



An Excellent Iron Boat: The Curlew in Antebellum North Carolina and the Civil War 1856-1862 (Maritime Heritage Minnesota Titles)

Christopher Olson

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In 1859 a young reporter took a trip along the coast of Virginia down to North Carolina and then to points further inland. As he traveled through northeastern North Carolina he noted:

An excellent iron boat, with the airy name of Curlew, winged us down the Sound. Her coadjutor on the upper waters having succumbed to some one of those ills that steamboats are heirs to, she had double duty to perform. Running night and day, however, did not upset the equanimity of her good-humored commander. This gentleman...proved that, in language as in boilers, the low pressure system is the safer.

So wrote Edward Bruce, a writer and regular contributor to Harper's New Monthly Magazine. The steamer he mentioned was one of many that sailed the northeastern North Carolina sounds and rivers. The Curlew, however, would soon participate in the coming conflict, where one incident would forever immortalize it in Civil War lore.

The history of the steamboat Curlew is linked to the history of American iron shipbuilding and the economic development of northeastern North Carolina. Harlan & Hollingsworth, America's most prolific builder of iron ships before the Civil War, built her during the early era of iron shipbuilding in the United States. The Curlew was brought to North Carolina to carry passengers and freight on the Chowan, Roanoke, and Blackwater Rivers, and for transporting excursionists to and from Nag's Head, a service that it ably performed. After the Civil War broke out she served as a troop transport and later as a gunboat for the Confederate Navy, and was sunk resisting Federal advances into North Carolina.

This one vessel is a case study of the role of the steamboat in the economic development of North Carolina, as well as an illustration of the role of the gunboat in the Confederate Navy. Furthermore, the vessel serves as an example of the state of iron shipbuilding technology in America during the 1850s, and her remains in Croatan Sound are a rare extant example of early American iron shipbuilding. This book, therefore, fills a gap in the historical record concerning a significant piece of mid-19th Century America.

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