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STEAMERS, TENDERS, AND BARKS:
THE UNION BLOCKADE
OF SOUTH FLORIDA
by Irvin D. Solomon and Grace Erhart

During the Civil War, the Union Navy sought to cripple the Confederacy with a blockade of southern waters. In Florida, this task fell primarily to the East Gulf Blockading Squadron, whose mission was to deprive the South of vital food and supplies by capturing blockade runners and raiding salt works. After the blockade of Tampa in 1861, Charlotte Harbor became the only port in South Florida accessible to runners. Consequently, this harbor became a rendezvous point for runners and an important target for the Union Navy. During the war, many kinds of sail and steam-powered craft plied the deep waters of the Charlotte Harbor region, where they operated as blockade runners, blockaders, supply ships, and tenders. Four ships – the Salvor, the Gem of the Sea, the Honduras, and the Ariel – exemplified the types of vessels that routinely operated in these waters.¹ This article examines the history of each of these four ships to give a sense of naval encounters along Florida's West Coast during the Civil War.

The 450-ton screw-steamer Salvor was possibly the first blockade runner to operate at Charlotte Harbor and the first to be captured and converted to Union service. Built in 1856 in Buffalo, New York, the craft began its career as a wrecker on the Great Lakes. In 1860, Tampa cattle shipper James McKay, Sr., purchased the steamer to transport South Florida's beef cattle to Cuba. In New York, McKay had the ship cut in half and seventy feet added to its middle section. The Salvor's new length ideally suited it for duty as a cattle boat. At one hundred and sixty-one feet in length, and with a twenty-five-and-one-half-foot beam (width), the steamer could carry as many as three hundred cattle in its dark and expanded hold. With its nineteen-foot draft, the Salvor could navigate the deepest waters of the Gulf of Mexico, Tampa Bay, and Charlotte Harbor with ease.² Square-rigged, the steamer sported masts that towered above its wooden decks. These carried auxiliary sails, clouds of canvas that helped assure the ship would never lie dead in the water in case of engine failure. Even the ship's older wood and soft-coal burning engines proved advantageous to Florida duty. This fuel was much easier to obtain in Florida and Caribbean ports than the hard anthracite, or Cardiff, smokeless coal preferred by top-class northern ships. The steamer's single gun, though not powerful enough to intimidate warships, did prove a deterrent to pirates and smaller, hostile craft.³

Despite these advantages, McKay's antebellum use of the Salvor achieved mixed results. During the summer of 1860, the steamer failed to arrive on time at the cattle holding pens at Ballast Point on Tampa Bay, causing a financial disaster for McKay as some thousand cattle perished because of a local drought. In November 1860, the Salvor's base of operations shifted to Charlotte Harbor, where the steamer loaded cattle from McKay's new wharf, near present-day Punta Gorda.⁴

Soon the Salvor saw nearly continuous service. In January 1861, McKay purchased 10,000 head of cattle from a South Florida rancher and shipped many of them to Cuba. The captain, realizing that war was imminent, had also agreed to supply cattle to the Federal forces in Key West while continuing to sell beef in Cuba. News of the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in
April 1861 led McKay to believe the Cuban cattle trade was, at least temporarily, doomed. He attempted to sell the Salvor to the Confederate Navy, but a southern naval officer who inspected the ship at Tampa Bay rejected the purchase after he rated the steamer too large to work on the rivers and too slow to evade Yankee warships at sea.\(^5\)

Undaunted, McKay loaded more cattle aboard the Salvor and steered a risky course for Havana. Unfortunately for McKay, the Union command had learned of his attempt to sell the vessel to the Confederate Navy and ordered it seized as he attempted to skirt the Florida Keys. The Federal troops at Key West immediately retrofitted it and pressed the ship into their own service. The steamer’s hard duty in the salt waters of the Gulf of Mexico soon “burned out” its boiler. When McKay, who had somehow arranged his own release from the Union forces, arrived at Key West from Tampa, he found the Salvor’s boiler seriously deteriorated. Ever the optimist, McKay offered his reclaimed ship to the U. S. Government. The Federals, however, had little use for the crippled ship, although McKay collected some money in lease fees for its limited service.\(^6\)

McKay gave his word that he would not attempt to run the blockade again and sailed the disabled Salvor to Cuba. He expected to sell the steamer to a Cuban bidder, but the buyer had withdrawn his offer by the time McKay reached Havana. Hoping to sell the steamer and a contraband cargo at Nassau, McKay had the Salvor’s boiler repaired and readied for the voyage across the Straits of Florida. He also changed the ship’s name to M.S. Perry and transferred title to a British subject so the ship would have foreign registry and would, theoretically, be safe from capture by the Federals. On October 1861, McKay set off for Nassau with a cargo of small arms,
percussion caps, coffee, and cigars. This would prove to be the *Salvor’s* final voyage under his command.  

