

7-1-2007

Ships Named Huntsville

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Recommended Citation

Nilsson, Dex (2007) "Ships Named Huntsville," *Huntsville Historical Review*. Vol. 32: No. 2, Article 3.
Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol32/iss2/3>

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Ships Named ^{Nilsson: Ships Named Huntsville} Huntsville

DEX NILSSON

Since the founding of our town over two hundred years ago, there have been four major ships and at least six riverboats named for the city of Huntsville. Almost all played exciting roles in U.S. history. Here are their stories.

The First *Huntsville*

In the early 1800s, the traditional cross-section design of a sailing ship's hull was kettle-shaped, a compromise between carrying capacity and sailing stability. But an experienced captain, Robert H. Waterman, was able to achieve phenomenal speed out of an old cotton packet, the *Natchez*. What was the secret?

Southern cotton was the big money-maker for the shippers in New York and New England. But sandbars, changing frequently because of unpredictable storms, often kept ships from traveling from the Gulf of Mexico into the Mississippi Delta and into New Orleans. In 1831, a deliberate design change was made. Five new ships, coastal packets, were built with flat bottoms and rectangular cross-sections. They could pass over the bars. Because cotton bales were square, more cargo could be loaded in a hull which was nearly shaped like a cotton bale. The five ships were all built concurrently for the Louisiana and New York Line. Speed was sacrificed to allow 30 percent more cotton in the hull and the ability to cross the sand bars.

One of the five ships was Waterman's *Natchez*. It was 130 feet 3 inches long, 29 feet 9 inches across, and only 14 feet 10 inches deep. The other ships varied only a foot or so. Average tonnage was 523. All of this was experimental. One of the other ships, the *Creole*, made slow passages and was quickly sold. But the third ship, the *Huntsville*, became the fastest packet on the New York-New Orleans run, making her best passages between 1834 and 1836. Her captain was Nathaniel B. Palmer, a name to remember.

Waterman and the *Natchez* would go on to be part of the China trade and affect design of the great clipper ships of the 1840s and 1850s. Palmer would become famous after he left the *Huntsville*. He went south searching for seals, and became the first person to see the continent of Antarctica. Its large archipelago is today named Palmerland. As for the *Huntsville* – it went on to become a whaler and a logger, operating in the Pacific.

I have found only two more references to the *Huntsville*. The Bishop Museum in Honolulu has a database (I Ka Moana Lipolipo) of whaling ships that hired or discharged Hawaiian seamen in Honolulu. There is one entry for the *Huntsville* – discharging a seaman named Olelo on October 16, 1857. The Captain of the *Huntsville* was recorded as William James Grant.

The second reference is the Jefferson County Genealogical Society (located in Port Townsend, Washington) which contains a list of local “Ship Captains, Master Mariners, and Pilots.” One entry was an 1897 obituary for John Hinds, who in 1864 was “in command of ship *Huntsville* in [the] lumber trade between San Francisco and Port Blakely,” Washington. ¹

The U.S.S. *Huntsville*

In late December 1860, South Carolina seceded from the United States of America. In January 1861, six other southern states followed, and by February the Confederate States of America had been formed. On March 4, Union President Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated. One of his first acts was to protect and supply U.S. facilities in the South, one of which was Fort Sumter at Charleston, South Carolina. The South viewed the Union-held fort as foreign to its newly formed country, and on April 12 a Confederate military force attacked the fort. It was the beginning of the Civil War.

Winfield Scott, the commanding general of the U.S. Army, devised a plan called the Anaconda Plan to blockade major ports of the South and to strangle the rebel economy. His idea was to win the war with as little bloodshed as possible. On April 19, Lincoln approved the plan and declared such a blockade. It would eventually cover 3,500 miles of coastline and close 12 major ports. It would require 500 ships. Most of the ships were commercial vessels which had been quickly converted for military use.

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One such vessel was the *U.S.S.* (i.e., *U.S. Steamship*) *Huntsville*. It had been built by Jacob A. Westervelt of New York City and had been launched there in 1857. It is clear that it was named for Huntsville, Alabama, as a sister ship to the *Montgomery*, built there at the same time.

