

The Day Book

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A Newsletter for the Supporters of the Hampton Roads Naval Museum

A Most Magnificent Ship: *CSS Florida*

by Joe Mosier

Capt. James Bulloch contracted Fawcett, Preston & Co. of Liverpool to build *CSS Florida*, the first foreign-built commerce raider bound for action with the Confederate Navy. Secrecy surrounded the building of Confederate ships in neutral Britain, so the vessel took the dockyard name *Oreto*. An 1819 law forbade neutral Britain to construct or sell men-of-war vessels to war-going countries.

To ward off suspicion from both British and Federal authorities, a cover story was concocted tying the ship to a merchant house in Palermo, Italy. Although suspicious, authorities lacked enough proof to seize the vessel.

Unarmed with mostly an English crew, *Oreto* departed England bound for the Bahamas on March 22, 1862. Her guns, equipment and stores were secretly forwarded to the Bahamas on the steamer *Nassau*. British authorities seized *Oreto* twice, but found no evidence of any violations.

With Lt. John Newland Maffitt, CSN, now in command, *Oreto* rendezvoused with *Nassau* on a small island and loaded her armament. *Oreto*



CSS Florida captures the clipper ship *Jacob Bell* in West Indian waters, Feb. 16, 1863. (Photo of Harper's Weekly engraving)

was commissioned as a regular ship-of-war on Aug. 17, 1862, and renamed *CSS Florida*.

En route to a Confederate port to finish arming, the raider's crew was struck with yellow fever. Only 5 of the 25 crewmembers were able to stand watch. Maffitt pulled into Cuba, where he became fever-stricken and fell into a week-long coma.

When Maffitt partially recovered, he directed the vessel to Mobile, Ala. which he believed was the least blockaded southern port. As *Florida* came upon Fort Morgan on Mobile Bay, three Union warships marred the pleasant view. Maffitt decided to face the fire that he could not return. At dusk, the raider headed for shore through a storm of gunfire. Still afloat,

CSS Florida Tars Talk

by Hunt Lewis

On Oct. 22, the Hampton Roads Naval Museum sponsored the debut performance about *CSS Florida's* capture. The first person vignette was presented by Mark Greenough and Harry Kollatz Jr. of Richmond's Living History Associates, Ltd (LHA). A question and answer session followed the vignette. About 35 people attended the performance.

Mark is a part owner of LHA where he works full time. Harry is an actor/writer and contract performer.

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The Director's Column

by Becky Poulliot

It gives me great pleasure to write the first of what I am certain will be many director notes for our new endeavor, the *Day Book*. This newsletter has been on the planning board since 1989, when the decision was first made to relocate the Hampton Roads Naval Museum from the Naval Base. The enlarged space at the National Maritime Center has permitted us to expand our exhibition galleries and to widen our interpretative services. The *Day Book* is the perfect venue to showcase all the new educational programs the museum now offers, and the achievements of our volunteer docents.

Each issue of our bi-monthly publication will focus on a historical theme to fulfill the research mission of the museum. We begin with the subject of the sunken Confederate raider, *CSS Florida*. I feel this topic is a good choice for a number of reasons. Our museum is the only repository of this rich collection of underwater artifacts. The museum's collection excels in telling the story of the Civil War. Through the study artifacts we can focus on a topic to better understand its naval tactics, technology and social history. The *Florida* exhibit is a one of a kind, so compelling that the entire display was funded by a *Legacy* grant, a program within the Department of Defense that promotes cultural and environmental initiatives.

The Hampton Roads Naval Museum received international attention when the Department of Justice awarded it the collection of the *Florida* items last year, after vandals were prosecuted for looting the shipwreck site. Our museum will once again be in the news on November 28th during a ceremony to be held at Nauticus, when the U.S. Department of the Interior awards those individuals who reported the looting.

