

Two Georgia Coast Pilots and the Capture of the USS *Water Witch*

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Pendant la guerre civile américaine, les opérations navales au milieu des bancs de sable mouvants le long des côtes des états confédérés ont exigé une familiarité quasi quotidienne avec un environnement toujours changeant. Sans ces connaissances, le maître de bord pouvait facilement s'échouer, risquant le bateau, la cargaison, et la vie aux caprices de la marée et du courant. Les navires des marines, autant de l'Union que de la Confédération, ont eu besoin de pilotes, blanc ou noir, libre ou esclave, pour assurer le succès de leurs opérations. Cet article révèle beaucoup sur le sujet de la culture maritime méridionale et comment elle a influencé les fortunes des marines nordiste et sudiste sur les côtes de la Géorgie. En particulier, il documente le rôle central des pilotes dans la capture par les confédérés du bâtiment de guerre nordiste Water Witch.

The Europeans who came to the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of what would soon be the American South found the coastal waters treacherous sailing. Shoals and sand bars waited to strand, and often destroy, vessels bringing explorers, colonists, supplies, and trade goods. In 1664 an Englishman wrote of Carolina's Cape Fear River: "The river is barred at the entrance, but there is a channel close aboard the cape that will convey in safety a ship of three hundred tons... The bar is a great security to the colony against a foreign invasion, the channel being hard to find by those that have not experience of it, and yet safe enough by those who know it."¹

Those who knew the way over the bars and shoals of the South's harbors, sounds, and rivers became invaluable to the growing economic life of the colonies. As international trade developed, colonial and municipal governments began to regulate the profession. The regulatory agencies rated pilots, linking their right to pilot vessels of larger draft to their abilities and experience. The most knowledgeable earned their

¹ "A Brief Description of the Providence of Carolina on the Coasts of Floreda, and more particularly of a New Plantation begun by the English at Cape Feare on the river now by them called Charles-River, the 29th of May, 1664," quoted in Jim McNeil, *Masters of the Shoals: Tales of the Cape Fear Pilots Who Ran the Union Blockade* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Books, 2000), p. 2.

“branch,” and usually developed small companies of associate and apprentice pilots.²

From the beginning, the maritime pilot’s profession in the South was an integrated business. Some of the earliest of those who knew the way were Native Americans.³ And as Europeans began to learn the sounds and rivers and bars, so too did newly arrived Africans. Thus, men red, white and black — slave and free — worked the pilot’s trade on the South’s coasts from the age of colonization to the end of the Civil War.

In the antebellum era, when New York Port had captured the bulk of the east coast’s international trade,⁴ those who knew the sounds and inlets and connecting creeks (much of today’s southern Intercoastal Waterway) proved just as essential in the “coasting” trade that continued between Southern ports, and up and down its major rivers.

As steam replaced sail, steamboat lines that connected ports like Wilmington, Charleston, and Savannah, and river centers like Augusta, Georgia, Palatka, Florida, and Beaufort, South Carolina, employed pilots full time to guide their vessels on regularly scheduled runs. Though rarely noticed by people outside the shipping trade, pilots were well-paid professionals who held positions of high responsibility and wielded great authority. When a pilot was working, he was in charge. The ship didn’t move until he said so.⁵ It went where he said, when he said. In the maritime business world a pilot’s

² Examples of these companies may be found in David Holt, “Bar Pilots of Mobile Bay” (typescript of an article from Mobile Post, May 15, 1938) in “Pilots” folder, Mobile Public Library, Local and Genealogical Annex; City of St. Augustine Papers, 1821–1993, Licenses: Pilot Box 3, folder 28, Manuscript Collection 17) in Florida Historical Society, St. Augustine, Fla.; Commissioners of Pilotage, Port of Savannah Papers (Collection No. 963), Georgia Historical Society.

³ P.C. Coker III, *Charleston Maritime Heritage, 1670-1865* (Charleston, SC: CokerCraft Press, 1987), p. 35.

⁴ See Robert G. Albion, *The Rise of New York Port: 1815-1860* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1939).