The *Huntsville* was a three-mast schooner, described by the Navy as “an 840-ton (burden) wooden screw steamship.” It went into operation on the New York-Savannah run for American Atlantic Screw [Steam Ship] Co.² But in May 1861, she was chartered for U.S. Navy service, converted to a gunboat, and commissioned as the *U.S.S. Huntsville*.³

Photo # NH 63876 Steamship Huntsville, which was USS Huntsville in 1861-1865 Artwork by Erik Heyl



The *U.S.S. Huntsville*.

U.S. Naval Historical Center photograph

Watercolor by Erik Heyl, 1945, painted for use in his book, *Early American Steamers*

The *Huntsville* operated off the Southern coast and in the Gulf of Mexico for the next three years. Her job was to help enforce the blockade.⁴ The following are some of her engagements:

An issue of *Harper's Weekly* shows an engraving of Union warships bombarding Port Royal, South Carolina, on November 7, 1861. Twenty-two Union ships are identified, including the “*C.S.S. Huntsville*,” which has to be an error and should have referred to the *U.S.S. Huntsville*.⁵

In Navy records of Civil War action,⁶ the *Huntsville* shows up for the first time in January 1862 when it was recorded as assisting a boarding

party from the *R.R. Cyler*, along with two cutters from the *Potomac*, in capturing the blockade-running schooner *J.W. Wilder*, which had run aground about 15 miles east of Mobile. The *Huntsville* actually saved the *Cyler*, which in trying to capture the schooner almost ran aground itself.⁷

On July 7, 1862, she encountered the *Adelia*, a 585-ton iron side-wheel steamer. The *Adelia* had been built in Scotland in 1859 as a merchant ship, but at this time it was in the Bahamas attempting to break through the Union blockade. She was captured by the *Huntsville* and the *Quaker City*.

What becomes of a captured ship? She would be taken to a “prize court” to determine that she was indeed a prize of war and could thus be taken over by the capturing country. The case of the *Adelia* is a good example. She was taken to the Prize Court at Key West, Florida, where she was condemned and then purchased by the U.S. Navy to be fitted out as a gunboat and put into Union service.

Ten days after capturing the *Adelia*, the *Huntsville* seized a blockade-running British schooner, the *Agnes*, off Abaco, an island in the northern Bahamas. It had a cargo of cotton and rosin. At this time, Navy records show that the *Huntsville* was under the command of Acting Lieutenant William C. Rogers.

On the 19th, the *Huntsville* encountered and captured the steamer *Reliance* just off the Bahamas after it had escaped from Savannah. The *Reliance* had been built as the *Hollyhock* and taken into Confederate service and renamed.

Three days before Christmas found the *Huntsville* still at sea, where it seized the schooner *Courier* off the Tortugas in the Florida Keys. The captured cargo included salt, coffee, sugar, and dry goods.

On March 13, 1863, the *Huntsville* seized the blockade-running British schooner *Surprise* off Charlotte Harbor, Florida. The *Surprise* had been trying to get to Havana with a cargo of cotton. A month later, again off Charlotte Harbor, the *Huntsville* captured the sloop *Minnie*, with another cargo of cotton. And on the 14th, still just off the Florida coast, she took the British schooner *Ascension*.

On May 13, on the other side of Florida, the *Huntsville* captured the schooner *A.J. Hodge*. Then six days later, back in the Gulf just off St. Petersburg, she captured the *Union*, a blockade-running Spanish steamer and a major prize.

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All told, the *Huntsville* captured a dozen blockade runners and assisted in the taking of several others.⁸

Beginning in May 1864, the *Huntsville* supported troops ashore at Tampa Bay. While off Tampa, her crew suffered greatly from yellow fever, so in July, she was sent north. She was decommissioned in August.

But in March 1865, she was again commissioned and in April and June made voyages to New Orleans and Panama. She then carried passengers between New York and Boston. In August she was again decommissioned.

In November 1865 the *Huntsville* was sold and resumed her commercial career. That career lasted until the ship burned on December 19, 1877, off Little Egg Harbor Light, New Jersey.

Who Was William C. Rogers?

For most of its time in the U.S. Navy, the *U.S.S. Huntsville* was commanded by Acting Lieutenant William C. Rogers. I have found nothing to describe him.

