

7-2016

## Serendipity and IX-Inch Dahlgren Smoothbore Cannon “FP 513”

James D. Spirek

*University of South Carolina - Columbia*, spirekj@mailbox.sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/sciaa\\_staffpub](https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/sciaa_staffpub)



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Publication Info

Published in *Legacy*, Volume 20, Issue 1, 2016, pages 26-30.

<http://artsandsciences.sc.edu/sciaa/>

© 2016 by The South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology

This Article is brought to you by the Archaeology and Anthropology, South Carolina Institute of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty & Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [digres@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:digres@mailbox.sc.edu).

# Maritime Research

## Serendipity and IX-Inch Dahlgren Smoothbore Cannon “FP 513”

By James D. Spirek

The recent recovery of the three cannons jettisoned by the CSS *Pee Dee* into the Great Pee Dee River during the waning days of the Civil War had various meanings to the many folks attending the event. To Catesby Rogers, the great grandson of Catesby ap Roger Jones in charge of the Selma Ordnance and Naval Foundry located in Selma, Alabama, the facility that forged the two Brooke rifles that meant seeing the handiwork of his ancestor. To Ted Gragg, Bob Butler, and many others involved over the years in discovering, recording, preparing, and lifting the guns, that meant witnessing the fruits of their labors finally visible on the riverbank. To the spectators, that meant marveling at the three tubes extraordinary condition after 150 years in the river. To the author, that meant a serendipitous turn of professional and personal connections concerning the recovery of one of the three cannons—IX-inch Dahlgren smoothbore “FP 513” (Figure 1).

Like many beginning graduate students, I found myself in search of a thesis topic. Studying at East Carolina University’s Program in Maritime History and Nautical Archaeology (now known as the

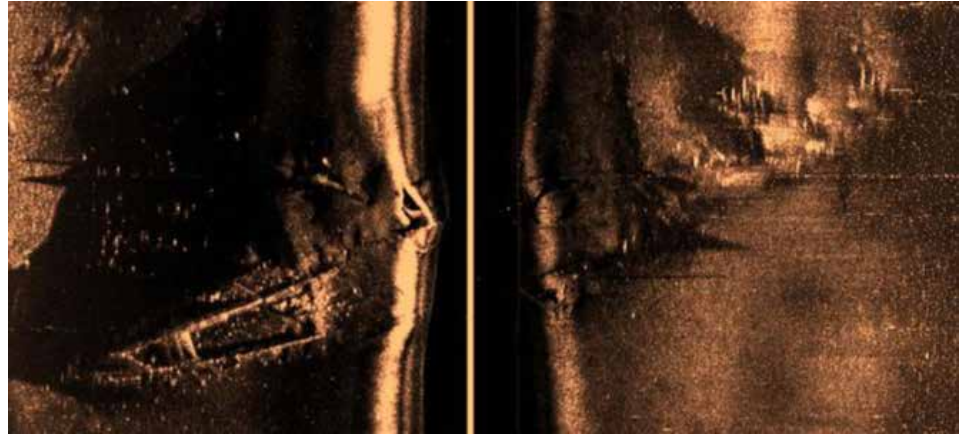


Figure 2: Sonogram image of the remains of *Southfield* on the bottom of the Roanoke River. The aft end of the gunboat is to the left of the image with forward end, demolished during river navigation projects in the late 1800s, to the right. (Courtesy North Carolina Underwater Archaeology Branch)

Program in Maritime Studies), that meant looking for a suitable project, typically on a shipwreck. In early 1990, a private underwater archaeological contracting firm discovered the remains of the USS *Southfield*, a gunboat rammed and sunk by the ironclad CSS *Albemarle*, in the Roanoke River just downstream from Plymouth, North Carolina (Figure 2). I was approached by my professors and the North Carolina Underwater Archaeology Branch, the state managers of submerged archaeological sites in the state, about my interest in studying the

remains of the Union gunboat. I jumped at the opportunity, as the remains of the gunboat met many of my requirements for a thesis topic—a shipwreck, underwater, near-by, and plenty of related historical documents. Both organizations also pledged to support the archaeological investigations at the shipwreck. Equally important was the enthusiasm shown by the town and private citizens of Plymouth to contribute to this endeavor with material support that included outfitting a vacant house for our use during the field school, a pig-pickin’, boat slips, and other resources. The sunken gunboat was a perfect shipwreck from the perspective of a budding underwater archaeologist with an interesting history before, during, and after the war and an archaeological site with many extant features reflecting its role as a gunboat supporting army and navy combat operations in the waters of North Carolina and Virginia.

