

A Sharp Fight

150 years ago, an unlikely naval encounter off Galveston stunned the U.S. Navy and saved Texas from a Federal invasion.

By Andrew W. Hall and Edward T. Cotham Jr.

Days after the Confederates opened fire on Fort Sumter in April 1861, President Lincoln declared a blockade of ports in the seceded states. The blockade represented a key part of the North's "Anaconda" strategy, designed to isolate the Confederacy from trade and foreign assistance, slowly squeezing the life out of the rebellion.

The Anaconda strategy was sound, but the Union remained woefully under-equipped to implement it. At the beginning of the conflict, the U.S. Navy possessed only a few dozen warships, and many of these were stationed overseas. To make up the deficiency, Navy department agents spread out through northern ports and shipyards, buying up every civilian vessel they could find – including some still under construction – that might be converted to a warship.

One of these new acquisitions was the iron-hulled passenger steamer *St. Mary's*, purchased new from her builder for \$110,000. Outfitted with a hurricane deck and wooden cabins, the 201-foot ship had a pair of enormous side wheels, driven by a single-cylinder steam engine that provided propulsion. A pivoted, diamond-shaped iron frame, known as a "walking beam," that rocked back and forth as the wheels turned, like a leviathan child's teeter-totter, transferred the vertical motion of the engine to the side wheels. Commissioned in October 1861 as USS *Hatteras*, the steamer was soon outfitted with an assortment of obsolete smoothbore cannon and more modern, rifled guns. *Hatteras's* armament typified that used by ships on the blockade but, as events later demonstrated, proved woefully inadequate against a purpose-built warship.¹

If the Union had limited resources at the beginning of the war, the Confederacy fared even worse. With limited industrial and shipbuilding capacity available in the South, the government in Richmond invested heavily in construction of warships overseas. The most famous of these vessels was CSS *Alabama*, built at the shipyard of John Laird, Son & Co. at Birkenhead, across the Mersey River from Liverpool in England.

Designed to be a commerce raider, *Alabama* preyed on the large U.S. merchant fleet scattered on trade routes across the globe. As built, *Alabama* was just ten feet longer than *Hatteras*, and two feet narrower in beam. But unlike *Hatteras*, *Alabama* was built from the keel up as a warship. While *Hatteras* was constructed of iron, she had thin plating, never intended to stand up to enemy gunfire. *Alabama* had iron framing covered with heavy timber that could absorb enemy shot. The shipbuilders carefully positioned *Alabama's* machinery below the waterline, safely out of the way of gunfire. Most important, *Alabama* carried very heavy naval artillery, including a seven-inch rifle and an eight-inch smoothbore cannon, both fitted on pivoting mounts. All of *Alabama's* guns firing on one side amounted to 274 pounds of shot and shell; *Hatteras's* broadside weight was only 114 pounds.

Hatteras spent her first few months patrolling the Atlantic coast off South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida and captured several small vessels that attempted to run the blockade. In the fall of 1862, *Hatteras* was assigned a new commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Homer Crane Blake, a twenty-two-year Navy veteran. About that same time, the Navy reassigned the ship to the Gulf of Mexico, where *Hatteras* took up blockade duties off the Confederate port of Mobile, Alabama.²

While *Hatteras* patrolled off Mobile Bay, the new Confederate raider *Alabama*, now under the command of former U.S. Navy officer Raphael Semmes, had begun doing exactly what she had been designed to do – sink Yankee merchant ships. After formally putting his ship in commission at an isolated anchorage in the

Azores, Semmes set a course to the west, skirting dangerously close to New England on the U.S. Atlantic coast. But the busy shipping lane proved to be very successful hunting grounds, and *Alabama* seized a dozen or more Union



Illustration of the steamer USS *Hatteras*.

Images courtesy of Andrew W. Hall.

merchantmen there. Semmes then set his course south and east, almost to the coast of Venezuela, then north and west again through the Caribbean. More captures followed, and word spread that the infamous Confederate ship stalked the region. Five days before Christmas 1862, Semmes's lookouts spotted Cape Catoche, the northernmost point of the Yucatán Peninsula. *Alabama* was now loose in the Gulf of Mexico.³

In the fall of 1862, the Union Navy had captured Galveston almost without firing a shot. The Confederate commander in Texas had always deemed the barrier island, connected to the mainland by a single railroad bridge, to be indefensible, so he had made little effort to do so. Galveston was the most important port in Texas and the terminus of a rail system that extended to Houston and points beyond, deep into rich, inland agricultural areas. With Galveston in Federal hands, northern newspapers soon began reporting that Union General Nathaniel Banks was in New Orleans, outfitting a force of 20,000 men to land on the island, the first act in a full-scale invasion of Confederate Texas.