Donald Gunn Ross III, on his website about his book, *The Era of the Clipper Ships*,⁹ names one of the “forty-niner” clipper ships that rushed between the East Coast and San Francisco after 1849 as *The Thomas Perkins*, out of Boston and under the command of William C. Rogers.

In 1851 and 1852, a sailing vessel called the *Witchcraft* was captained by William C. Rogers. It was “an extreme clipper ship.” It was launched on December 21, 1850, at Chelsea, Massachusetts, for Richard S. Rogers and William D. Pickman of Salem, Massachusetts. Richard was William C. Rogers’ father. Starting in April 1851, the ship sailed from New York to San Francisco, but had to put into port at Rio de Janeiro for repairs to a sprung mainmast. The continued voyage from Rio took 62 days, the fastest passage on record. A year later the *Witchcraft* sailed to Hong Kong, finally returning to New York from Shanghai. The ship continued in use but under different captains.^{10: 11}

In November 1861, “Acting Volunteer Lieutenant” William C. Rogers was listed in command of the *U.S.S. William G. Anderson*, on blockade duty. The ship had just been launched from the Boston Navy Yard the month before.¹² As mentioned before, Rogers shows up in Navy records on the *Huntsville* in July 1862.

At the end of 1864, after the *Huntsville* had been decommissioned, Rogers apparently continued his military career. In a letter to the U.S. Senate, on December 29, 1864, President Lincoln wrote “In obedience to the requirement of the law of 16 May 1864, I submit the following-named Volunteer officers for confirmation by the Senate, viz: ... Acting Volunteer Lieutenant William C. Rogers, U.S. Navy, to be acting Volunteer lieutenant-commander from the 24th October, 1864.”

And finally, in March 1865, Rogers is listed, still on blockade duty, commanding the *U.S.S. Iuka*.

Were all these William C. Rogers one and the same? Did a former sailing captain volunteer for duty as a lieutenant for the Union during the Civil War? Or were they father and son? Were they two different people with similar names at similar times? The last scenario seems unlikely.

As an aside, certainly a great coincidence of Navy captain names: On July 3, 1988, the guided missile cruiser *Vincennes* shot down Iran Air Flight 655 in the Persian Gulf, killing 290 people. It caused an international incident for the U.S. It was later determined that the ship’s Aegis system did not properly identify the aircraft, and the ship’s commander was said to have acted responsibly. Some people disagreed. Nine months later, the wife of the ship’s commander was nearly the victim of a pipe bomb that exploded in her minivan, which was registered in the commander’s name. Terrorists were blamed by some, a single person with a grudge against the commander by others. The case remains unsolved. The name of the *Vincennes* commander was William C. Rogers III.¹³

The preceding is the subject of a book the two Rogers wrote together.¹⁴ I contacted him through his publisher about the earlier William C. Rogers, but he wrote back that he “could state with virtual certainty that I am not related” and offered no information about his Rogers family.

The C.S.S. *Huntsville*

In February 1861, as the Confederacy established its government, former Florida senator Stephen R. Mallory was named secretary of the Confederate States Navy. The first thing he discovered was that he was a naval secretary with no navy. Of ninety U.S. ships at the time of Lincoln’s inauguration, only one fell into the hands of the Confederacy. The South

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was able to capture four cutters, add three slave ships, and purchase two private steamers, for a total of ten. All told, they were equipped with fifteen guns.¹⁵

By late spring, it was agreed what was needed were newly-built iron-armored warships of simple design. The preferred plan was one by a brilliant Lieutenant John Mercer Brooke – an iron casemate surrounding and protecting a gun deck, with the casemate sides inclined to ricochet enemy shot. Brooke tested various iron plates by firing the heaviest guns in the Union service and found that four-inch armor installed at a 45-degree angle would withstand any shells and at any range. Unfortunately, there wasn't a mill in the South that could make 4-inch iron plate. There was only one mill that could make 2-inch plate, and that was the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond.¹⁶

Aside from Tredegar, the most productive naval ordnance works in the Confederacy was in Selma, Alabama. Colin McRae had a foundry there, and it was commandeered, enlarged, and retooled by the military. It used iron ore from Brierfield, Alabama and a gun design by Brooke to turn out some of the best iron and best guns of the War.