With the recent hiring of our newsletter editor, Gordon Calhoun, the *Day Book*, is underway. Please make each coming issue as informative as this one by sharing your ideas and copies of our newsletter with current and potential supporters of the Hampton Roads Naval Museum. 🐭

About the *Day Book*

The *Day Book* is an authorized publication of the Hampton Roads Naval Museum. Its contents do not necessarily reflect the official view of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, the U.S. Navy, or the U.S. Marine Corps and do not imply endorsement thereof. The HRNM is a museum dedicated to the study of 200 years of naval history in the Hampton Roads region. The museum is open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday-Wednesday and 10 a.m. to 7 p.m., Thursday-Sunday.

The *Day Book's* purpose is to educate and inform readers on historical topics and museum-related events. It is written by the staff and volunteers of the museum. The newsletter takes its name from a 19th century Norfolk newspaper.

Questions or comments can be directed to the Hampton Roads Naval Museum editor. The *Day Book* can be reached at 444-8971, by fax at 445-1867, or write *Day Book*, Hampton Roads Naval Museum, One Waterside Drive, Suite 248, Norfolk, VA, 23511-1607. The *Day Book* is published by the every two months with a circulation of 1000.



Actors from Living History Associates field questions during the vignette of *CSS Florida's* capture in the Nauticus changing gallery.

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Each has performed vignettes for over 14 years as "ordinary persons" in naval, military, and social history. They perform for school, museums, historical societies and other groups.

The vignette was about the ramming and capture of the Confederate States raider *Florida* by the United States Navy screw sloop *Wachusett* in violation of Brazilian neutrality. Two sailors entertained an audience with a retelling of the ship's exploits.

The two tars told why they enlisted on the *Florida*.

Mark, explained that he was a patriot but thought service on ironclads in the rivers of the South was unappealing. Harry, a British subject, said he was lured by gold, grog and glory.

They took particular pleasure in relating how their esteemed Captain Maffitt had outfoxed and outran Yankee blockaders at Mobile, Ala.

They were most emphatic of *Wachusett's* sneak attack during half *Florida* crew's liberty.

They felt it was a cowardly deed because their ship deserved a fair fight at sea. They left the audience boisterously singing, "All For Me Grog," a chantey Harry thought especially appropriate since he was by that time, or at least acted, "one sheet to the wind." 🐭

Legacy Funding Saves *Florida's* Past

by Joe Judge

Shipwrecks continue to fascinate and speak to us even from the depths of the ocean. In Hampton Roads the most significant shipwrecks lie in the murky waters of the James River: *CSS Florida* and *USS Cumberland*. These ships have most recently been the source of a major collection that has arrived at the Hampton Roads Naval Museum. This collection is full of information but is severely troubled as well.

In 1993 the Department of Justice completed a successful prosecution of the individuals who looted *Florida* and *Cumberland*. The FBI turned over 535 objects to the HRNM and by the looters themselves when they were facing sentencing. Through the Congressional Legacy program designed to preserve Department of Defense resources, the Navy hired David Robinson, an archaeologist with Godwin Associates of Frederick, Maryland. Robinson arrived at the museum in the winter of 1993. Robinson quickly established himself in our annex building on Norfolk Naval Base and began to examine the collection. Three museum volunteers, Harrell Forrest, Harold Jarashow and Ken Wiley assisted him in photography and cataloging the artifacts.

Robinson faced two major tasks: organizing and cataloging of the collection, and assessing the conservation needs of the pieces. His findings arrived in October in the form of a 124-page report. This report gives an illustration of the type of information that historians can glean from shipwrecks, and the information that is lost to indiscriminate looting.

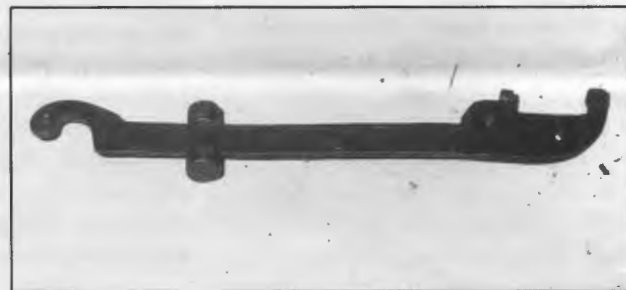
He found in the collection such artifacts as ship working tools, navigational tools, inkwells, ordnance items, ammunition, rifle stocks and uniform items. Among the significant items in this collection are the following:



A small sounding lead. This is a cylinder-shaped piece of lead with a hole, or eye, at one end. This piece, attached to a rope, was used to take soundings at depths of less than 20 fathoms. The base of the piece has been hollowed out to receive soap or tallow, which was used to sample the composition of the seabed.