Originally, the USS *Southfield* was a Staten Island ferry boat built in 1857 operating between there and Manhattan in New York Harbor until purchased by the navy in late 1861 (Figure 3). Hastily outfitted for a sea voyage south, the ex-ferryboat arrived at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, for conversion into a gunboat for the upcom-



Figure 1: Recovering IX-inch Dahlgren smoothbore from the Great Pee Dee River with author in middle ground. (SCIAA image)



Figure 3: The Staten Island and New York City ferryboat *Southfield* circa 1857-1861. (Courtesy of New York Public Library)

ing Burnside's expedition to attack the sounds of North Carolina. Workmen toiled incessantly to convert the ferryboat that once carried passengers and wagons into a gunboat capable of carrying four large naval guns and a complement of officers and crew. A major modification included building up the curbs that once guided wagons on and off the ferryboat into wooden breastworks to fasten the cannon breech-

ings for a 100-pdr Parrott rifle and three IX-inch Dahlgren smoothbores (Figure 4).

Transformed into a gunboat, *Southfield* joined the expedition off Hatteras Inlet, NC and with the other navy warships and army transport vessels crossed with difficulty over the shallow bar. During the Battle of Roanoke Island, *Southfield* acted as the flagship and softened Confederate batteries in support of the army's amphibious attack. Following the reduction of the island, the gunboat participated in the subsequent capture of other port cities in the Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds. Under the relatively firm control of Union forces, this theater of the war settled into routine naval patrols.

Bored with the inaction, *Southfield's* captain requested a transfer to a more active theater. Soon afterwards the gunboat received orders to proceed to Virginia to join the naval and land forces assembling to participate in the 1862 Peninsula Campaign under the command of General George McClellan. Here the gunboat operated alongside the USS *Monitor* and other vessels of the James River Flotilla protecting the left flank of the land forces pressing towards Richmond. As the Union cam-

paign headed fitfully to the Confederate capital, the gunboat bombarded batteries, participated in feints, and protected supply vessels. Strengthening Southern resolve and Northern indecision caused the offensive movement to sputter, eventually leading to the withdrawal of the land forces on the peninsula, which was covered by the naval flotilla. Following the failed campaign, *Southfield* returned to Norfolk for much-needed hull and machinery repairs and to receive a strengthened battery.

During the gunboat's absence from North Carolina, the situation had changed from relatively firm control to Confederate land forces threatening several Union strongholds. The Union naval commander in the sounds of North Carolina urgently requested additional assets, specifically requesting *Southfield*, due to the gunboat's shallow draft and increased firepower. The gunboat's battery consisted of two new IX-inch smoothbore Dahlgren's to increase the total to five IX-inches and a 100-pdr Parrott rifle gun, along with a 12-pdr boat howitzer—a formidable battery. Repairs to the gunboat in Norfolk were drawn out caused by logistical delays, but finally departed Virginia headed to the sounds in early December. The gunboat arrived on the Roanoke River to take up station at Plymouth on 7 December 1862; three days later the Confederates attacked in force.