⁵ When the U.S. frigate *Constellation* changed moorings in Hampton Roads, Master Richard L. Law noted: “Ship in charge of pilot.” See entry for 4 August 1853 in Journal of Philip Porcher, 28 July 1853-20 May 1857 in Papers of the Peronneau and Porcher Families, 1786-1818, 1855-1857, in South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina. For wartime instances of pilots exercising control over vessels’ movements at vital times, see report and court martial testimony of Commodore Josiah Tattnall on the destruction of the ironclad *Virginia* in U.S. Navy Department, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1931, hereinafter cited as *ORN*), Series I, Vol. 7, pp. 335-38, and Robert W. Daly, *How the Merrimac Won* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1957), pp. 175-81. Tattnall’s official report to Mallory, with his criticism of the pilots, was published in the Daily Richmond Examiner, eliciting a long rebuttal from pilots William Parrish, George Wright, William T. Clark and H. Williams. See Tattnall to Mallory in *ORN*, I, 7, p. 335, and *Richmond Examiner*, 24 May 1862. For other instances of pilots’ control of vessels’ movements at critical times, see correspondence between Commodore William W. Hunter, Lt. G.W. Gwathmey, and Assistant

position was one of prestige, authority, responsibility, and respect. Mark Twain said pilots were kings of all they surveyed. He thought the profession “the grandest in the world.”⁶

Prior to the Civil War the U.S. Navy used pilots just like the international trade vessels did — to get out of the harbor. Once that was accomplished, the pilot took his boat back to shore and the frigate or sloop of war set sail upon the rolling deep until she reached her next port of call, then signaled for a pilot to come off and guide her into that port.

But the naval war in 1861 to 1865 was conducted largely along the treacherous Southern coast, with all its inlets and river mouths and connecting sounds. These were dangerous waters for naval vessels, and for the naval officers who commanded them.

Edward Clifford Anderson, mayor of Savannah in the 1850s and wartime commander of the Confederate batteries defending the city, had been a midshipman in the U.S. Navy in his youth. He said: “My naval education had taught me that of all things most dreaded by the commanders of men of war that of being in shoal water near a coast was the greatest bug bear...” The late Prof. Tom Henderson Wells, a twentieth century U.S. Naval Academy graduate and career officer, concurred. “Nothing,” he said, “is calculated to make a combat commander more cautious than being in shoal water in the presence of an enemy.”⁷

So, as the blockade, invasion, and defense of the Confederate coast all began, both navies quickly took to doing what the prewar steamer lines had done: they hired pilots full time.

Both navies entrusted their vessels to pilots both white and black. In most Confederate ports, both races were well represented in the navy’s corps of pilots. In Savannah, two of the black pilots were slaves from St. Mary’s, Georgia, on the Florida-Georgia state line. One, Isaac Tattnell, worked for Claghorn & Cunningham, a Savannah

Adjutant-General T.B. Roy concerning pilot W.W. Austin and the placement and use of the ironclad battery *Georgia*; and pilots Austin, James Ferguson, and T.N. Philpot and the movements of the ironclad *Savannah* and gunboat *Macon*, all during Gen. William T. Sherman’s investment of Savannah, in *ORN*, I, 16, pp. 467-68, 469, 473-5. For a modern take on the subject—“Any order[s] he gives are construed as orders coming from the master of the vessel...” see Ralph Price, “Savannah Pilots: Part of River History,” in *Savannah: Port City Magazine* vol. 10, no. 1 (July/August, 1978), p. 32.