Silver ladle from the clipper ship *Jacob Bell*. The *Jacob Bell*, carrying a load of tea and firecrackers from China, was the most valuable prize captured by the *Florida* or any other Confederate raider. The load was worth about \$2 million. This ladle has "Jacob Bell" engraved on the handle.



A counter balance scale arm. Counter balance scales were commonly used for measuring weights of materials such as medicine or gun powder. The scale in this collection has oriental, possibly Chinese characters, on the arm. This led Dave to speculate that this tool might have been removed from the *Jacob Bell*.

There are many artifacts that yield significant information about 19th century sea life. Unfortunately, the people who looted the shipwrecks destroyed much valuable information by removing the items from their sites. In some cases we do not know whether an item comes from *Florida* or *Cumberland*. The physical deterioration alone is significant. As Robinson wrote in his report, "all [the artifacts] suffer from the adverse effects of improper storage and the inadequate 'home remedy' conservation techniques employed by the looters. Most damages sustained by the artifacts easily could have been prevented...in many ways this collection presents the archaeological conservator with a 'worst case' scenario."



A Man With Great Natural Resources

John N. Maffitt, Captain of CSS *Florida*: An Interpretation
by Jud Hill

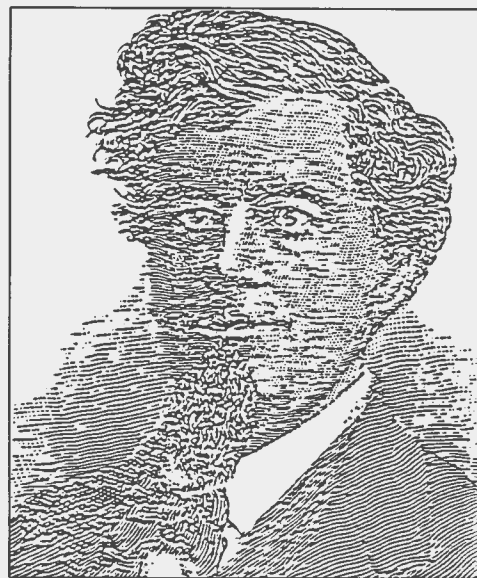
by Gordon Calhoun

The Confederate agent in England, James Bulloch, wrote these words when recommending John Newland Maffitt for command of the Confederacy's first commerce raider, CSS *Florida*, "A man with great natural resources, self-reliant, and fearless of responsibility." Capt. Maffitt gave the *Day Book* a most unique opportunity when he agreed to talk to us about life on board *Florida* and his life outside his 30 years of military service.

John Maffitt was born on a ship to Irish parents who emigrated to Connecticut. He went to live in Fayetteville, N.C. with his uncle, Dr. William Maffitt, after his parents divorced. He began to receive a formal education at age 9 in White Plains, N.Y., where he stayed four years.

In 1832, Maffitt was given the opportunity to become a U.S Navy midshipman and begin a career at sea.

Maffitt's sea career mainly consisted of coastal survey work. When the Civil War began, the survey work gave him detailed knowledge of the eastern coastline, making him a natural choice as a Confederate blockade runner captain. In mid 1862, Maffitt took command of the commerce raider CSS *Florida*.



Capt. John N. Maffitt pictured here after the war.

The following interview was conducted with HRNM volunteer Jud Hill. Hill does a first person interpretation of Capt. John N. Maffitt for the museum.

What did you think of CSS *Florida*?

