, directly over the spot where she came to rest with a broken back but with a heart beating fiercely. Next time you're down that salty way, look at the name on that pier. It shines bright in the Southern sunshine. It reads V-E-S-T-A.

## Manley A. Phelps

Manley A. Phelps, 77 of 2215 Gibson Ave., Wilmington, died at home Sunday morning after an extended illness. He was a native of Ash in Brunswick County.

Mr. Phelps was the son of the late Jacob Austin and Caroline Smith Phelps of Ash. He was a retired farmer and a member of Gibson Avenue Baptist Church, from which funeral rites will be held Tuesday at 3 p. m. by the Revs. R. C. Cline and Harry Lackey, with burial in Greenlawn Memorial Park.

He is survived by his wife, Mrs.

## Waterfront



We've got to look up the federal regulations regarding set turtles and their nests, because twice within the past two weeks we have come up with good material for this column, and each time we have feared to use names. On second thought, we think we'll tell the stories, but will simply neglect to give credit—this latter to protect those who were innocently involved.

One night recently a young lady who was a member of a vacationing family spied a little turtle crawling along the sand, and a short distance behind there came another. She and her mother soon back-tracked to a pile of sand that seemed to be producing these little creatures. And in fact it was, for this was the spot that one of the big mother turtles had chosen to lay her eggs; and this

was the time for hatching. The visiting vacationists dug up a few little turtles, but when they discovered some unhatched eggs, covered them back up again. The little turtles were released, and immediately headed for the ocean. And for the next several days, every time there was a new group of company at this cottage, they would go out and probe in the sand until they found some more little turtles in the nest.

The next turtle story has to do with a fishing trip for a little boy in Davis Creek. Last Saturday he hooked something really "big", and although his father could see that he had his hands full, he let the longster reel in his catch. When it got into sight, it turned out to be a sea turtle—maybe the papa or the mamma of the brood on the beach. And although it required only one little boy to haul in his passive quarry, it took three to hold him (or her) while the hook was being removed and the turtle liberated.

What does a charterboat skipper do on an open date? He goes fishing! At least that's what he does if his wife is a fishing fanatic and if there are other members of the family group almost as bad. Last Thursday Capt. Walter Lewis carried his wife and Dr. and Mrs. Norman Hornstein out on a marlin expedition. Both Mrs. Lewis and Dr. Hornstein have caught marlin while fishing off this boat and in these waters, but Thursday was not their day. The most spectacular catch was a 300-lb (estimated) spinner shark that Mrs. Gilliam Hornstein fought to a draw.

## F. W. Hewett

SHALLOTTE — Franklin William Hewett, 83, of Shallotte, died Thursday in a Lumberton hospital. Graveside rites were held Saturday at 3 p. m. at Chapel Hill Cemetery by the Revs. J. C. Furr and Burt Bennett.

Survivors include his wife; two sons, Peter and France Hewett; of Shallotte; a daughter, Mrs. Goldie Hewett of Shallotte; a half-brother, J. O. Hewett of Supply; 12 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren.

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