But northern civilians were not the only ones reading rumors about the plans for a Federal invasion of Texas; Raphael Semmes aboard *Alabama* read them, too. Cut off from regular communications with the Confederacy, and a little self-absorbed to boot, Semmes eagerly searched newspapers from captured merchant ships for any stories about his own vessel, or naval developments in general. From these newspapers, Semmes picked up speculation that General Banks's expedition would begin its push inland from Galveston around January 10, 1863. *Alabama's* cruise had been a great success thus far, but Semmes longed to do something more dramatic than burn unarmed Yankee merchantmen out on the open sea. The Banks Expedition seemed like the opportunity for



Lieutenant Homer C. Blake, a *carte-de-visite*.

Photo courtesy Edward T. Cotham.

Semmes to strike a dramatic and spectacular blow against the Union. Semmes figured that an expedition of that size would require a huge fleet of transports and supply vessels – forty, fifty, or more – anchored off Galveston. Semmes determined to head for Galveston, intending to take *Alabama* into the middle of that transport fleet at night and destroy as many vessels as he could. John Macintosh Kell, *Alabama's* executive officer, considered this plan “the boldest of all the bold schemes of Captain Semmes.”⁴ During the first week of January 1863, *Alabama* sailed steadily north through the Gulf of Mexico, toward the upper Texas coast.

Semmes and Kell did not know, however, that the situation at Galveston had drastically changed. The new Confederate commander in Texas, John Bankhead Magruder, had scraped

together a disparate force of dismounted cavalry, civilian riverboats, and local militia and had retaken Galveston on New Year's Day, 1863. In the process, the Confederates captured one Union warship intact and caused another to be blown up by her own crew.

Admiral David G. Farragut, the Union naval commander in the Gulf of Mexico, called the defeat at Galveston the “most shameful and pusillanimous” incident in the history of the U.S. Navy.⁵ Farragut saw the Galveston debacle as a strategic setback and an insult to the honor of the Navy. He ordered a large part of his command to Galveston, under the command of Commodore Henry H. Bell, to

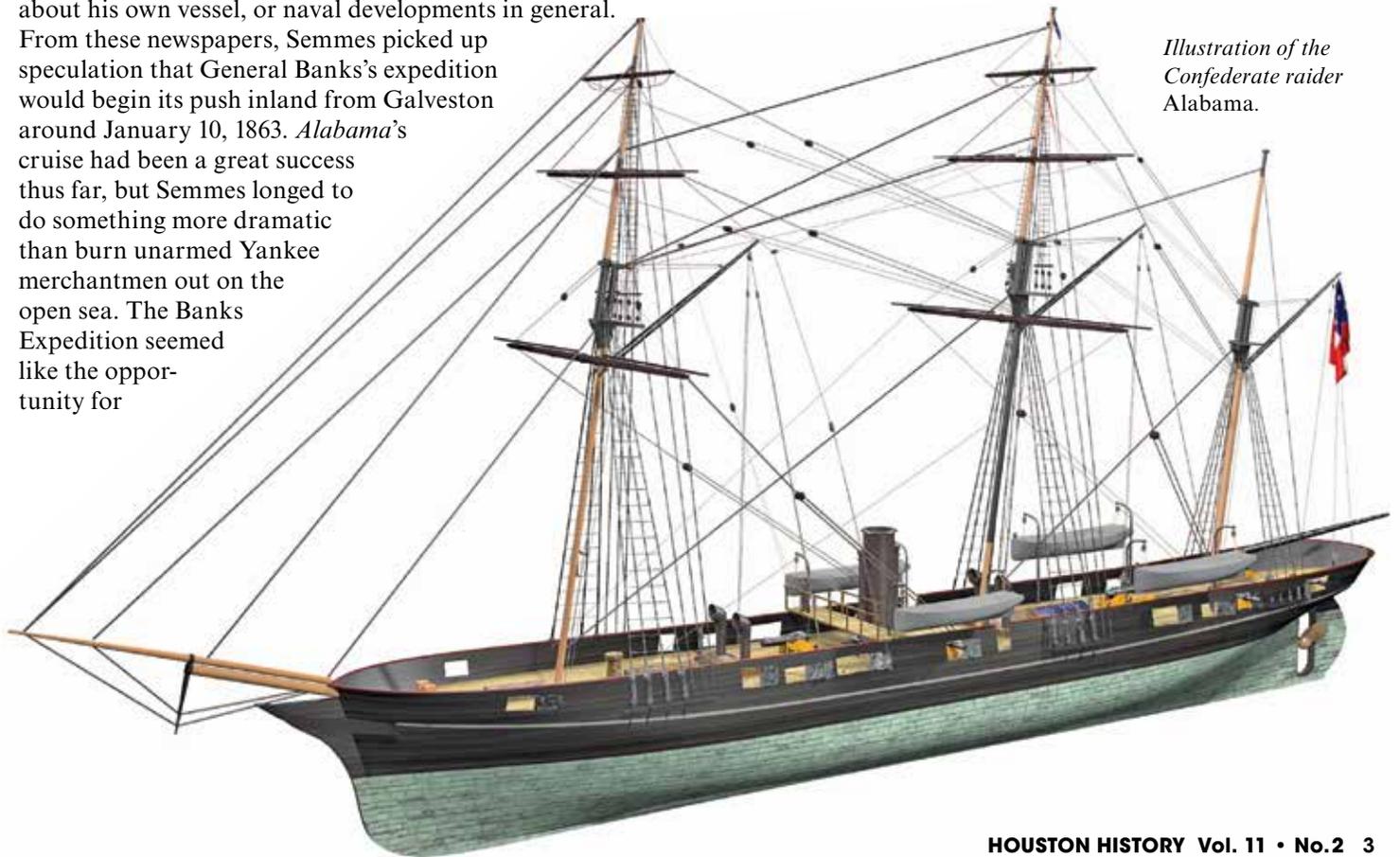
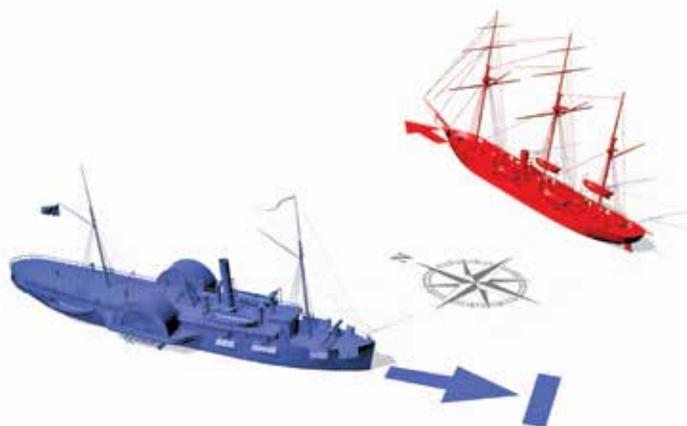
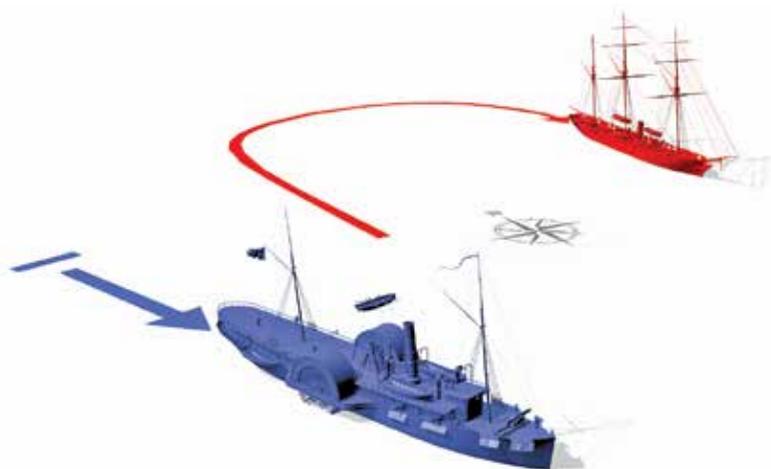