Florida was a magnificent vessel. The architectural firm of Williams C. Miller & Sons of Liverpool, England really knew their business. Miller was an architect for the Royal navy. He was very conversant with the qualifications that Mr. Bulloch had set forth. It had to carry a large amount, be very fast, have sails and a steam engine aboard. It had two seven inch swivel guns, three six-inch broadside rifles, and a 12-pound field howitzer. *Florida's* design was based on a China Tea clipper which was a beautiful design and, of course, the British and the Scots really knew how to build them.

How did you treat the merchantmen whom you captured?

With the greatest respect. It was unfortunate for them that they had to have their ship burned. The officers of the captured ship were always allowed to walk on the deck. Their crew had to be kept below to prevent any trouble, but they were always well treated. I

either took them to the closest port or had another passing ship take them.

I assume they were pretty angry. After all, some of these ships traveled thousand of miles only to have their ship and cargo burned on the last leg of the trip. For example, *Jacob Bell* was coming from China.

You're quite right, they were not pleased at all. Here they were, an unarmed, merchant ship and they lost everything. In the case of *Jacob Bell*, it was the biggest, most beautiful clipper ship of the age. It was carrying over \$2 million worth of tea and fireworks from China when we captured her off the coast of Puerto Rico. The captain of *Jacob Bell* had his entire family on board including his daughter who didn't take too kindly to being held captive.

What kind of a crew did you end up with?

The crew, to begin with, was mostly from the British Isles: English, Scots and Irishmen. Unlike the other raiders, we had Confederate crew members as well. *Florida* was the only raider which made it to a southern port.

In 1863, after *Florida* made port in France, it took on many Spaniards and Italians.

How well were they paid?

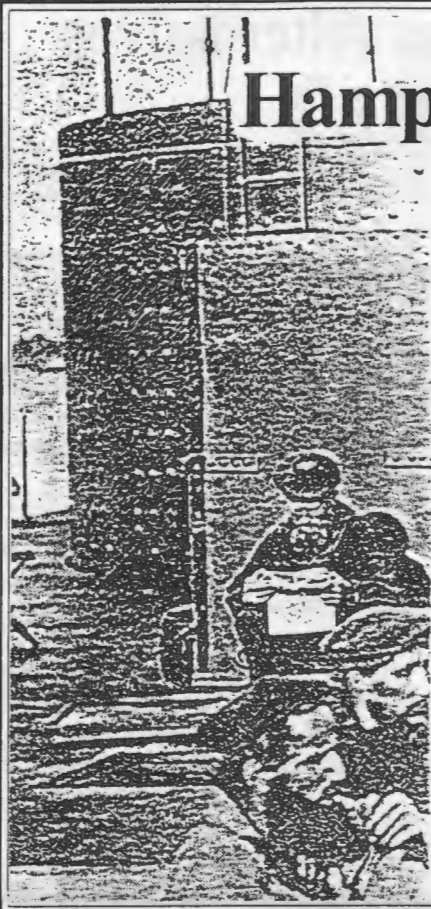
They received one-third more than they would receive on a merchant ship, plus they received a portion of the prize money when we sold captured cargo. The prize money was divided up based on seniority and rank. They were paid in gold too, not in paper money. Some of the merchant ship sailors would join us after finding this out.

Yellow Fever was a constant concern for you and your crew. Even today, it is not curable. What could you do?

I felt helpless. All I could do was see that the sick people were receiving proper care and that the fever was kept down. Other than that, there was little that I could do.

After you left *Florida*, did the war simply end for you?

No. I continued on as a blockade runner captain. After the war, I bought a house and settled down in Wilmington, N.C.



Hampton Roads Naval Museum Lecture Series

December 10, 1994
2:00 p.m.

Living History Associates will perform a Christmas Vignette of a Civil War sailor, at sea, and his beloved wife, at home, both looking at each other's correspondence and talking about their lives during the war.

January 25, 1995
7:00 p.m.

Dr. William Dudley, Senior Historian at the Naval Historical Center, Washington D.C., will talk about the *Chesapeake* Affair.

