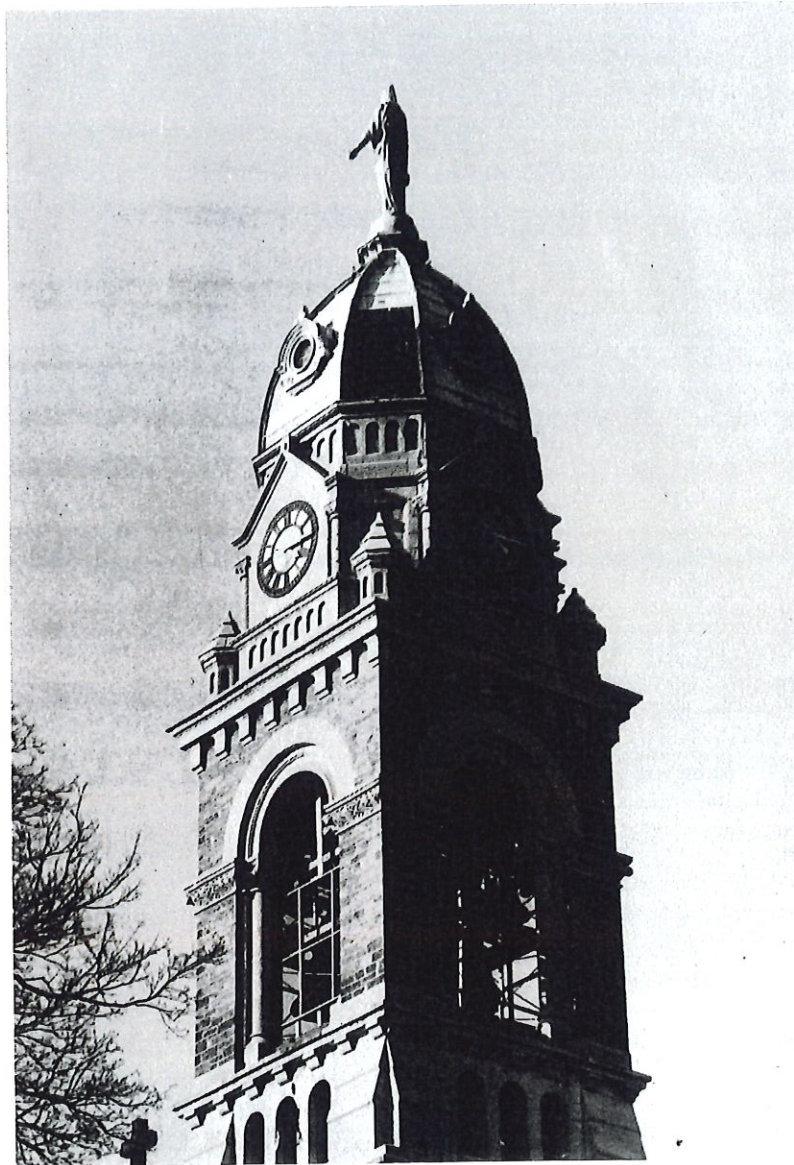


GERMANTOWN *CRIER*



*Bell Tower of the Shrine of the Miraculous Medal,
Chelton & Musgrave Streets, Germantown; formerly
St. Mary's Shrine, Vincentian Fathers*

THE UNSINKABLE SLOOP *GERMANTOWN*

Readers with long memories may recall our Tercenary page on the sloop *Germantown*: "Weatherly and Wet": The U.S.S. *Germantown*, 1846-1861 (*Crier* 35:93, Fall, 1983). For that piece we reviewed, we thought, all accounts of her construction, launching, service at sea, and her "scuttling and burning, April 20, 1861" by the Union forces at Norfolk harbor, in order to prevent her falling into Confederate hands. Certainly all accounts by *Germantown* writers, that is.

Now we discover, after a serendipitous glance at the general index to the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*, published by the Government Printing Office in Washington, beginning in 1894, that 1861 was by no means the end of the *German-town*.

"One newspaper report," we said in 1983, "has it that she was burnt; another says she was 'broken and sunk'; a third, apparently the final eyewitness account, says that 'heavy shears or derricks fell across her deck causing her to careen over.'" According to "Statistical Data of U.S. Ships" (*Official Records*, Series 2, v.1, p. 94), on "April 21, 1861" she was "burned by U.S. naval forces on the evacuation of Norfolk Navy Yard; raised [by whom?] April 22, 1863 [sic]." 1863? Misprint, surely, we thought.

