

Interesting Story Told About Old Confederate "Ram"

Ironclad Built on Roanoke Brought Complete Change in Naval Warfare

Completed April 18, 1864, Ram Had Brief But Brilliant Career

Ship Was Finally Blown Up By Torpedo While At Anchor

(A year ago this paper carried a story about the Confederate Ram, "Albemarle". It occasioned much interest at that time, and in April of this year, John W. Darden, of Plymouth, wrote a story about the famous old ship commemorating the 76th anniversary of its launching. The story by Mr. Darden is carried below. Ed.)

By JOHN W. DARDEN

Seventy six years ago tomorrow the Confederate ship, the Ram Albemarle, saw its first active service in the Roanoke River here at Plymouth.

The construction of this iron clad ship actually revolutionized naval warfare in the world. The iron-clad system had been but recently invented by a man by the name of John L. Porter, of Norfolk, Va., and that system had been used in the construction of this ship.

When Roanoke Island was captured by the Federal troops, Col. W. F. Martin and Lieut. Gilbert Elliott were engaged in the building of a gunboat at Deep Creek, Virginia. They were ordered to destroy the boat, which had been nearly completed, and to make their escape with about 150 laborers, who had been working under their directions. They then applied to the Confederate Government for a contract to build another gunboat at Tarboro, on Tar River. They began at once to build the ship, which being constructed under the direct supervision of J. W. Cook, of the Confederate Navy. Work on this boat had just begun when Peter Evans Smith recommended a more suitable place for the construction of such a ship in the south shore of Roanoke River at Edwards Ferry. An inspection of the site recommended by Mr. Smith was made by Martin and Elliott, who agreed with Mr. Smith and recommended the change to the Confederate headquarters at Richmond, Va. The Confederate Government accepted their recommendation and directed them to construct at once a floating battery instead of a gunboat, which was to be sheathed with iron. Martin and Elliott began at once to build such a craft. Mr. Smith took the contract to furnish the timber for the boat and Martin and Elliott supervised the actual construction, which proceeded rapidly and the boat was launched in a few months. This boat proved to be so unworthy that the iron was never put on it and it was soon abandoned.

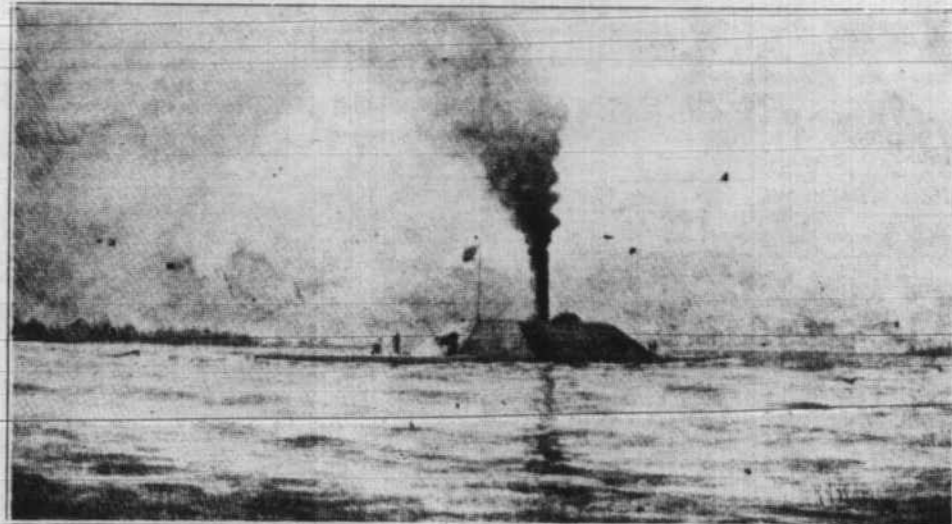
The Confederate Navy then contracted with Gilbert Elliott to construct a gunboat, to be named "Albemarle" at the same site where the other one had been built. Elliott, in order to carry out his agreement with the Confederate Navy as soon as possible, associated with him Peter E. Smith, of Scotland Neck, whose father, William R. Smith, owned the site and land upon which the Albemarle was to be built. They later associated with them in work the brother of Peter E. Smith, William H. Smith. The ship was constructed from plans prepared by John L. Porter, of Norfolk, Va.

Elliott, then only eighteen years of age but with the appearance of a man of thirty years of age and with an unusual mind and experience had charge of finances and general management. He left the actual building to his associate Peter Evans Smith, who had much experience and great engineering skill. W. H. Smith had charge of all supplies and outside work.