Illustration of the Confederate raider *Alabama*.



USS *Hatteras* (foreground, in blue) stops alongside *Alabama* (red) and asks her identity. Captain Semmes of *Alabama* stalls for time, identifying his vessel as a British warship.

Illustrations by Andrew W. Hall.



Alabama makes a wide turn away and to starboard to come back on a parallel course to *Hatteras* that has launched a boat with a boarding party to inspect the strange vessel's papers.

begin preparations to retake the port. Bell's force arrived on January 7, and began a daily bombardment of the city. USS *Hatteras* arrived soon after, late in the afternoon of January 10. Almost everything was in place for the assault on Galveston. One crewman on board USS *New London* confidently wrote to his father that "Galveston is a doomed town."⁶

Sunday, January 11, dawned clear and beautiful. The bombardment of the city's defenses continued. Sometime after 2:00 p.m., lookouts in the Union fleet spotted an unidentified ship approaching from the southeast. Bell ordered the closest of the Union ships, USS *Hatteras*, to investigate. By 3:00, *Hatteras* was in pursuit of the stranger.⁷

The unidentified vessel, of course, was CSS *Alabama*. Semmes had arrived off Galveston expecting to see dozens of transport vessels anchored offshore. Instead, all he saw were a handful of what looked like Union warships. While he puzzled over this, his lookouts reported seeing a shell fired from one of the warships that exploded over the town. Semmes now realized that Galveston had somehow been recaptured and returned to Confederate hands. While he thought about his next move, the lookouts reported one of the Federal warships had come out to intercept him. Semmes quickly revised his plan. He turned *Alabama* around, pointing her bow again to the south, moving slowly away from Galveston. He did not want the Union warship to close the range too quickly and so began leading *Hatteras* on a long chase in the fading, late-afternoon light.⁸