Although supposedly repaired, the steamer’s engines propelled it along at a modest three-and-one-half miles per hour. Every two hours the engines had to be shut down for servicing. McKay’s short-handed crew, consisting of a mate, two sailors, two engineers, and a cook, probably could not muster enough force to set the *Salvor’s* massive sails. Thus, the limping ship proved no match in speed for the Federal warship *U.S.S. Keystone State*, which inspected and took it as a prize near the Tortugas on the evening of October 13, 1861. After sailing to Key West, the *Salvor* was condemned and shipped North, never to return to Florida waters. Later that year, the steamer was sold at auction in Philadelphia for $38,250.94. After the war, the ship served as a freighter on the Metropolitan line between Boston and New York. 

In June 1863, long after the blockade-runner *Salvor* had exited Florida waters, a notably different kind of ship entered the area. Whereas the *Salvor* operated at Charlotte Harbor for only seven months, the 371-ton command bark *Gem of the Sea* blockaded the port for eighteen months. This vessel, as the *Salvor* had done for Confederate actions, typified the class of Federal ships that routinely plied these waters during the war years. 

Originally built in 1853 in Warren, Rhode Island, the *Gem of the Sea* had dimensions that suited it for a career in the merchant marine. Although only 116 feet long, the ship had a twenty-six-foot beam and a massive hold (fully thirteen feet five inches deep), allowing it to carry large amounts of cargo but preventing it from navigating shallow waters and rivers such as those characterizing Charlotte Harbor. As a sailing vessel, the *Gem of the Sea* had but one source of power, which came from the huge canvas sails set on three masts that towered above its wooden decks. The ship was rigged as a bark; rectangular sails graced its fore- and main-masts, while a fore- and aft-“spanker” hung parallel to the decks on a stubby mizzen-mast. 

The Union Navy purchased the *Gem of the Sea* for $15,000 in August 1861. Shortly thereafter, dock workers at the Brooklyn Navy Yard set about converting the bark into a blockading-type warship. They cut gun-ports into the ship’s wooden hull and mounted six 32-pounder cannons to serve as its battery (two of the guns were later removed). Although far from the heaviest artillery available, these weapons could easily demolish the small, unarmed blockade-running craft that the vessel would later encounter in Gulf waters. The ship’s deep hold proved a valuable asset, allowing the *Gem of the Sea* to store enough supplies to last several weeks. In September, Irvin B. Baxter, a career sea-captain commissioned as an Acting Volunteer Lieutenant in the Navy, took command of the *Gem of the Sea* and its seventy-man crew. He remained the ship’s captain through most of its Florida service. Five other officers, including an assistant surgeon and a paymaster, also served on the bark. In late October, the Navy commissioned the former merchant ship and gave Captain Baxter his first duty assignment. 

Attached to the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, the *Gem of the Sea* accompanied a fleet of coal and powder ships during their voyage south from Hampton Roads, Virginia, to Port Royal, South Carolina. There the fleet supplied theater commander Admiral Samuel Du Pont’s gunboats for their successful attack on Port Royal in November 1861. Afterward the *Gem of the Sea* served briefly off Charleston and Bull’s Bay, South Carolina, before taking up station off the
city of Georgetown. Near Georgetown the blockader’s captain and crew captured numerous rice-runners and supplied and protected a camp of escaped slaves and refugees on outlying North Island. In October 1862, having sustained minor damage after seizing five blockade runners, the Gem of the Sea sailed to the Boston Navy Yard for minor repairs. After servicing, the bark sailed south to join the East Gulf Blockading Squadron at Key West.12