The contract as has been stated before, called for the construction of a gunboat but this plan was later changed and a ram was constructed instead. No ship was ever constructed under more adverse circumstances. The shipyard was in an open corn field and several miles from the nearest shop or machinery of any kind. It appeared impossible to obtain tools and machinery to work with. Iron and steel was scarce and the task seemed to them practically impossible. However, while timbers were being gathered at the site by Mr. Smith, Mr. Elliott was running here and there to gather together such material as was possible to find. He did collect quite a bit of old railroad iron, which was smelted and rolled into plate by Tredegar Iron Works, of Richmond.

The vessel was 158 feet in length, 35 feet 3 inches wide and drew 8 feet and 2 inches of water, drawing 9 feet when loaded. It was equipped with two horizontal non-condensing link motion engine geared to its propellers. The diameter of its cylinders was 18 inches with a 19 inch stroke with two boilers heated by one furnace. The boilers were 15 feet 4 inches long. The smoke stack was 4 feet and 7 inches in diameter. A section of this stack is now in the North Carolina hall of history, which shows many holes and scars of battle. It was constructed principally of pine timber caulked with cotton. Its ram was 18 feet long of oak and tapered to 4 inches square at the end, which had strips of iron on each side two inches wide. The vessel, when launched, floated very low, with only the deck and casement being above the water. The casement or deck house was 60 feet long and constructed of massive pine timber

THE CONFEDERATE STATES' IRONCLAD RAM, "THE ALBEMARLE"



The above drawing is from a picture in the government publication, "Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion," and is a true-to-life portrayal of the famous ironclad, which was put into active service just 76 years ago. Based at Plymouth and participating in a number of battles in and near here, the ram was finally blown up by the daring exploit of a handful of Union sailors.

and covered with 4 inch pine boards or planking which was covered with two layers of steel plate or armor bolted to the pine timbers.

At this stage in the construction of the great vessel, the contractors were faced with a real problem. The plate steel, which was shipped from Richmond to Halifax, the nearest railroad station, was plain flat steel without holes. The problem of drilling the holes to fasten it to the ship was perplexing. It took a long time to drill holes through the plate with hand drills, about twenty minutes to each piece. To spend this much time on each of the pieces of plate meant many thousands of pieces of steel for use. It has been said that necessity is the mother of invention. Mr. Peter Smith, using his inventive mind, invented the twist drill, which enabled them to make the holes in four minutes. The ship was taken to Halifax, where the armor plate was delivered by the railroad, and the plate was soon put in place on the vessel. The heavy guns were also put on the ship at Halifax. She was soon ready for action. Forges and blacksmith equipment were put aboard and the crew worked feverishly to finish the work as it drifted down the Roanoke River. The armament consisted of two 8 inch rifles mounted on pivot carriages, which enables each gun to work through three portholes. These port holes were protected by heavy steel plate, which could be raised or lowered as needed, to protect the gunners on the inside. When the great vessel was ready for service, the Confederate Navy sent Captain James W. Cook to take command when it went into action. Capt. Cook was a brave and gallant Christian gentleman and officer. The engagement of the vessel proved him to be a real hero.

The Albemarle was begun in the spring of 1863 and completed on April 18, 1864, seventy six years ago yesterday. Because of high water in the river, the vessel was enabled to move steadily on down the river to Plymouth withstanding shell-fire from two forts above Plymouth and on April 19th she engaged the Southfield, which she rammed and sunk, and the Miami, two of the Federal gunboats which guarded the fortifications of the Federal Troops at Plymouth. The Miami, being lashed to the Albemarle by its crew, fired a shell against the Albemarle, which rebounded and killed Capt. C. W. Plusser, the commander of the Federal Naval forces at Plymouth, and many others of his men. The death of Capt. Plusser, however, did not daunt the troops of his ship. They made an effort to board the Albemarle, which was repulsed by the brave crew of the vessel. The Miami a fast side wheeler, soon took flight and eluded destruction by the Albemarle and her crew, going out of the river into the Albemarle Sound. The next day, April 20th, General R. F. Hoke, aided by General M. W. Ransom, with the Ram Albemarle to guard the water front, attacked the land fortifications and captured Plymouth. I might add that the battle of Plymouth was perhaps the hardest fought battle fought on North Carolina soil during the War Between the States. In addition to sinking of the Southfield and driving the Miami out of the river, the Albemarle had captured several smaller craft.