On *Hatteras*, Homer Blake and his officers became suspicious. They knew of *Alabama*'s successes in the Caribbean and had worried for weeks that the Confederate warship would eventually make her way into the Gulf of Mexico. Though they did not know the identity of the mystery vessel they chased, they could guess. Henry Ogden Porter, *Hatteras*'s executive officer, remarked to Captain Blake, "That, sir, I think is *Alabama*. What shall we do?" Blake replied immediately and directly, "If that is *Alabama* we must fight her." Blake ordered his ship cleared for action.⁹

By the time *Hatteras* had closed to a distance of about four miles, Blake could see that the stranger had stopped

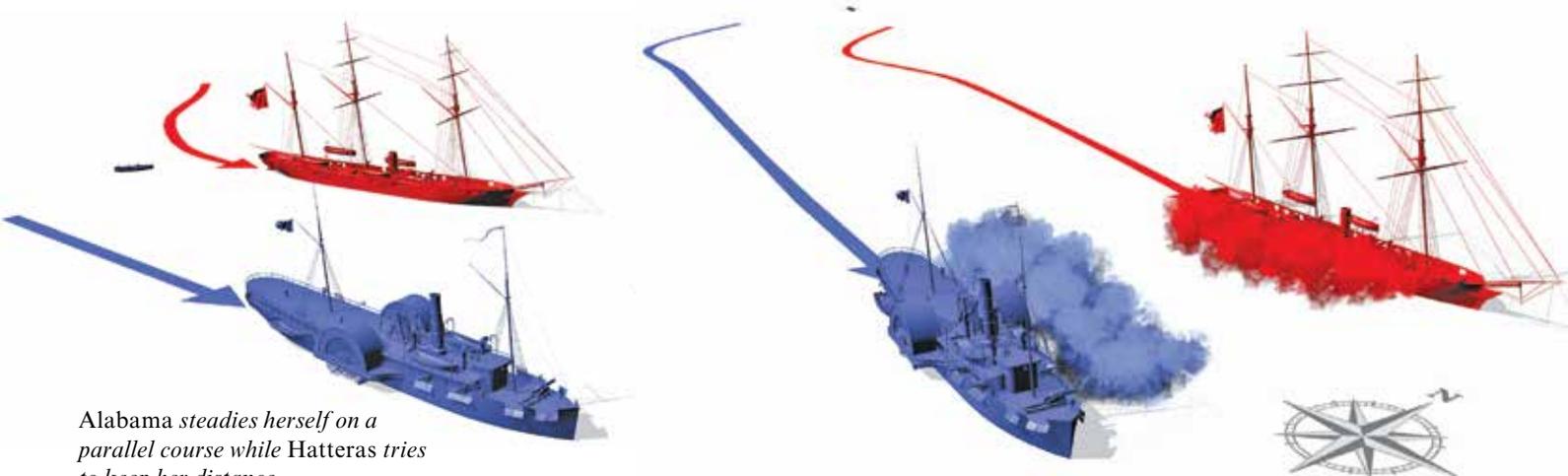
and was lying broadside-on, waiting for him to come up – not at all the way a skittish blockade runner would behave. It was about seven o'clock now, and nearly dark. As *Hatteras* came up alongside, Blake hailed the mystery ship: "What steamer is that?"

The reply shouted across the water from *Alabama* was that the raider was a British warship—Blake recalled that the name given was *Vixen*, while Semmes later said *Petrel*—and Semmes asked for the identity of Blake's ship. Semmes could not make out the name, but the first words he heard, "this is the United States Ship," sufficed. A brief pause followed while both ships jockeyed for a better position, with Blake suspecting the other ship was *Alabama*, and Semmes knowing that he had a Yankee warship under his ship's guns. Blake, following standard procedure, asked for permission to send a boat with an officer to verify the other ship's identity. Semmes, still trying to maneuver for best advantage, politely agreed. *Alabama*, meanwhile, had made a steaming turn to the east, running up alongside *Hatteras*'s port side, less than 100 yards off.

Satisfied with his position and that all was ready, Semmes turned to his first lieutenant and said, "Don't strike them in disguise; tell them who we are and give the broadside at the name." Kell raised his speaking trumpet and announced, "This is the Confederate States Steamer *Alabama*!" And then, to his crew, "Fire!"¹⁰

Alabama's first broadside went high, passing harmlessly over *Hatteras*. Blake immediately ordered his aft guns, the only guns that would bear, to return fire and rang the bell for full speed ahead. He turned the ship to port, trying to get into a position where he could fire all of his port guns at *Alabama*. On the deck below, Executive Officer Porter of *Hatteras* did not wait for Blake's orders; he yelled, "*Alabama*! Boys, now give it to her!" and the gun crews on *Hatteras* began firing away.¹¹

A running fight followed, *Hatteras* firing to port and *Alabama* to starboard. At some points, only twenty-five yards of black water separated the ships; Kell later described it as "a sharp fight." Blake soon recognized his disadvantage in firepower, and tried to turn his ship to



Alabama steadies herself on a parallel course while Hatteras tries to keep her distance.