In December 1862, the Gem of the Sea took up temporary station off Indian River, where its success continued. In January 1863 the blockade-runner Anne fell prey to small boats launched from the bark. The same boats later assisted in the March 1863 capture of the rebel schooner Charm and another unidentified sloop. That month, Baxter sent word to Squadron Commander Theodorus Bailey that blockade-running in and near the Indian River area seemed stymied, at least temporarily. Unconvinced, Bailey kept the Gem of the Sea on duty there until June 1863, allowing the bark to add the blockade runners Petee, Inez, and Maggie Fulton to its ever-growing list of prizes. Commander Bailey then ordered the ship to Key West, where it mounted an extra gun (a 20-pounder rifle) that strengthened its battery of four 32-pounder smooth-bores. Thus armed, the Gem of the Sea sailed for its next and final station, Charlotte Harbor on the peninsula's southwest coast.13

The bark arrived at Charlotte Harbor in July 1863, just in time for its crew to witness a Union raid up the nearby Peace River. The sailing tender Rosalie and two cutters from the bark Restless, which would shortly leave the harbor for duty elsewhere, had sailed and poled up the Peace River in an effort to capture two small blockade runners. Baxter sent a boat to assist the expedition, but the “cutting-out” party of armed and now land-borne sailors needed no help. The
incident reflected the nature of blockade operations in the Charlotte Harbor area, which late in
the war came to be characterized by frequent cutting-out parties.\textsuperscript{14}

The *Gem of the Sea* quickly assumed a supervisory role over shore operations and the general
blockade at Charlotte Harbor. The ship’s launches and cutters assisted the smaller, shallow-draft
tenders on their expeditions up the rivers and sometimes caught a runner or two themselves. But
the deep-draft command bark seldom, if ever, pursued Confederate prey in the coastal waters; in
fact, there are no records of any such missions. Rather, these types of shallow-water missions
remained the duty of the smaller tenders and launches manned by cutting-out parties. In a sense
this added an unusual character to the naval war in the Charlotte Harbor area, since military
records reflect few similar actions by other blockading ships on the West Coast of Florida.\textsuperscript{15}

The *Gem of the Sea* provided invaluable service at Charlotte Harbor. It became a reservoir of
men and supplies and often detailed prize crews to sail captured runners’ ships to Key West. The
*Gem of the Sea* also stored much of the food used by the Charlotte Harbor blockading vessels,
ot only for the larger ships in the theater, but for the crews of the various tenders as well.\textsuperscript{16}

By 1863 the command bark assumed new responsibilities in the area. This occurred largely as
a result of the Union’s rising concern for attempted cattle-running out of Charlotte Harbor. In
December 1863, when a detachment of the Forty-Seventh Pennsylvania Regiment arrived from
Fort Taylor, service boats from the *Gem of the Sea* transported the volunteer force to their new
base on Useppa Island near the mouth of Charlotte Harbor. They helped organize a locally
recruited unit composed of draft evaders (“layouts”) and Union sympathizers (known as the
Florida Rangers – later the Second Florida Cavalry), which would obviously require naval
support. Theater Commander Theodorus Bailey wrote Captain Baxter, “You will therefore
render them [the troops] every assistance in your power and protect them with your guns and all
the force under your command, if necessary.”\textsuperscript{17}

Baxter then ordered the *Rosalie* to join the *Gem of the Sea* at Charlotte Harbor. Apparently
Commander Bailey, who maintained close and frequent contact with Captain Baxter, intended
the *Rosalie* to be the chief communication link and “quick alert” vessel between the land-based
Rangers and the deep-draft command ship. His efforts paid off in December 1863, when the
*Rosalie*’s cannon fire provided strategic cover for a detachment of sailors making a rendezvous
with Rangers of the Second Florida Cavalry on the mainland. Under attack by Confederate
guerrillas, the Union men retreated to the water’s edge where the shallow-draft tender picked
them up. The *Rosalie* completed similar duties throughout its service in these waters.\textsuperscript{18}