On the morning of 10 December, taking advantage of the solitary gunboat, a Confederate force composed of infantry, cavalry, and artillery launched an attack against Union-controlled Plymouth. The captain of the gunboat ordered a cautious return fire due to their unfamiliarity with the city layout and fear for firing upon friendly forces. During the fight, the gunboat received a number of hits that included a shot bursting the steam drum, which disabled the gunboat. The captain ordered the anchor slipped and the crippled gunboat was swept downstream by the current and away from the beleaguered Union forces. Another ex-ferryboat turned gunboat, USS *Commodore Perry*, on picket duty at the mouth of the river, immediately headed upstream at the sound of cannon fire to support the Union forces. Finding the

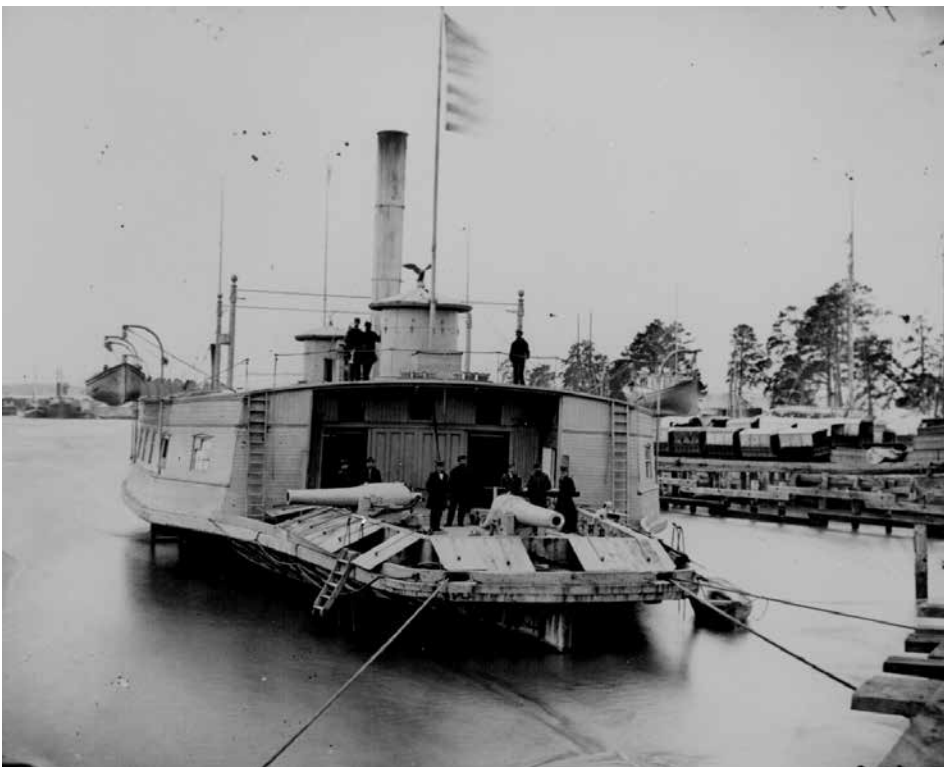


Figure 4: IX-inch Dahlgren smoothbore battery aboard the ex-ferryboat USS *Commodore Perry*. This arrangement is similar to *Southfield's*, except that it did not have sniper shields on the breechworks. (Courtesy of National Archives)