One of Mallory's worries was the port of Mobile, especially following the fall of New Orleans in April 1862. Mobile was the only Confederate port of importance left on the Gulf coast.¹⁷ It made sense to build ships for Mobile's defense on Alabama's waterways.

In July 1862, a contract was let to a Mobile shipbuilder, Henry D. Bassett, for construction of two ironclads, the *Tuscaloosa* and the *Huntsville*. The construction site was to be Selma, 150 miles up the Alabama River from Mobile, chosen mainly because McRae's foundry was expected to provide guns, boilers, and armor plate. But by the end of 1862 the *Huntsville* was still waiting for plating, the boiler, and machinery.¹⁸

On February 7, 1863, the *Huntsville* was launched into the Alabama River at Selma – still without its engine and its boiler – to take advantage of high water so it would go over the shoals without destroying the bottom of the ship. It was towed to Mobile Bay. After its arrival at Mobile, the *Huntsville* received its equipment, armor, guns, and crew. The engines are believed to have been transferred from a river steamer, and the armor plate finally delivered by Shelby Iron Co. and Schofield & Markham of Atlanta.¹⁹ After a shakedown cruise it was commissioned the *C.S.S. Huntsville*. It made its first trial run in April – but obtained a speed of only three knots.

The newly-commissioned *C.S.S. Tuscaloosa* was slower, achieving only two-and-a-half knots. Neither ship could be used as an offensive ironclad; instead they were floating batteries. Admiral Franklin Buchanan, in charge of Mobile's defense, was reluctant to send either of these batteries into the bay because of their slowness. Eventually, he was ordered to reinforce the wooden gunboats protecting the lower part of the bay on both ships. They never arrived, having to stay instead in the upper bay because of lack of power.^{20: 21: 22}

The *Huntsville* was 150 feet long, protected with two inches of armor, and when fully equipped, had a Brooke 6.4-inch rifle and four 32-pounders.²³ She might have been relatively small, but she carried 17 officers and a crew of 87 under the command of Lieutenant Julian Myers.²⁴

The main deck was the same as the gun deck. Hammocks were strung between the guns to serve as quarters for some of the crew. On the deck below were the captain's cabin, more crew quarters, and the mess. On the third deck were storage rooms, magazines, and the boilers. There was virtually no ventilation on any deck, and permission was given for some of the crew each night to go ashore where they would sleep in the cotton warehouses. Of course, when the ship was operating, this was impossible. Excessive heat, dampness (water often trickled in), and lack of light contributed to illness, low morale, and inefficiency. Life on board for over 100 people was simply intolerable.²⁵

It would be August 1864 before the battle for Mobile Bay began. Buchanan was in no hurry, still waiting for promised ships and equipment to arrive. The Union force, under Rear Admiral David Farragut,²⁶ had also been waiting on blockade duty, for over six months for its promised ironclads to arrive. The Confederates had two forts guarding the entrance to the bay (Fort Gaines and Fort Morgan) one ironclad (the *Tennessee*, Buchanan's flagship), three gunboats, and many mines (then called torpedoes), with only a small secret channel open for its blockade runners. The Union had 5,000 land troops, four ironclads, and fourteen wooden ships including two gunboats.²⁷

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Huntsville

Type: Confederate ironclad
Displacement: not recorded
Dimensions: 45m x 10.3m x 3.2m
(150ft x 34ft x 10ft 6in)
Machinery: not recorded (single screw)
Top speed: 3 knots
Main armament: One 162.5mm (6.4in), three 32-pounder guns

Launched: February 1863

Huntsville was one of a quartet of ironclads ordered by the Confederate Navy and built at Selma, Alabama. One of the ships was never

completed, but *Huntsville* formed a pair with her sister *Tuscaloosa*. The fourth vessel was *Tennessee*. *Huntsville* had a low freeboard hull surmounted by a long armoured casemate which housed the guns. The 162.5mm (6.4in) gun was positioned forward,

while the 32-pounders were on broadside, with one able to fire in company with *Tennessee*. *Huntsville* was towed to Mobile to receive her machinery. When it fell to Union forces, *Huntsville* and *Tuscaloosa* were ordered up the Tombigbee River where they were scuttled on 12 April 1864.