In January 1864, Captain Baxter received orders to assist and protect the Federal troops that
moved in to occupy the old post at Fort Myers, used during the Seminole Wars. Shortly
afterward Charles H. Rockwell replaced Baxter, who departed to take command of the steam
blockader *Fort Henry* (altogether four different officers would command the *Gem of the Sea*).
The sturdy ship fulfilled its new mission well until it departed Charlotte Harbor in January 1865.
By that date it had captured or assisted in the seizing of nine blockade runners. If the rebel
vessels captured by its tenders are counted, the bark orchestrated the capture of nearly two dozen
runners.\textsuperscript{19}
After departing the southwest coast in early 1865, the battle-scarred Gem of the Sea sailed first to Key West and then north for repairs. It never returned to Florida waters. Auctioned at Philadelphia in late 1865, the Gem of the Sea fetched a paltry $6,500. What its new owners, A.C. Purvis and Son, did with the proud vessel remains a mystery.20

Besides the ubiquitous blockaders and runners, a third type of vessel routinely operated at Charlotte Harbor – the supply ship. The most significant supply vessel in South Florida undoubtedly was the wooden side-wheeler Honduras. Built in New York, the Honduras first saw sea duty in 1861. Somewhat surprisingly, the U. S. Navy initially overlooked this handsome 376-ton ship in its rapid expansion early in the Civil War. After the screw-steamer Salvor’s initial detainment at Key West, the Cubans, to whom cattle-shipper James McKay, Sr., sold his beef, bought the Honduras to import cattle from Truxillo to Battabano, Cuba. The Union Navy purchased the side-wheeler from the Cubans in July 1863 for $51,000. Converted to a war-ship, the Honduras received its commission that September. Assigned to the East Gulf Blockading Squadron as a supply ship (and sometimes a dispatch boat), the side-wheeler served throughout the war in this capacity.21

Indeed, the Honduras proved well-suited for this task. Its spacious ten-foot-deep hold easily carried large amounts of supplies. In spite of its sizeable dimensions (150 feet long, with a twenty-seven-foot beam), the Honduras drew only eight to nine feet of water when fully loaded, allowing it to restock ships operating in fairly shallow areas near the runners’ favorite clandestine ports like Charlotte Harbor and the Peace River. The steamer’s tall masts and fore and aft schooner rigging complemented a single walking beam engine, which normally pushed the Honduras along at a respectable seven knots. At its utmost, the side-wheeler could reach twelve-knot bursts. The steamer burned coal, necessitating rather frequent trips to the naval base at Key West to refill its bunkers.22

Although not designated as a blockade ship, the Honduras initially mounted two 12-pounder sea rifles, a minimal but sufficient armament for routine hostilities. On October 9, 1863, the steamer’s battery was reinforced by a 20-pounder rifle and two 24-pounder howitzers. Six days later, the supply ship captured its first blockade runner, the Scottish-built steamer Mail. The side-wheeler stood in pursuit, but the blockade runner proved both fast and desperate. A six-hour chase ensued, with three small Federal tenders joining in the pursuit. Off Tampa, the Mail finally hove to and surrendered to the persistent Honduras.23

The Honduras then resumed its regular supply duties, carrying beef and vegetables to the ships on blockade duty and occasionally ferrying captured contraband, such as cotton and turpentine, to Key West. In January 1864, the Honduras received orders to assist the schooner Matchless in transporting a detachment of the Forty-Seventh Pennsylvania Volunteers from Key West to Fort Myers. The Honduras’s speed and reasonably shallow draft, which allowed the side-wheeler to navigate the shifting Caloosahatchee River twelve miles upriver to the fort, made it ideal for this service. Commander Theodorus Bailey detached the steamer from regular supply duties for two weeks to further assist the troops. The Honduras not infrequently ferried captured Confederate sympathizers, dispatches, and occasionally Confederate cattle to Key West. Later, the side-wheeler participated in the May 1864 raid on Tampa Bay. Again, the steamer served as a troop and supply transport, but this time an armed boatload of sailors from the Honduras joined
Admiral Theodorus Bailey, Commander of East Gulf Blockading Squadron, from December 9, 1862, to August 7, 1864.