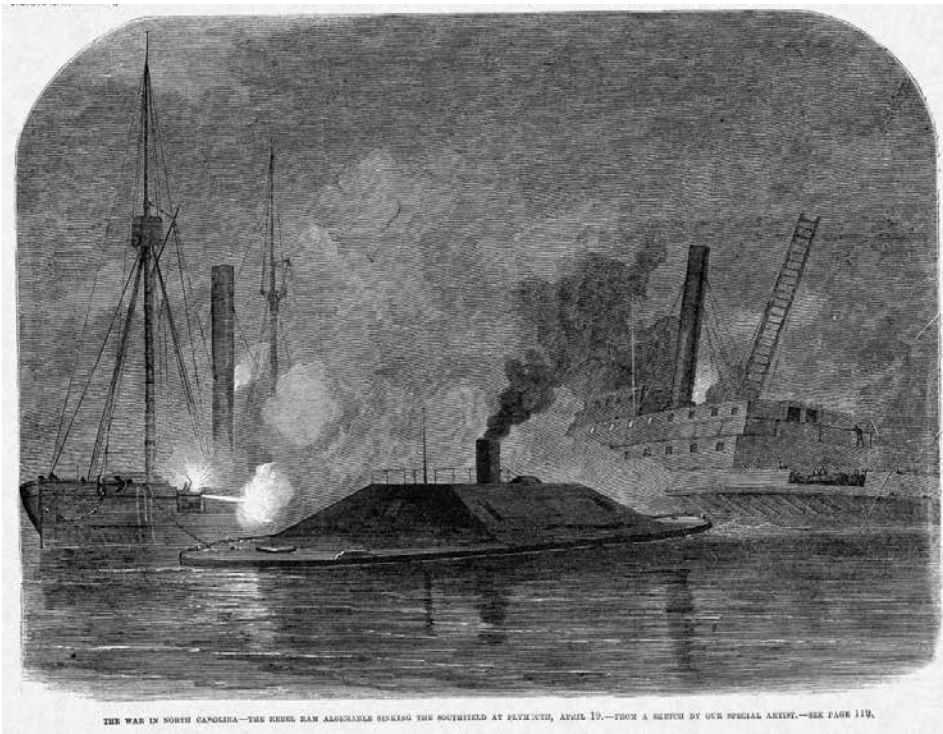


Figure 5: Naval engagement between Confederate ram *Albemarle* and Union gunboats *Miami* and *Southfield* on 19 April 1864. (*Harper's Weekly*)

helpless gunboat drifting downriver, the captain of *Commodore Perry*, tossed a hawser to *Southfield*, and headed to Plymouth with the gunboat in tow. When the two reached the town, the Confederate forces had withdrawn from the attack.

The senior commander in the sounds felt *Southfield's* captain displayed a lack of gallantry during the firefight and called for his removal from command. Subsequently, the commodore of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron ordered a report of the conduct aboard *Southfield* during the attack. The gunboat's commander provided a detailed response to several questions that included the number and types of projectiles fired by each gun, with their serial numbers, during the engagement. He noted, however, that the crew of gun No. 4, an IX-inch, had not been able to get their gun to bear on the town, and subsequently did not provide the serial number for that cannon. Apparently the commodore received the response favorably as the captain retained his command of the gunboat until he departed due to ill health in the fall of 1863.

From the attack on Plymouth in late 1862 to early 1864, the gunboat participated in routine patrols in the sounds and ad-

acent rivers and provided fire support at hot spots. One such spot occurred at Washington on the Pamlico River in March 1863 where the gunboat assisted in breaking the Confederate siege of that Union-occupied town. A Confederate assault on New Bern in January 1864 prompted a timely response by *Southfield* and other gunboats to protect the town. In early 1864, intelligence reports confirmed the building of an ironclad further up the Roanoke River. At Scotland Neck, just above the river town of Hamilton, the Confederates were building a casemated ram called the CSS *Albemarle* intending to break-through the naval defenders at Plymouth and then to engage other Union naval forces in the sounds. The Union fear of iron warships meeting wooden gunboats was now looming.

In an effort to thwart the impending attack, Union naval forces sank several hulks upstream from Plymouth and strategized on the best way to engage the ram with the gunboats. The captain of the USS *Miami* decided to lash his gunboat to *Southfield* and attempt to engage and to catch the ram in a cross-fire between the two gunboats; a fateful plan for *Southfield* and the captain. On the night of 18 April 1864, the long anticipated Confederate at-

tack began with land forces assaulting the town, while the ironclad ram descended the river directly at the two gunboats in the early morning hours of the 19th (Figure 5). The ram smashed 30-feet into the starboard side of *Southfield*. Temporarily embedded in the gunboat, *Albemarle* offered a point-blank target to the gun crews of *Miami*. The gunboat's captain assisting alongside the guns directed a cannon at the casemate of the ram and fired. Shell fragments rebounded from the iron flanks back towards the Union gunboat and struck the captain in the head, killing him instantly. The impaled *Southfield* began to fill with water and started to sink, threatening to drag the ram down with it. Crew from *Miami* cut the lashings binding the two gunboats together, while crew from *Southfield* clambered aboard the gunboat before the two separated, including the captain, while others jumped in the river. At some point, the ram broke free of its victim and started to direct attention at *Miami*. The Union gunboat backed down the river and eluded the ram. The next day, enveloped by the ram and another steamer, Union forces surrendered Plymouth to the Confederates. The sunken *Southfield* and its battery lay on the bottom just downriver from the town.