⁶ Twain was writing about Mississippi River pilots, of course. Their job was more demanding, and their knowledge far more extensive, than that of coastal pilots. Their pay reflected those facts. They could make more than twice the salary of top coasting pilots. Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (New York: Signet Classic edition, 1961), pp. 40, 376

⁷ William Stanley Hoole, *Confederate Foreign Agent: The European Diary of Major Edward C. Anderson* (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Co., 1976), p. 95. Losing a ship was the ultimate disaster for a naval officer, a disgrace that would damage, stunt, or end a career. Thus, grounding within reach of the enemy was a great fear. See Tom Henderson Wells, *The Confederate Navy: A Study in Organization* (University: The University of Alabama Press, 1971), pp. 63-4.

ship chandler and wholesale grocery firm that ran a steamboat service from Savannah to Jacksonville and on to Palatka, Florida, serving all the islands and coastal communities in between. Hired out by his master for \$35 per month, Tattnell piloted the steamer *St. Marys*.⁸ His fellow townsman Moses Dallas made the same run, as did white pilots like Rufus B. K. Murphy (known as R.B.K.), who lived in the Wassaw community, just down the Wilmington River from Savannah.

When the war began and civilian river traffic declined, Tattnell and Dallas were two of many area pilots who hired on to the Confederate Navy. But after the battle of Port Royal Sound in November of 1861, Isaac Tattnell escaped to the Union blockading squadron. A “contraband,” he was allowed to enlist in the U.S. Navy as an Ordinary Seaman, and was soon showing the Yankees a way into the back door of Savannah through Wassaw Sound and Wilmington River.

His compatriot, Moses Dallas, stayed with the Confederacy. For a slave, Moses Dallas had it made. His owner, a widow named Harriet Ann Elbert, lived in St. Mary’s. Her sister, also a widow, owned Dallas’ wife and their six children. Since Moses Dallas’ employers were in Savannah, the sisters let the family move there.⁹ The Dallases rented a house and five acres out Bryan Street, east of town, behind Fort Jackson in a community of nominal slaves¹⁰ and free persons of color.

Whenever Dallas took a job with a new steamboat line, Mrs Elbert’s attorney negotiated the initial contract. But it stipulated that henceforth, Moses Dallas would act as his own negotiator for any contractual changes, including pay. And his salary would be paid directly to him, even though it was normal for a hired-out slave’s wages to be paid to the owner (who often allowed the slave a small allotment for living expenses). Dallas’ wages thus netted his owner, Mrs Elbert, nothing.¹¹

⁸ Clarence L. Mohr, *On the Threshold of Freedom: Masters and Slaves in Civil War Georgia* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1986), p. 84; *ORN*, I, 12, pp. 460, 469, 487-88; I, 14, pp. 212, 251, and I, 15, p. 180. See also John Rodgers to Capt. Charles H. Davis, in Robert Means Thompson and Richard Wainwright, eds., *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, 1861-1865*, vol. 1 (New York: 1918), pp. 94-96; Admiral Samuel F. Du Pont to wife in John D. Hayes, ed. *Samuel Francis Du Pont: A Selection from his Civil War Letters* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1969), 1, p. 306.

⁹ The Dallas family background is told in the testimony of Harriet Dallas, Maria Dallas, Paul Jackson, Alice Marshall, and Mana Dollar in National Archives and Records Administration (hereinafter NARA), Record Group (RG) 217, Southern Claims Commission Settled Claims, 1877-1883, Chatham Co., Ga. (Microfiche pub. M1658), case no. 15213.

¹⁰ “nominal” or “quasi” denotes slaves who, like Moses and Harriet Dallas, lived and worked like free people.

¹¹ This arrangement was not unique to Moses Dallas. Bernard E. Powers, Jr., in *Black Charlestonians: A Social History, 1822-1885* Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1994), records a number of instances of hired slaves keeping all their wages. In Savannah, another slave pilot who kept his wages was William Jones. See Lt. Cmdg. Joel S. Kennard, C.S.N. and Assistant Paymaster Dewitt C. Seymour correspondence, 27, 30 May 1864, in C.S. Navy Collection in Hargett Rare Book Room, University of Georgia Library. Dallas’ civilian employment pattern, and its continuance with his employment by the Confederate

