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: http://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 for free and open access 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 SCHOLARC@mailbox.sc.edu.
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 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 upcoming...
ing Burnsides 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 breechings 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 campaign 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
helpless gunboat drifting downriver, the
 captain of Commodore Perry, tossed a haw-
 ser 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 pro-
 vided a detailed response to several ques-
 tions 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 subse-
 quently did not provide the serial number
 for that cannon. Apparently the com-
 modore 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 partici-
 pated in routine patrols in the sounds and ad-
 jacent rivers and provided fire support at
 hot spots. One such spot occurred at Wash-
 ington 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, intelli-
gence 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 Albermarle
 intending to break-through the naval de-
 fenders 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 strat-
egized 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 (Fig-
ure 5). The ram smashed 30-feet into the
starboard side of Southfield. Temporarily
embedded in the gunboat, Albermarle of-
fered 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, threat-
ening 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,
enfiladed 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

Figure 5: Naval engagement between Confederate ram Albermarle and Union gunboats Miami and Southfield on 19 April 1864. (Harper’s Weekly)
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. 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 Parrott 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.

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