After the successful defeat of Union forces, the Confederates worked to recover the battery of the Union gunboat and completed the operations by the end of May. Three of the Dahlgren's stayed in Plymouth, and eventually were recaptured spiked by the Union navy, but two others were apparently sent elsewhere. As we now know, one of the IX-inch Dahlgren smoothbores was sent upriver to Weldon and then shipped via the Wilmington, Weldon, and Manchester Rail Line to the Mars Bluff Navy Yard arriving there sometime between September and October 1864. The smoothbore was placed aboard the CSS *Pee Dee*, which required modifications to the bulwarks to accommodate the captured Union gun amidships on a pivot carriage. Completed in early January 1865, the gunboat's sole naval mission occurred in early March when sent upriver to cover withdrawing

Confederate forces from Cheraw under pressure from advancing Union troops. Without firing a shot, the gunboat returned downstream to the navy yard where the crew received orders to jettison the cannons and to scuttle the gunboat.

For many years, the whereabouts of the three cannons remained shrouded in mystery—did they go down with the ship or thrown overboard elsewhere? It was not until 1995 that the first cannon was found along the waterfront of the navy yard. Interestingly, that cannon was the IX-inch Dahlgren. When Dr. Lawrence Babits, now-retired director of the Program in Maritime Studies at ECU, posited three Union shipwreck candidates, from whom the gun came from—two from out West and the USS *Southfield*, I was determined to learn if indeed this was from the gunboat I had spent many hours researching and diving on years ago as a graduate student. I reviewed my thesis and notes, especially the detailed report of the 10 December 1862 attack on Plymouth, that listed the guns and their serial numbers, save one, No. 4. But, I did not find any mention of gun “FP 513.” As mentioned in previous articles, during a research trip to the National Archives in Washington, DC, we examined archival resources to identify the cannon. Two sources, the “Register of IX-inch Dahlgren’s” and a collection of ordnance returns, provided the confirmation that the Confederate gunboat was indeed armed with a recovered *Southfield* cannon (Figure 6).

The markings on the gun “FP 513,” especially the abbreviation “JMB” on the trunnion provided clues as to when the cannon was deployed aboard the Union gunboat (Figure 7). *Southfield* was originally armed with a 100-pdr Parrot and three IX-inch Dahlgren smoothbores in early January 1862. The abbreviation “FP” denoted the cannon was cast at the Fort Pitt Foundry outside Pittsburg, PA, while the abbreviation “JMB” meant the gun had been inspected by the assistant ordnance inspector, Captain John M. Berrien, who had assumed that role in the spring of 1862. This provided an approximate casting date occurring after Berrien’s

arrival at the foundry, which confirmed that the gun was not part of the original complement of the gunboat. The new cannon must have come aboard during the refit in Norfolk in late 1862.

The register stated that by 2 December 1863, the cannon had been fired 66 times. As mentioned above during the Confederate attack on 10 December 1862, a few days after the gunboat returned to the sounds from Virginia, the captain listed all the guns deployed during the battle. All the guns were accounted for with serial numbers save one, No. 4, as it was unable to enter “the ball.” That apparently was gun “FP 513,” as all the other guns in the captain’s report match the ordnance returns listing the other cannons aboard the gunboat. This also suggests the location of the cannon aboard *Southfield*. The forward battery, or “fighting end,” consisted of the 100-pdr Parrott and two IX-inch Dahlgrens, while the aft battery comprised the remaining IX-inchers. The gunboat no doubt was anchored with its fighting end towards the town, and as the attack unfolded the forward battery had a clear line of fire, whereas the aft battery would have been hampered by the main cabin blocking that sections line of fire. I believe that “FP 513” was located in the aft battery on the starboard side of the gunboat, which obstructed by the main cabin, prevented its deployment during the firefight. The next opportunity to fire

the gun did not occur until at least March 1863, when the gunboat and others fired at Confederate forces in the vicinity of Plymouth. Other occasions for firing the gun occurred during the siege of Washington, rescuing another gunboat pinned down by a battery, the siege of New Bern, and of course, during the climactic battle with the CSS *Albemarle* on 19 April 1864.