After Semmes identifies his ship as CSS Alabama, both vessels exchange furious broadsides, running side-by-side, until Hatteras is completely disabled, dead in the water and sinking.

enable *Hatteras* to get alongside the enemy vessel, where his crew could attempt to board. But Semmes used his ship's superior speed and maneuverability to keep *Hatteras* at a distance.¹² About eight minutes after the action began, a shell entered *Hatteras* above the water line forward and burst a quantity of stored turpentine, setting that part of the ship on fire. Soon after, another shell hit the forward part of the "walking beam" and knocked it out of alignment. The walking beam was a critical part of the connection between the steam engine and the paddle wheels, and the damage caused *Hatteras* to slow its forward motion. At almost the same time, a shell entered amidships and set fire to the vessel near the magazine. Yet another shell had entered the engine works and damaged part of the steam machinery.¹³

Executive Officer Porter went below to check on the damage and asked the ship's engineer about the condition of the machinery. The engineer simply replied, "We are pretty near played out, I think." With the engine room quickly filling with water, crew members tried unsuccessfully to plug the holes with rolled hammocks. Porter headed back up the ladder to Captain Blake with the bad news.¹⁴

One of the heroes that night aboard *Hatteras* – unmentioned in any official report of the action – was an unidentified African American officer's steward who Blake later described in an article for *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*. The man knew of a small locker of arms and ammunition under a passageway off the wardroom, and when the ship caught fire, the steward remained at his post, continually dashing the ammunition with water. When later asked whether he found his position dangerous, the steward replied that he had, "but I knew if the fire got to the powder them gentlemen on deck would get a grand hoist."¹⁵

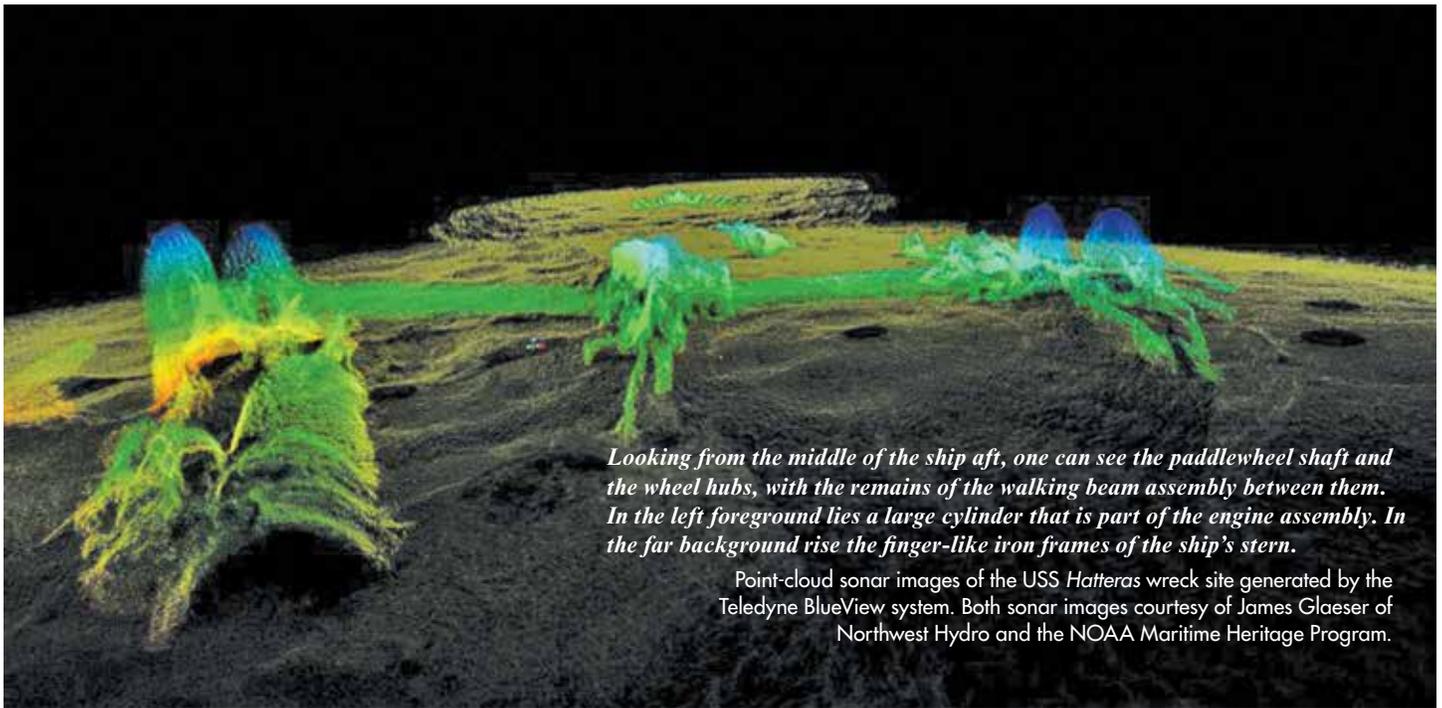
Fearing that the fire might ignite the ship's primary magazine, Captain Blake ordered that two feet of water be pumped into the compartment. At that moment, a shot knocked a hole in the engine's main cylinder, flooding the engine room and deck nearby with scalding steam. The engine ground to a halt, having been struck six times in different places. *Hatteras* was dead in the water and beginning to roll steeply to port.¹⁶ Blake ordered that a lee gun,

facing away from the enemy, be fired to signal his surrender. The entire fight had lasted only thirteen minutes.