**For additional information please call
444-8971**

Magnificent continued from page 1

but badly holed with most of the rigging shot away, *Florida* made it to shore with one crew member dead and seven wounded.

CSS *Florida* spent the next few months refitting and taking on men and stores. On Jan. 16, 1863, she escaped to sea avoiding the six-ship Federal squadron which intended to keep her in port. Maffitt spent six months in the North and South Atlantic making captures and eluding the large Union force pursuing him. *Florida*, badly in need of machinery repairs, sailed to France where Maffitt applied for permission to dock and repair at Brest. French authorities finally granted the request after a long delay.

Shortly before *Florida* was ready for sea, Maffitt suffered a heart attack. Cmdr. Joseph N. Barney relieved Maffitt, who took a leave of absence from the Confederate States Navy at the request of doctors.

Lt. Charles M. Morris took



USS Wachusett escorts CSS Florida to Hampton Roads after capturing the vessel in Brazil.
(Photo of Harper's Weekly engraving)

command from Barney, who also fell ill. Morris got underway with *Florida* on Feb. 12, 1864, and continued successful cruising for eight months.

By that fall, Federal ships had swept most Confederate commerce raiders from the seas. Northern land armies decreased the number of ports available to blockade runners. Within months, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles began discharging sailors and selling the Union fleet.

Meanwhile, *Florida* was scheduled to replenish in Bahia,

Brazil. Prior to entering the harbor on Oct. 4, 1864, the crew removed the shot from guns in accordance with international law. Morris received from the U.S. consul assurance that *Florida* would be safe in port. Therefore, the captain allowed half of his crew liberty. On Oct. 6, Morris and some officers attended the opera ashore, leaving a crew of 70 men aboard.

With orders to seize any Southern

See *Magnificent* on page 7

Volunteer Notes

by Jamie Swanson

Indoctrination of Ely into First Flight Hall of Fame

One of our volunteers has asked that we look into the possibility of providing some way for interested volunteers to attend the indoctrination of Ely into the First Flight Hall of Fame on Dec. 17, 1994, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

Ron Bell, past chairperson of the Newport News Historical Commission, is considering taking a contingent from the area to the day-long ceremony. Any of our volunteers who want to go should contact him at (804) 595-1744 or call Florence Monfalcone, the current Chairperson of the Newport News Historical Commission, at (804) 244-5253.

The New Recruits

The new Volunteer Basic Course did not harvest as large a crop of new docents as we had hoped for, but those in the program seem very interested, attentive, and involved as a group. I guess the old axiom is true about quality over quantity.

Those that have stayed to complete the basic courses have really been tremendous.

Volunteer Parties

The proposed Ball is dead. Remember the survey about having a Volunteer Costume Ball around Christmas of 1995? The response to the survey indicated that there is not enough interest among the docents.

On another note-keep your calendar free the week of Dec. 5-9 for the annual docent Christmas party and graduation party for the third Docent Basic Course students.

Museum Provides Alternatives to the Classroom

by Bob Matteson



Ralph Preston, a HRNM docent, explains life in the Civil War to students at Granby High School

The end of summer has a variety of meanings. If you're a child, it usually means back to school. For parents the summer's end means a time to relax from the seemingly endless active season. To the teacher it's an end to the vacation away from students.

To help stimulate learning, teachers often seek alternative solutions to the classroom setting. The Hampton Roads Naval Museum has been fortunate to be able to provide several alternatives that fall within the state's curriculum objectives and enable teachers to expand the limitations associated with school settings.


To help meet these requirements the Hampton Roads Naval Museum, with the help of its volunteers, will offer educational programs designed

for both in-house and export to the classroom beginning this Fall.

Currently Bob Comet, John Simanton and Michael Clark are demonstrating wooden ship model building. Ralph Preston and Jud Hill are going to local schools to export both a Civil War and underwater archeology program. Ralph Preston, Jud Hill, Gurley Ritter and Pete Watson are acting as liaisons to schools in Norfolk, Virginia Beach, Chesapeake, Suffolk and Portsmouth.