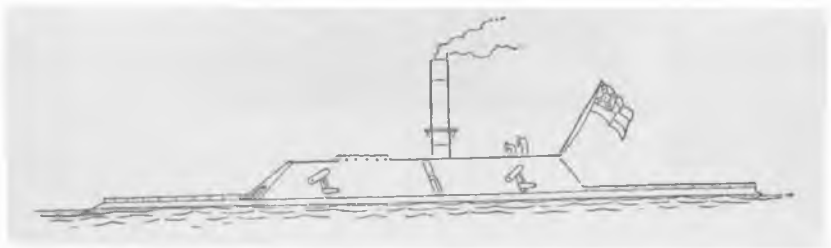
The *C.S.S. Huntsville* From an unknown textbook

The Union attack began on August 5. The Union suffered the first loss when the *Tecumseh*, its main ironclad, ran into a mine and sank in less than two minutes with a crew of 94 on board. Under fire from both the Confederate ships and Fort Morgan, Farragut had to decide whether to retreat or risk more of the minefield. That's when he issued his now-famous order, "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!" It was the pivotal move, although Farragut's action is regarded today as an act of heroism instead of foolhardiness when his ship hit several mines that failed to explode because salt water had rusted their firing mechanisms.²⁸ Huge damage and heavy casualties were inflicted on the Union forces, but the *Tennessee* was disabled by shelling, and Buchanan, who was wounded, had to surrender. Forts Gaines and Morgan soon fell.²⁹

If the *Huntsville* played any significant role in the battle, it wasn't noted in any of the sources. But the fight for Mobile wasn't over.

The loss of the naval battle did not mean the loss of the city of Mobile. It would be another six months before Union land forces were strong enough to attempt to take the city. The city was in the upper west corner of the bay, protected by Spanish Fort and Fort Blakely across from it on the eastern shore. On March 27, Spanish Fort came under attack by Union forces. It and its companion fort held out for nearly two weeks. Under the direction of Flag Officer Ebenezer Farrand, now in charge of the Mobile squadron, the *Nashville* and *Huntsville* plus the unarmored *Morgan* took up position between the two forts and shelled the attackers. Union General Frederick Steele later reported, "The enemy's gunboats *Huntsville*, *Nashville*, and *Morgan*, took position in the Tensaw River ... and kept up a constant fire night and day, which was very harassing and destructive." The Union force concentrated on the unarmored *Morgan* until the little gunboat was forced to retire. It was followed by the *Nashville*, although it had not been hit. Only the *Huntsville* remained in the open, slugging it out. Spanish Fort fell on April 8, Fort Blakely a day later. On April 12, the mayor of Mobile yielded the city to advancing Union troops, but the troops never captured the city and Confederates retained control.

On September 26, 1864, Farragut wrote to Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, "In my dispatch No. 418 I had the honor to call the attention of the Department to the rebel force of ironclads in the vicinity of Mobile ... I now enclose a sketch of the two ... ironclads ... *Tuscaloosa* and *Huntsville*, each mounting four guns."



The C.S.S. *Huntsville*

as sketched by Admiral Farragut

Courtesy the National Archives and Records Administration



Admiral Farragut
1801-1870

Farrand had the *Huntsville* and *Tuscaloosa* sent up the Spanish River where the crews, along with most of their supplies, were transferred to the *Nashville*, and the two little ironclads were scuttled to avoid capture. He and his remaining men and ships went up the Alabama River, then up the Tombigbee. The Union forces followed but did not attack. It would be May before Farrand would arrange a surrender. Lieutenant Julian Myers who had commanded the *Huntsville* represented Farrand at the ceremonies on May 10. It was over a month after Lee had surrendered at Appomattox.^{30, 31}

Riverboats

From the 1820s to the 1870s, one could find at least one active riverboat called the *Huntsville*. There were at least six.