Blake and Porter knew that *Hatteras* was doomed; their worry now centered on whether *Alabama* would leave them to sink without attempting to rescue survivors.¹⁷ *Hatteras* had rolled so far over on her port side that it appeared she might capsize completely, so Blake ordered the guns on that side to be thrown overboard. *Hatteras* was heeled so far over by then that the men did not have to use block and tackle to coax the guns over the side. Freed of the weight of the artillery on the port side, the ship righted herself at once but she continued sinking.¹⁸

Porter could not believe that *Alabama* had left a disabled foe. He yelled into the darkness, demanding that *Alabama* send boats to save *Hatteras's* crew. Finally, Semmes dispatched two of his boats to help transfer the Union ship's crew, now prisoners, to *Alabama*. As Porter supervised the orderly loading of the boats, Blake carefully counted the men leaving the ship. When everyone other than Porter and Blake had been evacuated, two crewmen last seen in the coal bunkers remained unaccounted for. Both Porter and Blake tried to go below to search the bunkers, but the smoke and fire stopped them; Porter even burned off the bottom of his shoes on the hot deck. Finally, Blake concluded that the missing men could not be recovered and reluctantly left for *Alabama* to surrender formally to Semmes. Ten minutes after they reached the enemy ship, *Hatteras* went down, bow first.¹⁹

Alabama had survived the battle with only minor damage, and one man slightly wounded, but Semmes now faced another set of problems. More than 100 prisoners roughly doubled the number of men on board the Confederate raider. They took up space, consumed rations and fresh water, and needed guarding. More importantly, every available Federal warship in the region would now be sent to find and engage *Alabama*. Semmes needed to leave the Gulf of Mexico and dispose of his prisoners quickly, so he set a course for Jamaica, south of Cuba. *Alabama* anchored off Port Royal, across the harbor from Kingston, after dark on January 20, nine days after the encounter with *Hatteras*.



Looking from the middle of the ship aft, one can see the paddlewheel shaft and the wheel hubs, with the remains of the walking beam assembly between them. In the left foreground lies a large cylinder that is part of the engine assembly. In the far background rise the finger-like iron frames of the ship's stern.

Point-cloud sonar images of the USS *Hatteras* wreck site generated by the Teledyne BlueView system. Both sonar images courtesy of James Glaeser of Northwest Hydro and the NOAA Maritime Heritage Program.

Semmes put Blake and his crew ashore and, after taking a few days to refit and reprovise his ship, slipped away on January 25 for points unknown.²⁰

A formal court of inquiry on the loss of *Hatteras* held at the Brooklyn Navy Yard concluded that Blake and his senior officers had discharged their duties “in an efficient and praiseworthy manner,” and that Blake’s own conduct after the battle “was altogether commendable and proper.”²¹ Nonetheless, others stood ready to assign blame. One notable example was Admiral David Dixon Porter, elder brother of *Hatteras*’s executive officer, Henry Porter. Years later, Admiral Porter argued that the error was Commodore Bell’s, for not sending sufficient force to investigate the vessel sighted on the afternoon of January 11. Two ships, he argued, would have made quick work of the Confederate raider. Porter suggested, perhaps in subconscious reference to his younger brother’s involvement in the embarrassing incident, “Never send a boy on a man’s errand.”²²

After leaving Port Royal and *Hatteras*’s crew astern, Raphael Semmes set a course east and then north, through the Santo Domingo Channel between the islands of Hispaniola and Puerto Rico, into the North Atlantic again. Then *Alabama* headed south, along the coast of Brazil, where Semmes took a dozen ships in the spring and early summer of 1863. After an extended refit at Cape Town, South Africa, the raider continued east, across the Indian Ocean, through the Sunda Strait and into the Java and South China Seas. After another long call at Singapore for repairs and provisions, *Alabama* sailed west again, skirting the Indian subcontinent, following the west coast of Africa, around the Cape of Good Hope and again north into the Atlantic.