Because on June 10, 1861, the Confederate Office of Naval Detail and Equipment reported: "Arrangements are now being made for raising the sloops of war *Germantown* and *Plymouth*." On August 23, 1861, she was "being fitted up as a floating battery," wrote C.S.N. Flag Officer Barron, commanding naval defenses of Virginia and the Carolinas, to Lieutenant Jones, C.S.N., commanding Jamestown Battery. "I confess, the more I reason upon the propriety and expediency of getting this ship thus prepared afloat, the more my anxiety is increased and my confidence in the project confirmed. She is to have her bulwarks cut down to her spirketing all around, from her spar deck down to her berth deck, which is some 18 inches below the water line. She will have a bulkhead running around the ship about 7 feet from the sides of the ship, which locker will be filled with sand, thus placing 14 feet of sand in addition to the sides of the vessel herself between the enemy and the steamer which will have us in tow. This arrangement, I think, will render our motive power secure against the shot from an adversary. No masts, no machinery, or anything else in the vessel, but provisions and other necessaries for, say, one month. Her battery will consist of 1 rifle gun, pivot, forward; 1 VIII-inch solid-shot

gun aft; 1 XI-inch gun amidship, and 4 IX-inch guns for either side, giving us 4 broadside guns. With this ship well manned and officered, assisted by the *Patrick Henry* and perhaps the four gunboats, carrying each 1 32-pounder, could we not render very important aid to General Magruder when he attacks Newport News?... I really do not think we would be thought overrash to attempt to worry the *Wabash*, if she dared to come out from under Fortress Monroe. Why not? ... Think of all this. The Navy must do something."

Further correspondence suggests that parts for these guns were slow coming; and on December 12, 1861, the Confederate Commandant of Gosport [Norfolk] shipyard was assuring the anxious mayor and citizens of Norfolk that the *Germantown* would be anchored across the channel "to stop the ingress of the enemy's vessels." (From its glory days as flagship of the African Squadron, now was the *Germantown* reduced to a mere obstacle.)

By February 21, 1862, the captain of the U.S.S. *Roanoke*, in Hampton Roads, was reporting to the Secretary of the Navy in Washington that the sloop of war *Germantown* anchored off Craney Island, carried 6 or 8 guns. On March 8, 1862, C.S.N. Flag Officer Forrest, Gosport Dockyard, was urging that the *Germantown*, "mounting five long 32-pounders," could, if towed to position, since she had no means of locomotion, "add very much to the little squadron about to engage the enemy." March 9th was the date of the epoch-making engagement nearby of the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac* (another and more celebrated U.S. ship raised and refitted by the Confederates). Was the *Germantown* in position to observe this historic engagement? Possibly so. The sketch reproduced herewith (from a photograph by the U.S. Naval Photographic Center), which appeared in *Harper's Weekly* in 1862, presumably before the *Merrimac-Monitor* confrontation, shows the *Merrimac* and the *Germantown* as near neighbors.

On March 15, Flag Officer Forrest, worried that the *Germantown* might be "captured any dark night by a squadron of boats ... with muffled oars," directed that she be towed back up to the yard, to be converted into an ironclad. Then, on March 24, the Secretary of the Confederate States Navy directed that the *Germantown* and another ship be placed in such position so that one or both might be sunk at short notice to obstruct the approach of the enemy's ships to Norfolk. On April 30th, the Secretary reiterated his instructions with greater urgency, declaring that the *Germantown* "must be held in readiness to close the pass upon an hour's notice."

Our index gives us only one later mention of C.S.S. *Germantown*. In "Statistical Data of Confederate Ships" (*Official Records*, ser. 2, v.1:254), appears the statement: "Disposition. - Burned at the evacuation of Norfolk." The Confederates evacuated Norfolk in May, 1862.

Was she finally destroyed this time? Or was April 23, 1863, the date given by the U.S. Navy for the raising of U.S.S. *Germantown*, the date which we had thought a misprint for 1861, actually the date of a second raising, this time by the Union Navy? If so, can there have been much left of her to raise?