The University of Missouri at St. Louis has a list of the “Names of Steam Boats” compiled by Capt. F. L. (Fielding) Wooldridge. Wooldridge, himself a steamboat captain on the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers, spent more than 40 years collecting, assembling, and authenticating his data. Over 7,000 steamboats are on the list, which runs 220 pages in small type. The list includes six boats named *Huntsville*:

| | | |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|------|
| <i>Huntsville</i> | Side Wheel Steamboat | 1829 |
| <i>Huntsville</i> | Side Wheel Steamboat | 1841 |
| <i>Huntsville</i> | Side Wheel Steamboat | 1845 |
| <i>Huntsville No. 2</i> | Side Wheel Steamboat | 1853 |
| <i>Huntsville</i> | Stern Wheel Steamboat | 1864 |
| <i>Huntsville</i> | Stern Towboat | 1893 |

Of these, *Way's Packet Directory*³² gives details of three:

The first of three named *Huntsville* was launched into the Ohio River in 1845 at New Albany, Indiana. She had a wooden hull and a side wheel. It was 205 feet long, 29 feet wide, 6 feet deep, and carried 344 tons. The owners were gentlemen from Kentucky plus one, George Warren, from somewhere in Alabama. Charles Pell was captain. The *Huntsville* operated on the Missouri River for almost ten years, until it was snagged and lost at St. Genevieve, Missouri, on August 21, 1854.

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A second *Huntsville* was launched at the same shipyard in 1853. It was a stern-wheeler. (Note that the Wooldridge list has it as a side-wheeler.) It was much larger than the first – 261 feet long, 40 feet wide, and 9 feet deep. It was named the *Huntsville No. 2*, probably because the owners were the same Kentucky gentlemen again with George Warren, now of Texas, plus William McClure of Tusculum. The captain in 1854 was C.W. Harrison and in 1855 was again Charles Pell. The ship operated on the Mississippi River and the Tennessee River, although briefly, for on March 24, 1855, it burned at Hamburg, Tennessee, with its load of 4,000 bales of cotton.

Still another stern-wheeled *Huntsville* was launched at New Albany in 1864. It was 159 feet long. It operated mostly between Shreveport and New Orleans, but on August 26, 1873, the ship was on the Red River when it broke its tiller, hit the bank, and sank with 180 head of cattle.

There might have been an even earlier *Huntsville* riverboat. Dave Dawley³³ claims to have pages from a book titled *Allegheny County's Boat Building* that discusses shipbuilding at Pittsburgh. "In 1836 there were sixty-one steamboats built at Pittsburgh and vicinity. . . . There were built at Brownsville in the same period, twenty-two, and at Beaver, seven." They were all built in 1836. The book lists all the ship names that were built including a *Huntsville*.

And finally, regarding the towboat listed above, the towboat *Huntsville* was built for the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis (NC&StL) Railway. Of primary interest to the railroad were the industries in Gadsden and the shipment of their products north. The railroad used the towboat to carry its cars and other materials across the Tennessee River between Gunters Landing (later Guntersville) to Hobbs Island – a distance of about 22 miles. The administrator at the Howard Steamboat Museum in Jeffersonville, Indiana, recently wrote to me:

"*Way's Steam Towboat Directory* lists T1142, *Huntsville*, a sternwheel, woodhull, towboat as being built in Jeffersonville by Howard. That's the Howard Ship Yards & Dock Co. in Jeffersonville, just three miles upstream from New Albany, and the same yard that built the *Robert E. Lee*. She was used on the Tennessee River by the NC&StL RR. She was dismantled in 1903 and parts were used in the building of the second towboat of that name which was built at Guntersville. This second boat was dismantled in 1946."

Somehow the whistle from the second towboat *Huntsville* came into the hands of Mike Giglio, a long-haul truck driver from Marietta, Ohio, who donated it to the River Museum in Point Pleasant, West Virginia. Jack Fowler, Executive Director of the River Museum, has connected the whistle to an industrial-power vacuum that makes enough air so that at the touch of a button, it can whistle just like new, much to the delight of museum visitors.

The Latest U.S.S. *Huntsville*

The *Knox Victory* was built in Oregon in 1945, one of the last “Victory Ships” of World War II. A Victory Ship was a type of cargo ship produced in large numbers during the war and often had the word Victory as part of its name. It was an improvement over an earlier “Liberty Ship” design in that it was faster and had back-up electrical power.³⁴

The *Knox Victory* was built at the Oregon Shipbuilding Corporation in Portland, Oregon in March 1945, launched on April 13, and delivered to the War Shipping Administration on May 11. Designated the VC2-S-AP3 MCV184,³⁵ she operated as a merchant ship under charter to the Olympic Steamship Company for the remainder of the war and later continued merchant service under charter from the Maritime Commission and Maritime Administration until 1958 when she entered the National Defense Reserve Fleet at Olympia, Washington.