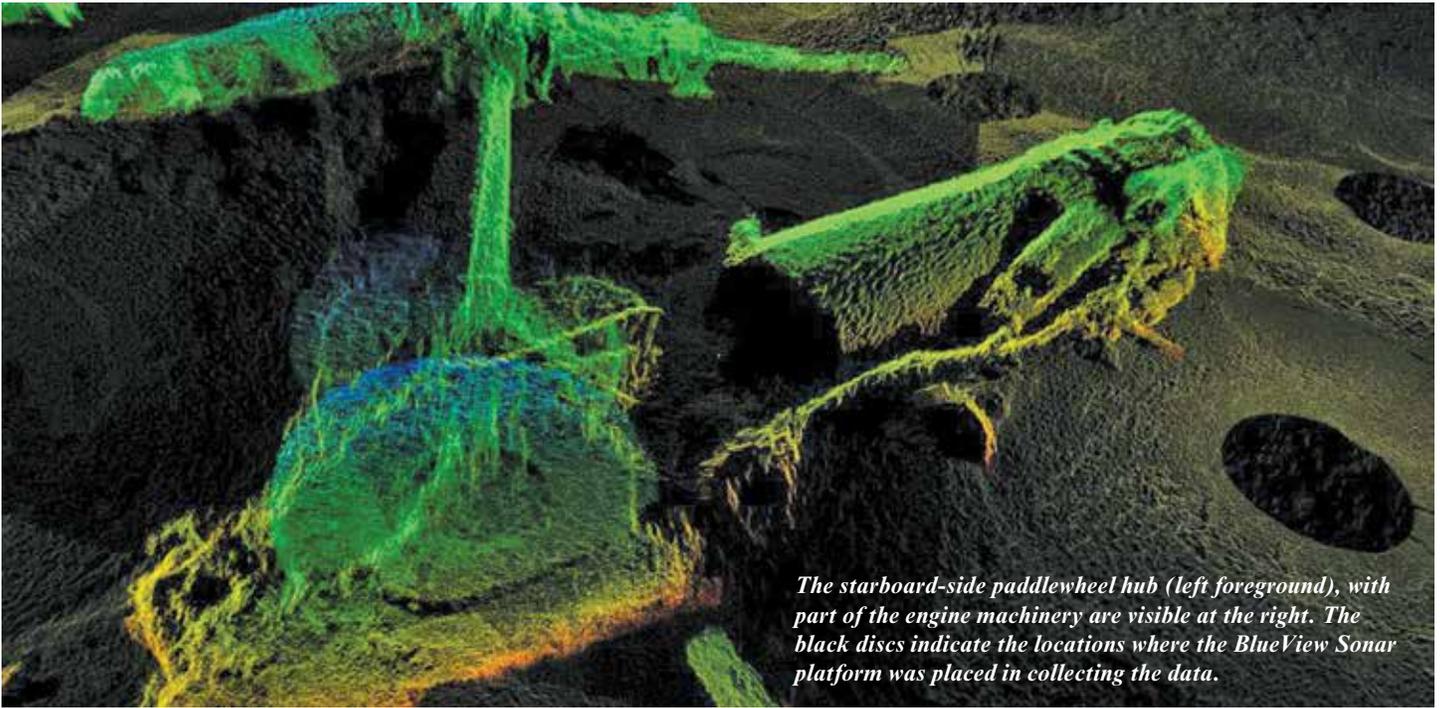
By the spring of 1864, *Alabama* had been at sea for almost eighteen months. Continually hunted, she and her captain stayed just a step ahead of their pursuers. But Semmes’s luck ran out in June 1864, when he brought his worn-out

ship and crew into the neutral port of Cherbourg, France, where the USS *Kearsarge* cornered them. Given the options of abandoning *Alabama* in a neutral harbor or slugging it out with *Kearsarge*, Semmes chose to fight. In an hour-long battle in which the antagonists steamed round and round each other, *Alabama* was holed repeatedly below the waterline. Semmes struck his colors and ordered his crew to abandon their sinking ship. *Alabama*’s depredations against Yankee merchantmen came to an abrupt end.²³

Semmes’ decision to engage *Kearsarge* has been hotly debated ever since, but undoubtedly his quick victory over *Hatteras* played a part in his calculation. *Hatteras* was the only other naval vessel Semmes had faced during his long cruise, and it may have given him undue confidence in engaging *Kearsarge*, a proper-built and heavily-armed warship. Semmes employed similar tactics in both encounters, but the ease of his 1863 victory helped pave the way to his defeat in 1864.

The *Alabama* and *Hatteras* fight yielded other consequences as well. The ease with which *Alabama* sank *Hatteras* stunned many in the U.S. Navy. Before that battle, they had seen *Alabama* almost as a nuisance. After *Hatteras*, however, they recognized *Alabama* as a formidable warship in her own right. For the next year and a half, Union ship captains worried that *Alabama* or a similar Confederate vessel might appear on the sea behind them and reduce their ships to sinking wrecks. This led commanders to become overly cautious and, on some occasions, fail to achieve military objectives.