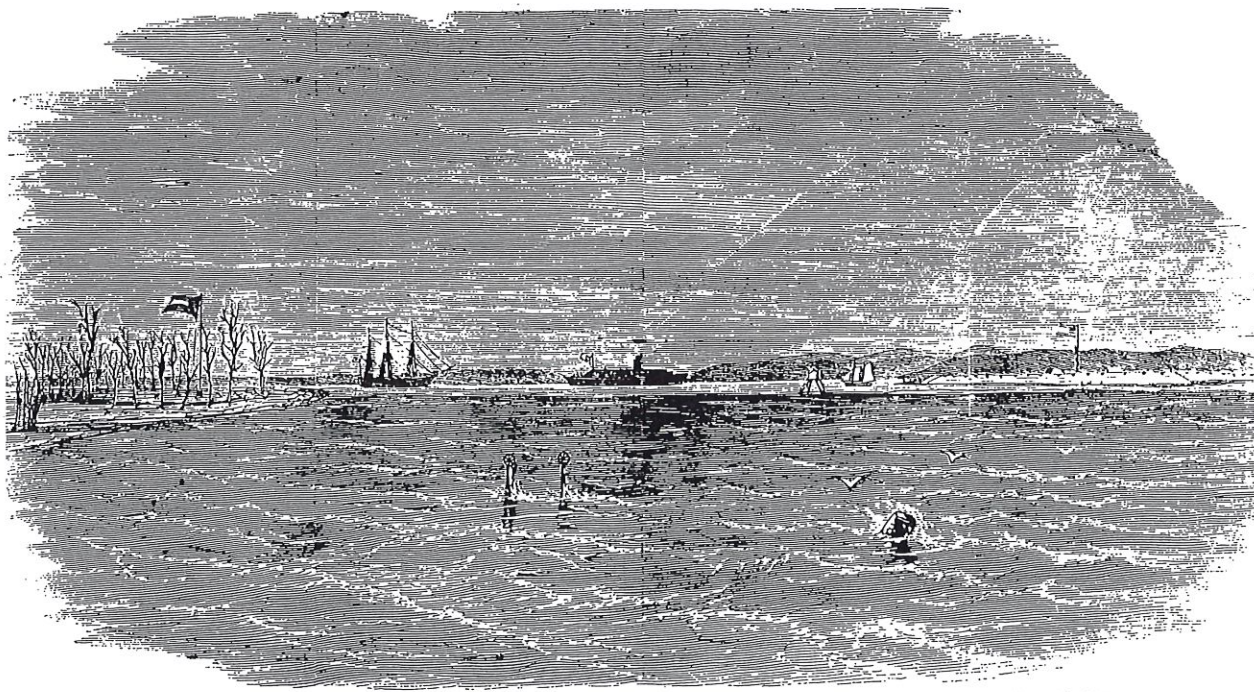
A comparatively recent work, *Civil War Naval Chronology, 1861-1865* (compiled by Naval History Division, Navy Department; Washington, 1971; p. VI-241)* says: "CSS *Germantown*, formerly the United States 22-gun sloop-of-war of that name, was built at Philadelphia Navy Yard in 1846. In 1861 she lay at Gosport (Norfolk) Navy Yard, ready for sea but had to be scuttled and burned by the Federal Navy, evacuating Gosport, 20-21 April. The Confederates raised her in June of that year but she lay at anchor off Craney Island until May 1862 when she was filled with sand and sunk in the Elizabeth River for the protection of Norfolk. She was raised again by Federal forces in April 1863."

Certainly the afterlife of the *Germantown* was unknown to local historian Ethan Allen Weaver, who initiated and led the

Germantown Site and Relic Society's drive to obtain her ship's bell, found in 1904 among debris "in a little-used building" at Norfolk Navy Yard. This campaign, supported by ex-Governor Samuel Pennypacker and Senator Boies Penrose, culminated in an Act of Congress, in 1906, which ultimately brought the bell to this Society. (We remember Mayor Green ringing it at the Tercentenary celebration in 1983.) The relevant volumes of the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies*, containing the Gosport-Richmond correspondence cited above, were not published until 1921, so it seems likely that Weaver and Pennypacker were entirely unaware of the *Germantown*'s Confederate existence.

We promise to report in these pages any further sightings of the *Germantown*. We note in passing the existence of the U.S.S. *Wissahickon*, another Civil War era ship. But at present we must decline to pursue the adventures of the *Wissahickon*.

*We are obliged to our member Harold E. Spaulding for calling to our attention this work, as well as an article by Ivan Musicant, "The Fires of Norfolk," in the March, 1990 issue of *American Heritage* (pp. 56-65). Musicant quotes the U.S. commander's report of the first burning: "The mast and spars of the *Germantown* were on fire, and portions of her hull enveloped in the flames from the *Merrimack*."



New Battery at Sewall's Point. Elizabeth River. Sloop of War "Germantown." Sunken Light-ship. Iron-clad Frigate "Merrimack." Light Beacon. Buoy. Craney Island Battery.
 THE IRON-CLAD FRIGATE "MERRIMACK," AND SLOOP OF WAR "GERMANTOWN," OFF CRANEY ISLAND.—[FROM A SKETCH BY OUR SPECIAL ARTIST.]