On August 11, 1960, the *Knox Victory* was acquired by the Navy and assigned to the Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS). She was renamed the U.S.S. *Huntsville*, after the cities in Alabama and Texas. The MSTS had come into being in 1950 during the Korean War and chartered former Victory and Liberty ships to carry tanks, trucks, guns, ammunition, and equipment. It continued doing so through the Vietnam War and other U.S. international involvements.³⁶

The *Huntsville*, however, was converted to a missile range instrumentation ship on November 27 at the Triple A Machine Shop in San Francisco. She was given the designation T-AGM-7. She began duty as a tracking ship in 1961.

The history of tracking ships goes back to 1950 when the U.S. Army launched two V-2 “Bumpers” rockets over the water from Cape Canaveral

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and found it needed offshore vessels to track them. Such ships would eventually cruise to strategic locations around the world to track missiles and spacecraft – their crews having front-row seats to history. The Navy even gave them the separate classification of T-AGM. Twenty-three vessels eventually shared that classification.³⁷

The newly designated *Huntsville* was manned by a civilian crew. She operated out of Port Hueneme, California, and Honolulu, Hawaii. For four years she made intermittent “on station” patrols in the central Pacific, extending from Mexico to Wake Island and the Marshalls. Many of these patrols were in support of the U.S. space program.³⁶ For example, the *Huntsville* is listed off Midway Island for the October 3, 1962, Mercury 8 flight in which Walter Schirra completed six orbits.³⁸ Such patrols continued until 1965.

From 1965 the *Huntsville* tracked test missiles under the direction of the Air Force Systems Command, Space and Missile Center (SAMTEC), on both the Western Test Range out of Vandenberg AFB in California and the Eastern Test Range from Cape Canaveral. The Western Test Range had been established in 1958 to extend from Vandenberg west all the way to the Indian Ocean.³⁹

When the Apollo program began, lunar trajectories became part of the equation for the first time. NASA would deploy five tracking ships in support of the program. The *USNS Vanguard*, *Redstone*, and *Mercury* were the world’s largest such ships and were used for “injection support.” They could gather data and issue signals in the initial phases of a flight, but there was a hole in their re-entry support. To fill it, SAMTEC donated two of its tracking ships, the *Huntsville* and the *U.S.S. Watertown*.³⁷

The reader will notice that I have used the *U.S.S.* designation in this article, although at times Navy ships were designated *USNS*. For the *Huntsville* and its companion ships, it is unclear exactly when the designation might have changed or why.

The *Huntsville*, along with the *Watertown*, were brought into Avondale Shipyards in Westwego, Louisiana, for a conversion that was completed in October 1966.³⁷ Conversion consisted of new electronics for tracking, telemetry, ship-to-spacecraft communications, data processing, and station-to-station communications. Contract for the conversion was issued to Ling-Temco-Vought’s Range Systems Division; the Avondale yards were used under subcontract.⁴⁰ In June 1967, the *Huntsville* underwent a

further modification at Jacksonville, Florida, for installation of a C-Band radar system specially designed for Apollo re-entry tracking.

Now an improved sea-based tracking station, the ship returned to the Pacific. She would support Apollo missions 7 through 12.³⁹ Here is a brief synopsis of those missions:

7. Schirra, Cunningham, Eisele: first 3-man crew as well as first manned use of Saturn IB. They completed 163 orbits over 10 days.

8. Borman, Lovell, Anders: first use of the Saturn V. On this mission, the crew orbited the moon.

9. McDivitt, Scott, Schweickart: first flight with the lunar landing equipment. Schweickart made a 37-minute space walk.

10. Stafford, Young, Cernan: This crew circled the moon and made a simulated lunar landing.

11. Armstrong, Aldrin, Collins: History was made with the first moon landing on July 20, 1969



12. Conrad, Gordon, Bean: This crew made the second moon landing in November 1969.

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Apollo 12 Insignia

At this point, the *Huntsville* was over 455 feet long, had a full-load displacement of 12,199 tons, and carried 14 officers, 56 crewmen, and about 70 technicians.⁴¹ The officers and crew were Civil Service employees. The technical crew worked for the Federal Electric Corporation, SAMTEC's range services contractor.³⁹ Below is a souvenir cover postmarked Honolulu, July 20, 1969, and sent from the *Huntsville* by D.E. Rattenne. Donald Rattenne was chief engineer on the *Huntsville* for the Apollo 10, 11, and 12 missions.⁴² It is the only name of an individual I have found connected to the *Huntsville*.