The loss of *Hatteras* also helped shape the larger conduct of the war. At the time of the battle, Bell’s squadron was prepared to recapture Galveston and use it as a stage to invade Texas. They likely would have been successful had they proceeded as planned; but worried that *Alabama* and other Confederate ships might be lurking out of sight, naval officials delayed, giving the Confederate garrison critical



The starboard-side paddlewheel hub (left foreground), with part of the engine machinery are visible at the right. The black discs indicate the locations where the BlueView Sonar platform was placed in collecting the data.

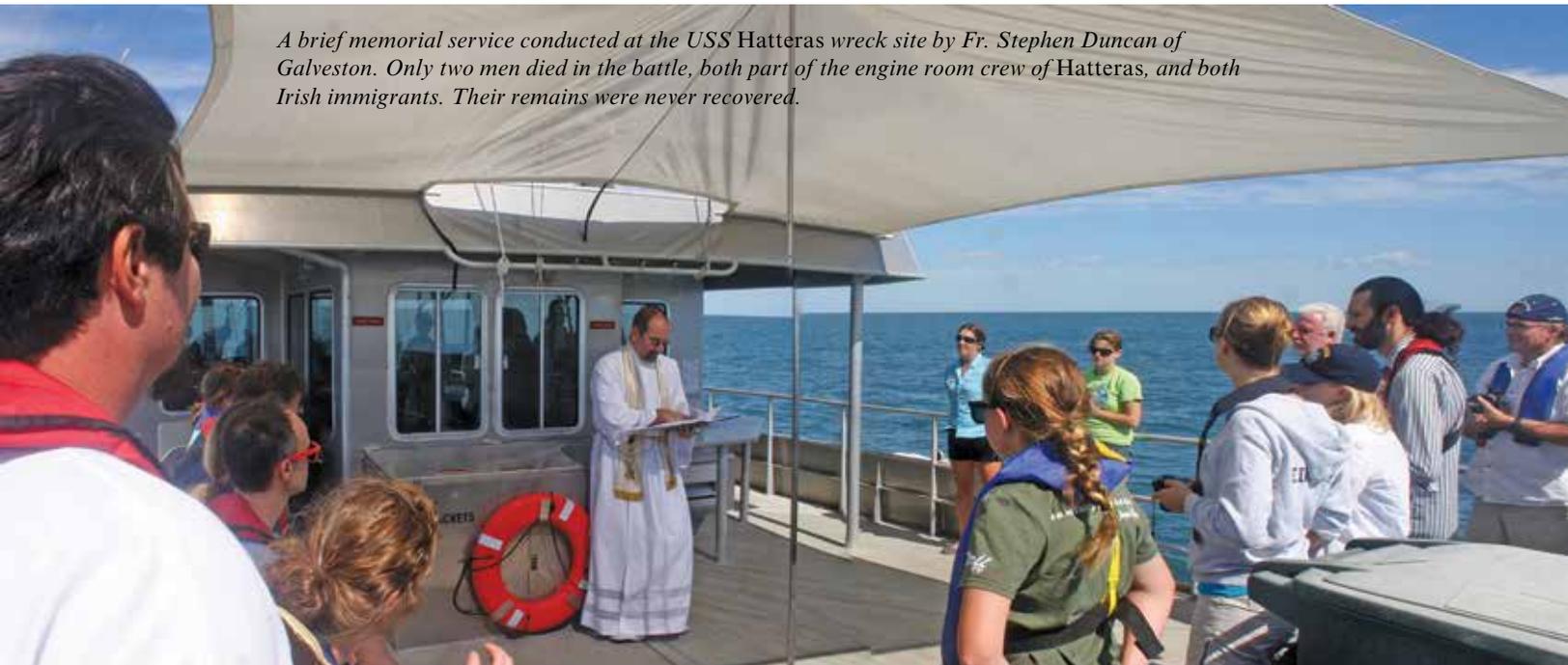
time to fortify the city. Galveston survived as the last major Confederate port, not surrendering until June 1865, two months after Appomattox and the assassination of President Lincoln.

The short clash between *Alabama* and *Hatteras* was more than just a rehearsal for the battle that ended *Alabama's* famous career. The 1863 battle had its origin in a scheme that, if successful, would have dealt a substantial blow to Union military plans on the Texas coast. Although Captain Semmes's plan to steam boldly through the middle of the fleet firing broadsides in both directions did not materialize, Semmes indirectly played a major role in postponing Union plans to capture Texas. The very fact that a major invasion

of the interior of Texas never occurred can be traced in part to the thirteen-minute fight in which *Alabama* defeated *Hatteras*.

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Ed Cotham is the author of several books on Texas in the Civil War, including *Battle on the Bay: The Civil War Struggle for Galveston*. Ed also serves as president of the Terry Foundation in Houston.



A brief memorial service conducted at the USS Hatteras wreck site by Fr. Stephen Duncan of Galveston. Only two men died in the battle, both part of the engine room crew of Hatteras, and both Irish immigrants. Their remains were never recovered.