Dallas was good with money: “My husband was a hard working man,” Harriet Dallas said. He “did not spend any money foolishly.”¹² When Dallas hired on to the Confederate Navy, it was for first-class pilot’s wages, \$60 per month. By late 1862 he was making \$80 per month.¹³ The Confederate Navy appreciated his expertise. He was chief pilot on the Savannah Squadron’s flag vessel, a prewar steamer converted to a gunboat named the CSS *Savannah*. When he demanded a pay increase to \$100 per month, the squadron’s flag officer wrote Secretary of the Navy Stephen Russell Mallory that Dallas was “the finest inland pilot on the coast” and strongly recommended the raise. Secretary Mallory personally endorsed the slave’s pay raise, which brought him well into the realm of officers’ pay.¹⁴

When the Confederacy instituted conscription in 1862, a white, draft-eligible Savannah pilot, R.B.K. Murphy, evaded the draft by rowing out to one of the Union blockaders and offering his services as pilot to the U.S. Navy. Murphy quickly proved his worth, serving where his expertise was most needed and gaining the trust of U.S. naval officers.¹⁵

In January of 1864, R.B.K. Murphy was assigned to the new monitor *Montauk*. Admiral Samuel F. Du Pont was being pushed by the navy department to make an attack on Fort Sumter with his ironclads, a risky enterprise, and wanted to test this new monitor against Fort McAllister on the shores of Ossabaw Sound, below Savannah.

Montauk and Fort McAllister dueled several times. Each time, the monitor’s guns blew great divots from the fort’s thick sand walls, but she failed seriously to damage the fort. Her failure added to Admiral Du Pont’s pessimism about attacking Fort Sumter.

Withdrawing from her last battle with McAllister, *Montauk* struck an anchored “torpedo.” These underwater mines were death to monitors. When *Tecumseh* struck one during the battle of Mobile Bay, she went to the bottom within minutes, taking her captain and most of her crew to their deaths. Off Charleston, the monitor *Patapsco* struck a torpedo and went down just as quickly, killing sixty of her complement of 103 officers and men.¹⁶ But in Ossabaw *Montauk* seemed scarcely to notice the mine. The

Navy, is detailed in a report from the Savannah Station’s assistant paymaster, Charles W. Keim, C.S.N. to Bolling Baker, First Auditor of the Confederate Treasury Department, 1 September 1864 in NARA, RG 45, Subject File NP (Pilots), microfilm No. 21, frame # 0498.

¹² Harriet Dallas testified that “that was the way we were able to buy the property and live comfortably.” She later clarified: “The house did not belong to me — was a rented house.” See Harriet Dallas and neighbors’ testimony in Southern Claims Commission, op. cit.

¹³ The squadron’s two white senior pilots, Tom Hernandez and William W. Austin, always made top pay in the squadron, keeping ahead of Dallas by \$20 per month.

¹⁴ Dallas’ negotiating a pay raise with the Confederate Navy Department has become part of the man’s legend. See Comm. William A. Webb, C.S.N. to Secretary Stephen R. Mallory, and Mallory to Webb, in *ORN*, I, 14, p. 704, 708.

¹⁵ Elinor Barnes and James Barnes, eds., *Naval Surgeon: Blockading the South, 1862-1866. The Diary of Dr. Samuel Pellman Boyer* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 21. Rear Admiral S.F. Du Pont to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles in *ORN*, I, 14, p. 251.

¹⁶ For the loss of the *Patapsco*, see *ORN*, I, 16, pp. 171-80. Lists of the saved (43) and lost (60)

explosion appeared to have little effect, and no one was killed.

The difference for *Montauk* was the pilot, R.B.K. Murphy. When the torpedo exploded he instantly grasped what had happened and slid the monitor's punctured hull onto a mud bank, sealing the wound.¹⁷ As *Montauk* lay in the mud, her engineers were able to survey the damage and patch her leak. Then she steamed to Port Royal for proper repairs. The Union Navy owed Murphy the salvation of their newest monitor. Her crew owed him their lives.