On May 5th, Capt. Cook steamed out of the Roanoke River into the Albemarle Sound with the Albemarle and two tenders, the Bombshell and the Cotton Plant, both of which had been captured a few days before by the Albemarle, and engaged seven well armored and well equipped gunboats armed with 55 guns. The Albemarle, as has been stated before, had only two 8 inch rifles, one of which was damaged in the early part of the battle in which it was then engaged. Capt. Cook and his gallant crew continued to use the damaged gun, however, as best they could until the battle was over. The vessels engaged in this battle, which occurred in the Albemarle Sound between Leonards Point and Sandy Point and is crossed by the new Albemarle Sound Bridge, on the Confederate side were the Albemarle, Bombshell and Cotton Plant. The Federal ships were the Miami, Mattabesett, Sas-

sacus, Whitehead, Wyalusing, Commodore Hull and the Ceres. The battle ranged from 2 o'clock in the afternoon, May 5th 1864, until nightfall.

when the Albemarle returned to Plymouth, the Bombshell being recaptured by the Federal forces. I am unable to learn just what happened to the Cotton Plant.

The Federal forces surrounded the Albemarle and hurled their gun-fire at her without effect. The Commander of the Sassacus gives the following description of the battle: "The Sassacus, which at close range, gave the Albemarle one broadside after another with solid nine inch shot without affecting her activities. The guns might as well have fired blank shells, for the shot skimmed off into the air. Even the 100 pound shot from our pivot rifles glanced off from the sloping sides and roof without effect at all. The feeling of helplessness that comes from the failure of heavy guns to make any mark on an advancing foe can never be described." The Sassacus then attempted to sink the Albemarle. She drew off a few yards and pointed her bow directly at the broadside of the Albemarle and the order, "Full steam ahead," was given by the commander. She struck the Albemarle at the rear end of the casement. The jar gave the vessel such an upset that the stern was driven several feet below the water. The crew thought at first that the vessel was sinking and the Commander gave the command to the men, "Stand by your guns, if we must go down let us go down like brave men." The vessel was soon righted and the brave fight continued. A well directed shot from the Albemarle pierced the Sassacus and tore a hole through the boilers of the ship, which rendered the vessel helpless. The screams of the men, which was caused by the escaping steam and

ANSWERS CALL



The last personal link connecting the construction and activities of the old Albemarle Ram with the present was broken last October when Thomas P. Johnston died at his home in Salisbury. Posing for the above photograph when he was a young man, Mr. Johnston was a member of the Albemarle crew, serving as "powder monkey" and as paymaster special.

was killed by pistol shot from the Miami. This is the only death that the Confederates had during the battle. The Federals lost several.

It is said that the scarcity of fuel and the bad condition of the stack caused the crew of the Albemarle to have to use bacon for fuel to enable them to make port at Plymouth after the battle.


From this battle, which occurred on May 5th 1864, until October 27th 1864, the ship lay at anchor at Plymouth. The Federals well knew that, with the Ram Albemarle in command of the water front at Plymouth, they would never be able to recapture the place. They made several attempts to torpedo the vessel, which was finally accomplished by Lieut. W. B. Cushing on the night of October 27, 1864. Capt. Warley being in command of the vessel at that time.

The boat was raised by the United States Government in 1867 and taken to Norfolk, Va., where it was sold on October 15th, of that same year to J. N. Lenard and Company for the sum of \$3,200.00.

Before she was finally dismantled the Commander of the navy yard had a picture of her made and framed in wood taken from her and presented it to Mrs. James W. Cook, the widow of the great ship's commander, who was then living in Portsmouth. The smokestack and the flag are preserved to this day. The smokestack being in the hall of history, Raleigh, N. C., and the flag being in the North Carolina room of the Confederate Museum, Richmond, Va.

The Albemarle was a North Carolina boat built on North Carolina soil by North Carolina men of North Carolina.

(Continued on next page)



You Have Put in A Lot Of HARD WORK AND EARNED EVERY PENNY

Of Your

Tobacco Money

MARTIN COUNTY farmers are to be congratulated upon their fine crop of tobacco—undoubtedly the best in the history of the county. We sincerely hope prices will be good and that you will make a profit on every acre.

But, regardless of the price, only you know the trouble and the expense you have been put to in producing this fine crop—the hard work on hot days, the sleepless nights—and therefore you alone can appreciate the care which should be taken with the money you receive for it—the fruits of a whole year's work.

DON'T TAKE CHANCES!

Put your hard-earned money in a safe bank, in an institution the officers of which give first consideration to safety in handling their depositors' funds. The Branch Banking and Trust Company never forgets the money it handles belongs to its depositors, and every investment is made with this in mind.

We Offer a Complete Banking Service — and Will Be Glad To Extend Every Accommodation Which Is Consistent With Safe and Sound Banking Principles

BRANCH BANKING & TRUST COMPANY

Member Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation WILLIAMSTON, N. C.