Nine people are preparing to do first person interpretations. Thus far only two of the uniforms are in but the others are on order. Soon to be on line is Dr. Charles Devine Jr. as a Civil War Confederate surgeon. Gary Abrams will be an American Revolutionary War French Naval Allis talking about his participation as part of the French fleet during the battle of the Virginia Capes. Jud Hill is currently in and out of his persona as Capt. Maffitt of CSS *Florida*. Ralph Preston is going to be a Civil War Union enlisted sailor. John Simanton and Harold Anten will be Spanish-American War sailors. Al Petrich and Pete Watson will do a special program as U-boat commander and merchant convoy ship captain as one pursues while the other tries to avoid. Shortest but far from least, Miriam Burgess is going to be a USO canteen worker of World War II.

We also have planned three vignettes through March and several well-known guest speakers scheduled throughout the upcoming year.

With all of these alternatives available to area teachers, and the constant contact we have planned with them, few area schools should escape our efforts to recruit their class participation. If you are a teacher, and are interested in any of these programs, please call the Hampton Roads Naval Museum at 444-8971. 

Calendar of Events

November

Every Wednesday & Thursday afternoon, through **December 15** ship model building demonstrators in the HRNM gallery.

21-29 USS *Haylor*, U.S. Navy destroyer available for tours at Nauticus pier

28 Dept. of Interior Protection of Maritime Cultural Heritage Program. 9:30 a.m. in the Nauticus auditorium

Docent birthdays for November

David Rawlings
Harry Clark
Joe Mosier
Donna Morrison
Harold Anten
Mark Harju

Magnificent continued from page 5

raider, USS *Wachusett* slipped past a Brazilian man-of-war and attempted to sink *Florida* by ramming it. The blow proved not fatal and a scatter of small-arms exchange ensued. With two shots from *Wachusett's* battery, Lt. Thomas K. Porter, the senior officer aboard *Florida*, surrendered the ship. *Wachusett* took the raider in tow and proceeded out of the harbor despite challenging fire from Brazilian forces ashore. Prior to her capture, CSS *Florida* took 37 ships including *Tacony* and *Clarence*.

Wachusett towed *Florida* to Hampton Roads on November 12, 1864. Secretary of State William H. Seward realized the problems *Florida's*



December

10 Living History Association Vignette-Civil War Christmas Correspondence. See ad on page 5 for more information.

15-31 HRNM open 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily.

25 HRNM closed

capture brought. The captain of *Wachusett*, Cmdr. Napoleon Collins, had trampled on international law. The Brazilians, goaded by Morris' complaints, demanded the return of *Florida* and its crew.

Seward said in conversation with an admiral in Hampton Roads, "I wish she was at the bottom of the sea." The admiral, David Dixon Porter, may have taken Seward at his word. Porter ordered the captive sloop moved to an anchorage near the site of USS *Cumberland*, sunk earlier in the war. In the process of shifting berths, *Florida* collided with a transport, began to leak badly, then sank mysteriously on the morning of November 28. The United States was thus relieved of the ignominy of returning the vessel to Brazil.

After the war, Maffitt claimed that

Docent birthdays for December

Eleanor Di Peppe
Hunt Lewis



January

1 HRNM closed

25 Dr. William Dudley of the Navy Historical Center gives a presentation on the "*Chesapeake* affair." See ad on page 5 for more information.

Porter ordered an engineer on board to, "open her sea cock before midnight and do not leave that engine room until the water is up to your chin." The government claimed the sinking was an accident.

The Navy court-martialed Collins the following spring and found him guilty of violating Brazil's neutrality. Although he was sentenced to dismissal from the service, Secretary Welles overturned the verdict two months later and promoted Collins to captain. He would become an admiral before his death a decade later.

CSS *Florida* rests at the bottom of the Elizabeth River near the Monitor-Merrimac Bridge Tunnel today. In 1993, the Department of Defense funded an archeological excavation of the ship. Some of the items recovered from the ship are on display at the Hampton Roads Naval Museum. 