From Port Royal a Charleston pilot took *Montauk* into the battle against Fort Sumter, where Confederate guns battered the ironclads mercilessly.¹⁸ Murphy was reassigned to a little side wheel gunboat named *Water Witch*, keeping the blockade back in now-peaceful Ossabaw Sound. *Water Witch* had been built in 1852 and served on slave patrol in the Caribbean and in charting portions of the South American coast. In these pre-war duties, she was a stepping stone for officers on their way up.¹⁹ But now, she was a dispatch and supply boat, a lowly service vessel in the South Atlantic blockade, and a stop for officers on their way down. Her captain was Lieutenant Commander Austin Pendergrast. He had been executive officer aboard the frigate *Congress* during the Battle of Hampton Roads, and he had the duty of surrendering that vessel, aground, helpless, and under attack by the Confederate ironclad *Virginia*. Her guns had no effect on the armored ram, and her wounded captain ordered the vessel surrendered to avoid sacrificing her crew. But it was Pendergrast who had to perform the surrender, and, although he acted under orders, giving up the ship derailed his career. Command of *Water Witch*, patrolling these Georgia sounds, was his punishment.²⁰

Though Pendergrast was determined to rebuild his career, the Georgia coast was hardly the place to do it. Not much happened there. Nevertheless, the captain worked to keep his vessel and crew in a state of readiness. He realized that the ship, like others isolated in these Georgia sounds, was vulnerable, and he told his officers that *Water Witch* would never be taken. He ordered all lights extinguished at night and the ship kept ready to move at a moment's notice. Each evening officers inspected the guns to insure they were loaded, cast loose, and ready for action. There were sharpened cutlasses in racks, and pistols and carbines loaded and ready. The anchor chain's pin and shackle were inspected nightly, a hammer and punch at hand to drive out the pin and slip the anchor. Banked fires kept enough steam to move her, and every half hour the engines were turned

are on pp. 179-80.

¹⁷ Reports on the *Montauk*'s battles with Fort McAllister are in *ORN*, I, 13, pp. 543-50 and 626-39. For the torpedo's damage and Pilot Murphy's skillful saving of the vessel, see report of Second Assistant Engineer Thomas Stephens in *ORN*, I, 13, pp. 700-704.

¹⁸ The Confederate and Union reports on the Fort Sumter attack are in *ORN*, I, 14, pp. 3-112.

¹⁹ *ORN*, II, 1, p. 237. Robert Erwin Johnson, *Rear Admiral John Rodgers, 1812-1882* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1967), pp. 145-47.

²⁰ For additional background on the *Water Witch*, Lt. Comm. Pendergrast, and life on the blockade in Ossabaw Sound, see Memoir of Rear Admiral Luther Guiteau Billings in Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, pp. 14-34.

over.²¹

Still, the crew was unhappy and morale was low. Their enlistments had expired and they wanted to go home, but they were trapped aboard their ship until replacements arrived. The U.S. Navy had a manpower shortage — the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron was nearly 1400 men under strength in the summer of 1864 — and there were many sailors in the squadron who had done their duty and were still serving long after their enlistments were completed.²²

Because *Water Witch* was in a low risk environment, twenty of her sailors were allowed to depart without replacement, leaving the ship shorthanded, and those left behind in a sullen mood. There were race problems, too. She had eight black men among her crew, and the whites didn't like them.²³

In Savannah the Confederates realized *Water Witch* was isolated and vulnerable, and one of the squadron's lieutenants, Thomas P. Pelot, organized an expedition to board and capture her. In fact, Pelot intended to use the captured *Water Witch* to roll up the blockade all the way down the Georgia coast. The blockading gunboats knew each other by sight: they brought each other orders, supplies, and mail. Pelot thought he could bring *Water Witch* right up to sister blockaders and capture them before they realized they were in danger.²⁴

One thing he would need was a good pilot — one who knew the sounds. He asked for Moses Dallas. Pelot took Dallas and 115 Savannah sailors south through the backwaters to the shores of Ossabaw Sound. They stalked *Water Witch* for two nights, pulling out in the rain the first night to the spot she occupied at sundown, only to find she had changed positions after dark. When she left the sound to complete small missions to the south next day Lieutenant Pelot placed several men in an abandoned Confederate earthwork to mark her position when she returned, and on the rainy afternoon of 2 June 1864, she was back in Ossabaw and in the Confederates' sights. Just before midnight Pelot picked up his scouts from the earthwork. Hidden behind an island, they huddled with Pelot and pilot Dallas and consulted a chart by a covered light. That's where she is, the scout said, pointing to a spot on the chart. Dallas told them she was anchored in Five Fathom Hole, just where he thought she'd be. A little before 1 a.m. Pelot launched his expedition. Through the dark, rain squalls blowing over them, Moses Dallas guided seven

