

Museum Around the Corner  
Georgetown County Historical Society Museum

Guns of the CSS PeeDee ©

One of the treasures in the Georgetown County Museum is an original letter written during the War Between the States by Union Admiral John Dahlgren who was charged with blockading the ports of the Southeast during the war. On October 29, 1864, he prepared orders for the USS Canandaigua to replace the USS Pawnee in its monitoring of Winyah Bay. He alerts the two captains that "I have heard a rumor that the Rebels have built a gunboat on the PeeDee... do not let it get out to sea." The rumor was true and the CSS PeeDee was being built at the Mars Bluff Confederate shipyard, near Florence, SC.

According to Ted Gragg, in his new book, "Guns of the PeeDee" she was christened and launched on January 11, 1864 and in commission with Lieutenant Oscar F. Johnston, CSN, in command. There is some confusion about her size, but she was about 150 feet long with a beam of about 25 feet and drawing about 7 and one half feet. She was certainly a large vessel for the fairly narrow PeeDee River. She carried two Brooke rifled guns, one VII inch and the other VI.4 inch. A captured Dahlgren smoothbore gun rounded out her fire power. Steam power was her primary propulsion with wind or sail power as backup.

Her first assignment came on February 28, 1865 when she was ordered to go north on the PeeDee about 56 miles to Cheraw to cover the flank of Confederate Lt. General Hardee's withdrawal of his army from the advancing front of General William T. Sherman's United States Army. Although we do not know exactly the chain of events, the probability is that as she approached, the sounds of gunfire and artillery could be heard, exciting the crew to their first taste of action. Her assignment was to wait until Hardee's men retreated across the PeeDee Bridge, then destroy it to prevent the Union Army from advancing across. As the Confederates crossed the bridge, they lit a powder train that destroyed the bridge, thus there was no need to engage the CSS PeeDee. The first mission had been a success without firing a shot. Preparations were made to turn the ship about and return to the Naval Shipyard at Mars Bluff now that the threat had passed.

On March 2, 1865, the Mars Bluff shipyard was ordered to be destroyed to prevent it from falling into enemy hands; Sherman's troops were closing in, the war was ending. Two weeks later, having dumped his guns over the side, Lt. Johnson ordered a charge to be set and exploded to destroy the CSS PeeDee.

Fast forward to 1994. The CSS PeeDee Search and Recovery Team, led by Ted Gragg, had been searching for hard evidence of the CSN Shipyard and ultimately the CSS PeeDee remains. Little by little, clues emerged about the location of the shipyard. In 2015, after years of hard, hot, dirty work, the three guns were found. Recovery was complicated with the State of South

Carolina requiring permits and the Federal Government claiming all property of the Confederate States belonged to them, so the recovery was handled very professionally and scientifically. Funding came from grants and pockets of the Recovery Team. As Ted writes, "On 29 September, 2015, following 150 years of lying peacefully on the bottom of the Great PeeDee River, three cannons jettisoned by the CSS PeeDee during the waning days of the Civil War were lifted onto the bank of the river..." The next day, the three cannons were taken to the Walter Lasch Conservation Center in North Charleston where they have been submerged in special conditions to stabilize them.

There was no stopping this determined group of searchers once they had been "bitten by the bug". Their phenomenal efforts in researching the history of the CSS PeeDee, physically searching the terrain for signs of their quest led to a successful recovery and the telling of a great story in the process. Ted's book, "Guns of the PeeDee, The Cannon Recovery" is available at the Georgetown County Museum.