As for its firing history as part of the armament of the CSS *Pee Dee* that would have been limited to several reported test firings of the guns into the adjacent swamp across from the navy yard. As mentioned above, the gunboat did not fire upon the town of Cheraw, while covering Confederate forces crossing over the river. Another factor that perhaps restrained firing the smoothbore was a lack of ammunition, although the navy yard commander did mention receiving shells for the IX-inch. Archaeological investigations in the river along the waterfront of the navy yard recovered numerous VI.4 and VII-inch Brooke rifle shells, but did not recover one single shot, shell, or grapeshot for the IX-inch. It is possible those projectiles remained aboard the scuttled gunboat, but during previous salvage operations, none were noted as having been recovered. Perhaps future work in the river may uncover some Confederate or Union examples from this gun.

NAME OF VESSEL.  
*Southfield*

CLASS OF GUN.	REGISTER No.	WEIGHT.	FOUNDRY.	YEAR.	PROVER.	PIVOT OR BROADSIDE.
<u>100lb Parrot</u>	<u>No 1</u>	<u>9548</u>	<u>R.P.F.</u>	<u>1861</u>	<u>P</u>	<u>Manually Carriage</u>
<u>IX inch</u>	<u>342</u>	<u>9192</u>	<u>P.P.F.</u>	<u>no date</u>	<u>no name</u>	<u>"</u>
<u>"</u>	<u>346</u>	<u>9130</u>	<u>C.A.B.C.</u>	<u>1861</u>	<u>W.P.F. (111)</u>	<u>"</u>
<u>"</u>	<u>344/12</u>	<u>9137</u>	<u>P.P.</u>	<u>"</u>	<u>no name</u>	<u>"</u>
<u>"</u>	<u>513</u>	<u>9193</u>	<u>P.P.</u>	<u>1862</u>	<u>J.M.B.</u>	<u>"</u>
<u>"</u>	<u>343</u>	<u>9271</u>	<u>P.P.F.</u>	<u>1861</u>	<u>no name</u>	<u>"</u>
<u>12 Pdr</u>	<u>87</u>	<u>756</u>	<u>J.A.D.</u>	<u>"</u>	<u>"</u>	<u>Truss Carriage</u>

Figure 6: Ordnance document from April 1863 confirming the gun aboard the USS *Southfield*. Gun 513 particulars underlined in red. (SCIAA image)



Figure 7: Engraved brass insert with serial number inside hammerlock clevis. (SCIAA image)

What makes the cannons of the CSS *Pee Dee* interesting and significant is that they have a history attached to them. The pedigrees of the two Brooke rifles are fairly complete, even down to the amount of iron used in pouring the mold and their shipment from Selma, Alabama to the Mars Bluff Navy Yard. The identity of the Dahlgren, however, remained problematic to a degree; but a little historical research provided an identity to this archaeological object. In the near future and for many years to come, visitors to the outdoor display in Florence will see three large naval cannons on their pedestals and learn the histories attached to these guns. This will provide a more meaningful educational experience of the efforts to arm this Confederate gunboat, built in an out-of-the-way location many miles upriver from the ocean, in an effort to contest Union naval supremacy during the Civil War. To the long-ago graduate student and now professional, that means a lot for others to learn from our efforts to solve historical and archaeological mysteries that have local and national interest and import (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Author with the recovered CSS *Pee Dee*, ex-Southfield, IX-inch Dahlgren smoothbore. (SCIAA image)