²¹ Billings Memoir, p. 40; reports of Comm. C.C. Carpenter, Lt. Comm. Austin Pendergrast, and Acting Master C.W. Buck, all in *ORN*, I, 15, pp. 475, 477, 479.

²² See "Jottings by the Way: A Sailor's Log — 1862 to 1864. The Diary of Charles K. Mervine," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (July, 1947), pp. 138, 139, 141. Dahlgren to Welles, 1 Oct. 1863, 6 June 1864, and report of Lt. Comm. Pendergrast, *ORN*, I, 15, pp. 4, 471, 478; Billings Memoir, p. 37.

²³ Report of Assistant Surgeon W.H. Pierson, *ORN*, I, 15, p. 482.

²⁴ See correspondence between Commodore William W. Hunter and Lt. Thomas P. Pelot in *ORN*, I, 15, pp. 491-93. Additional report of Rear-Adm. John A. Dahlgren, *ORN*, I, 15, p. 472; Billings Memoir, pp. 42-43. See also Richard B. Harwell, ed. *A Confederate Marine: A Sketch of Henry Lea Graves with Excerpts from the Graves Family Correspondence, 1861-1865* (Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Company, 1963), p. 119.

small boats straight to the darkened *Water Witch*.

They pulled through intermittent mist and rain, flashes of lightening showing them the blockader dead ahead. As they approached, the gunboat's watch spotted them on the water and hailed. Dallas called back: "Contrabands!" — escaping slaves.

Again the watch hailed, and again Dallas sang out "Contrabands!" But the Confederates were close now and Lieutenant Pelot shouted: "We're Rebels, damn you!" Then he turned to his men and cried "Give way, boys!" The craft closed on *Water Witch*, and the watch fired his pistol and sprang the rattle as the first grappling hooks flew into the blockader's boarding netting. In a moment Pelot and his followers were up in the netting, hacking at it with their cutlasses, trying to cut through and get to the deck.²⁵

Aboard the gunboat, the watch's hails wakened some of the officers. Then came the pistol shot and the rattle, and the officers looked for their arms. The ship's paymaster, Luther Billings, came out of his cabin armed with two pistols. He'd taken but a few steps when Pelot dropped out of the boarding netting literally at his feet.

Pelot stumbled, regained his balance, and attacked. Billings saw Pelot's cutlass just in time to parry the blade on one of his revolvers. "I threw my left arm around his waist and, craning my head over his shoulder, I hugged him with all my might," Billings said. Unable to get a swing at the Yankee with his blade, Pelot pounded Billings in the back with the butt of his cutlass. Billings pressed a pistol against Pelot's side and fired.

The bullet pierced Pelot's heart. "I was still hugging him with all my strength," Billings said, "and I remember a feeling of amazement when, at the smothered report he slipped from my encircling arm... and stretched full length on the deck face upward."²⁶

By now there was pandemonium on deck, cutlass-wielding Confederates coming aboard on both sides. Other Union officers were out on deck, shooting down into the boats still coming alongside.