Photograph courtesy of the Naval Historical Foundation, Washington, D.C.
the landing party and participated in the capture of the *Neptune*, a blockade-runner carrying fifty-five bales of cotton.24

After its service at Tampa, the *Honduras* returned to its normal supply duties. Through August 1864, the steamer continued its supply runs to the Charlotte Harbor area, despite a yellow fever epidemic sweeping the squadron. Even though some sailors aboard the side-wheeler eventually contracted the disease, the crew and ship faithfully performed their duties.25

In July 1865 the *Honduras* departed Florida waters for New York, where the steamer was decommissioned and sold for $27,000. The ship’s career in Florida, however, had not ended. Late in 1865 the nefarious cattle runner James McKay, Sr., purchased the side-wheeler and used it to revive South Florida’s cattle trade with Cuba. Renamed the *Governor Marvin*, the steamer once again served in the familiar waters of the Charlotte Harbor region. Its ultimate destiny remains a mystery.26

While the *Honduras* served primarily as a supply ship and transport, another type of vessel performed different, yet equally valuable, services for the Union forces at Charlotte Harbor. These were the tenders, small sailing craft assigned to assist the command ships. Typical of these small vessels was the nineteen-ton schooner *Ariel*. Possibly built by John Curry at Key West, this former blockade-runner was captured by the steam blockader *Huntsville* in November 1862.

*Honduras.*

Photograph courtesy of the Naval Historical Foundation, Washington, D.C.
Condemned as a prize at Key West, the little schooner was formally purchased by the Navy Department the following July for $1,450 (although it had actually begun documented service in January of that year). The Ariel’s most important feature was its shallow, four-foot draft. This allowed the little vessel to operate much closer to shore than the larger command blockaders and supply ships. A small crew, probably consisting of no more than eight men, sailed the ship, while a single light 12-pounder smoothbore cannon (the smallest caliber artillery available) provided the vessel’s main armament. The tender’s twin masts and fore and aft sails supplied its only power.27

Thus outfitted, the Ariel first served as a tender to the flagship St. Lawrence near the Bahia Honda reef, about thirty miles northeast of Key West. Three months later the schooner routinely patrolled the waters between Tampa Bay and Charlotte Harbor. Normal duty called for the vessel to scour the coast-line from Charlotte Harbor to Cape Sable as an advance boat for command ships like the Gem of the Sea, which were actually expected to capture enemy prizes. Once, while on such duty, the Ariel captured the blockade-runner sloop Magnolia about five miles off Caximbas Bar, just north of Marco Pass. Even though the Ariel saw extensive duty in these waters, the Magnolia represented one of only four ships the Ariel captured in the war.28

In May 1864, the Ariel, along with three other tenders, assisted in General Daniel P. Woodbury’s raid on Tampa Bay. The diminutive Ariel served as a troop transport, landing infantry on the shore. However, the Ariel’s role in the July 1864 raid on Bay Port proved greater. After assisting in the transportation and landing of some 260 assorted Federal infantry troops near the Anclote River (north of Tampa Bay), the Ariel, accompanied by the tender Sea Bird, proceeded to Bay Port. Officers from the Ariel had the honor of taking possession of the town long before any Federal troops arrived, capturing a quantity of cotton as well.29

Following the war, the decommissioned Ariel joined the tenders Rosalie, Sea Bird, Two Sisters, and Stonewall on the auction block at Key West in June 1865. The small schooner sold for only $1,270 to John Curry, possibly the ship’s builder. Afterward, the Ariel, like many of its sister ships in southwest Florida, disappeared from recorded history.30

The types of ships serving in the waters of South Florida during the Civil War clearly reflected the nature of the conflict in that area. While blockade runners like the Salvor’s owner, James McKay, Sr., persisted in challenging the Union net, Federal blockaders just as doggedly adapted to their daring attempts. By 1863, both Confederate runners and Union commanders realized that the shallow waters of Charlotte Harbor represented the last active naval theater on the West Coast of Florida. However, as the Union adapted to this new shallow-waters orientation by orchestrating cutting-out parties and by servicing command barks like the Gem of the Sea with more versatile shallow-draft, quick-response vessels like the Honduras and their tenders like the Ariel, the number of Confederate prizes increased and the number of would be Confederate runners decreased. Though different in class, duties, armaments, and assigned missions, vessels like the Salvor, Gem of the Sea, Honduras, and Ariel served as representative examples of the types of ships that operated in South Florida during the Civil War and subsequently sealed the last remaining leaks of the East Gulf Blockading Squadron on the West Coast of Florida.
**U.S.S. Ariel.**

Photograph courtesy of the Naval Historical Foundation, Washington, D.C.