Souvenir cover from *Huntsville* Chief Engineer Rattenne postmarked on the day of the Apollo 11 moon landing, July 20, 1969

Use of the tracking ships peaked with the Apollo program. The availability of improved ground station technologies doomed the expensive ships. Just weeks after Apollo 11's historic mission, NASA released four

of its ships, including the *Huntsville*, keeping only the *Vanguard* for the remaining six Apollo flights.³⁷ The *Huntsville* was returned to SAMTEC where it operated until its last voyage (according to the Air Force Systems Command *News Review*) on January 15, 1973 to the Naval Supply Center in Oakland for in-the-water storage.³⁹

However, that wasn't really the *Huntsville's* last voyage. In March 2006, the National Security Archive at George Washington University posted 30 documents regarding U.S. collection and analysis of intelligence concerning French nuclear weapons tests. The documents had been declassified from Secret and made available under the Freedom of Information Act. Up until 1974 when testing resumed, France had already detonated 34 nuclear bombs in the Pacific. Because of the U.S.-Soviet moratorium on atmospheric testing, the French tests were carefully watched and monitored by the U.S., mostly by Strategic Air Force aircraft. As part of this surveillance, the Defense Nuclear Agency had a project in 1973 called HULA HOOP and another in 1974 called DICE GAME. Document #29 mentions that "a U.S. Navy ship, the *Huntsville*, participated in the HULA HOOP and DICE GAME programs. Operating in international waters outside the Pacific test area, the *Huntsville* monitored the nuclear blasts, and the Defense Nuclear Agency launched drones equipped for nuclear sampling from its deck." ⁴³



The latest *U.S.S. Huntsville*,
outfitted for communications duty.
Photo courtesy NAVSOURCE

On November 8, 1974, the *Huntsville* was stricken from Navy records.⁴⁴ Most of the tracking ships were cut up for scrap. However, the Department of Defense, Naval Vehicle Register, carries a note for the *Huntsville* - "Laid up in the National Defense Reserve Fleet; Final disposition, sold by MARAD, 17 July 1995, fate unknown." MARAD is the Maritime Administration, part of the Department of Transportation, and custodian of the Naval Defense Reserve Fleet. Surely there is a record telling to whom the *Huntsville* was sold, but I have queried both DOT and MARAD and received no reply. The *Mercury*, the ship that sent the signal for the Apollo 11 translunar injection burn, as of 2002, was being used to haul sugar from Hawaii to San Francisco.³⁷ Perhaps the *Huntsville* is also still afloat.

Special thanks to John Hargenrader, Jane Odom, and Colin Fries of the NASA History Office in Washington who graciously identified and helped me research four large paper files about the Huntsville and the other vessels that supported the Apollo missions.

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⁹ Ross III, Donald Gunn, *The Era of the Clipper Ships* at www.eraoftheclipperships.com.

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¹⁶ Melton, Maurice, *The Confederate Ironclads* (Cranberry, NJ: Thomas Yoseloff, Publisher, 1967).

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¹⁸ Still

¹⁹ Civil War Naval Chronology.

²⁰ Still

²¹ Melton

²² Luraghi

²³ Melton

²⁴ Crew members of the *C.S.S. Huntsville* are listed at a Confederate States Navy website: www.datasync.com/~jtaylor/alanavy.htm.

²⁵ Still

²⁶ *David Glasgow Farragut* biography, Visitor Services, Vicksburg National Military Park.

²⁷ *Battle of Mobile Bay*: <http://en.wikipedia.org>.

²⁸ Melton

²⁹ Still

³⁰ Still

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³¹ Melton

³² Way, Frederick, Jr., *Way's Packet Directory, 1848-1983* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University, 1983). Book also carries the note that the material is copyrighted by Sons and Daughters of Pioneer Rivermen.

³³ "Riverboat Dave's Paddlewheeler Site," www.riverboatdaves.com.

³⁴ www.usmm.org/victoryships.html.

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