Pilot Murphy fought through the growing melee toward the anchor chain, trying

²⁵ Information on the Confederates' movements, and on the attack, are from Lt. Joseph Price's report to Capt. W.W. Hunter in *ORN*, I, 15, pp. 501-02; John R. Blocker, "Capture of Blockader, *Water Witch*," *Confederate Veteran* vol. XVII, No. 12 (Dec., 1909), p. 604; Robert Watson Diary, Cornell University Library (typescript available in Port Columbus Civil War Naval Center, Columbus, Ga.); excerpts from Hubbard T. Minor diary in the U.S. Army Heritage and Research Library, Carlisle Barracks, Pa., reprinted as Hubbard T. Minor, Jr., "Diary of a Confederate Naval Cadet (Conclusion)," *Civil War Times Illustrated*, Vol. XIII, no. 8 (Dec., 1974), pp. 24-28; Alexander A. Lawrence, *A Present for Mr. Lincoln: The Story of Savannah from Secession to Sherman* (Macon: The Ardivan Press, 1961), pp. 138-144; and William Harden, III, "The Capture of the U.S. Steamer *Water Witch* in Ossabaw Sound, Ga., June 2-3, 1864," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*. Vol. III, no. 1 (Mar., 1919), pp. 12-27. See also Lt. Thomas P. Pelot to Hunter in *ORN*, I, 15, p. 492.

²⁶ Billings Memoir, p. 43; reports of Lieutenant Commander Austin Pendergrast, Acting Master Charles Buck, and Assistant Surgeon W.H. Pierson, and extracts of proceedings of a court of inquiry, in *ORN*, I, 15, pp. 477-491.

to slip the anchor and let the ship get away from the small boats still closing on her. He made it to the shackle, where someone cut him down.²⁷

Paymaster Billings and Acting Master Charles Buck ran to one of the broadside guns to depress the cannon and sink one of the Rebels' boats. Caught up in the excitement of the battle, Moses Dallas tried to climb through the gun port, right where Billings and Buck were working at the gun. Billings recalled: "a grinning negro face appeared at the port opening. I remember how ghastly his face grew when his gaze met the leveled pistol I held only a few inches away from it. Again the deadly flash and Moses, the pilot, also passed away."²⁸

Other Rebels rushed them. Buck was struck in the head, knocked down, and forced to surrender. Billings was driven across the deck to the arms chests. He found many of the crewmen cowering there, weapons close at hand, but refusing to fight.²⁹

Within fifteen minutes, it was over. The Confederates had the ship. But both Lieutenant Pelot and Moses Dallas were dead. So the expedition down the coast to attack the blockade was aborted. Now, the goal was to save the gunboat from recapture.

R.B.K. Murphy was too badly wounded to guide the ship anywhere, so the quartermaster was pressed into service to steer her up the sound and into the Vernon River. He ran her aground. And it took the rising tide and the help of a slave pilot named Ben, borrowed from ashore, to get the prize to safety under the guns of a Confederate battery on the Vernon River.³⁰

Water Witch would stay there in the coming months, trapped by what was now a substantial blockade — the Yankees feared the Rebels would send the captured gunboat to sea as a commerce raider.

Moses Dallas was dead, and R.B.K. Murphy was a prisoner. While he recovered in the Savannah naval hospital, the Savannah Squadron commander reported him to Richmond as a draft dodger and traitor, actively working for the enemy. But Richmond took no special notice and Murphy remained a prisoner. He would be exchanged within six months, and would soon be back piloting U.S. naval vessels off the Georgia coast.³¹

Through the rest of the war, coastal pilots like Moses Dallas and R.B.K. Murphy would continue to be vital to the operations of the Union and Confederate navies on the

²⁷ Report of Assistant Surgeon Pierson, *ORN*, I, 15, p. 481.

²⁸ Billings Memoir, p. 43.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Capt. C.R. Hanleiter to Capt. W.T. Taliaferro and Lt. Joseph Price to Capt. W.W. Hunter in *ORN*, I, 15, pp. 497, 502.

³¹ Report of Assistant Surgeon Pierson, *ORN*, I, 15, 483, and R.B.K. Murphy entry in Edward W. Callahan, ed., *List of Officers of the Navy of the United States and of the Marine Corps from 1775 to 1900 Comprising a Complete Register of all Present and Former Commissioned, Warranted, and Appointed Officers of the United States Navy, and of the Marine Corps, Regular and Volunteer* (Reprint; New York: Haskell House Publishers, Ltd., 1969).

Southern coast. Blockade boards may make strategy, and captains, commodores and admirals may give orders, but ultimately Confederate and Union war vessels were under the control of those who knew the way.