

# The Galveston— Houston Packet

*Steamboats on Buffalo Bayou*

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Published by The History Press  
Charleston, SC 29403  
www.historypress.net

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*Front cover, top:* Sternwheel packet *St. Clair* at the Houston landing, circa 1867. *Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library /San Jacinto Museum of History.* *Front cover, bottom:* Detail of William Aiken Walker's 1874 depiction of Galveston harbor, showing (left background) a Buffalo Bayou packet, possibly *Diana*, and (center) a cotton barge being towed by a steam tug. *Galveston and Texas History Center, Rosenberg Library, Galveston.*

*Back cover:* Houston Direct Navigation Co. boat *Lizzie* loading cotton at Houston, circa 1872. *Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.*

First published 2012

Manufactured in the United States

ISBN 978.1.60949.591.6

Library of Congress CIP data applied for.

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*For Becki, Faith and Emily Faith*

Chapter 5

## THE TEXAS MARINE DEPARTMENT

*Our only chance is to get alongside before they hit us.*  
—Leon Smith, commander of the Confederate cottonclads at the Battle of  
Galveston

The first casualty of the Civil War on Buffalo Bayou was an unnamed Confederate soldier who had the misfortune to be a recruit in a militia company organized by members of the local *turnverein*, a health and physical fitness movement that was popular among German immigrants to the United States. The company organized by the Houston *turnverein*, the Turner Rifles, was commanded by Captain E.B.H. Schneider, a thirty-one-year-old native Rhinelander.<sup>103</sup> Schneider was one of the founders of the Houston *turnverein* and, in keeping with the spirit of that organization, he drilled them strenuously. Schneider “at once sought to apply the most rigid discipline and exhaustive methods in training his men to be soldiers,” one Houstonian would recall years later. The captain would load them down with camp equipment, packs, cartridge boxes and the like and march them far out into the countryside and back. He also liked to drill the men at quick time and double-quick, “for the amusement of people who had gathered to see them drill.”<sup>104</sup>

If Captain Schneider was proud of his soldiers, though, he was also vain and, on one day, criminally stupid. One afternoon in early 1861, seeking to push his company into ever-more spectacular feats of military drill, he marched them down San Jacinto Street, across the wharf and into the bayou.

He evidently assumed they would continue marching in formation across the bottom, and emerge on the other bank “as if nothing had happened.” It didn’t work out that way, of course; there was an eight-foot drop into the bayou from the wharf and, thanks to ongoing dredging efforts, the water there was twelve or fifteen feet deep. Remarkably, only one of the soldiers drowned, a young man who to that point had been deemed the best all-around athlete and swimmer in the company. The body was recovered and laid out in the city armory; the dead man’s rites were said to have been the first military funeral in Texas during the war.<sup>105</sup>

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Texas’ secession from the Union on February 1, 1861, was followed by a public referendum three weeks later to affirm the actions of the Secession Convention. The convention reconvened on March 2—chosen because it was the twenty-fifth anniversary of Texas’ Declaration of Independence from Mexico during the Texas Revolution—to announce the results.<sup>106</sup> Texans voted overwhelmingly for secession, by a factor of roughly three-to-one; in Harris and Galveston counties, the fire-eaters supporting secession scored even bigger victories, with 88.3 percent and 95.9 percent of the vote, respectively.

The “secession winter” of 1860–61 coincided with the cotton season. The season looked to be a strong one, though probably not a record, with Galveston receiving a total of 66,853 bales of cotton during the first five months of 1861. Most of these came by boat, and most of those from steamboats plying Buffalo Bayou, the Trinity River and the Brazos.<sup>107</sup>

On April 19, 1861, days after the Confederacy opened fire on Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, President Lincoln declared a blockade of Confederate ports. The blockade was a key element in the Union’s grand strategy, widely known as the Anaconda Plan, to surround the South and choke off its commerce and possible support from overseas. It extended from the Virginia Capes southward, around Florida and the Gulf of Mexico to the mouth of the Rio Grande. Like the South American constrictor for which it was named, the Anaconda Plan would gradually squeeze the life out of the rebellion. But it was a job far easier said than done; through a series of meetings that spring, the U.S. Navy’s Blockade Strategy Board eventually came to realize the scope of the task at hand. Even so, as late as September 1861, the board still believed that an effective blockade of the Texas coast could be carried out by a total of four Union navy vessels, three

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at Galveston and one shallow-draft gunboat to sweep all the bays and inlets between Galveston and the Rio Grande.<sup>108</sup>

The blockade at Galveston began on July 2, with the arrival of USS *South Carolina*. Her commander, Captain James Alden, sent a boat into the harbor under a flag of truce, announcing the formal imposition of the blockade.<sup>109</sup> Alden soon seized several small sailing craft that he organized into a miniature flotilla, but the main success of his blockade during this period rested on other, larger factors. In the first place, the war was still new; when Alden arrived, the Battle of First Manassas/Bull Run, with its brutal introduction to large-scale combat, was still almost three weeks off. Many still believed, in that summer of 1861, that the conflict would be over within months, and few were willing to risk valuable ships and cargoes when they believed they could afford to sit out the conflict and resume their normal trade soon enough. Before the war, the “coastwise” trade between Galveston and other U.S. ports had accounted for just over half of the city’s \$12.9 million in exports;<sup>110</sup> those ports were now either closed to Southern shipping or blockaded themselves. Foreign shippers were reluctant to trade with the South, for fear of poisoning commerce relations with their more important trading partners in the North. Above all, there was reluctance on the part of the Confederacy to let *any* of its exports go, especially “King Cotton,” on the assumption that the European powers’ demand for the staple would eventually force them to intervene in the conflict, and break the Union blockade. It was wishful thinking, but it still seemed a plausible outcome in the summer of ’61.

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Commerce quickly ground to a halt. There were few vessels attempting to run the blockade—Galveston and Texas were too far removed from the center of the conflict—so most of the Buffalo Bayou packets sat idle while cotton remaining from the 1860–61 shipping season piled up in warehouses. U.S. government subsidies for mail service, always a critical element in boat operators’ financial calculations, evaporated. Within a few months, steamboat owners tried to recoup their losses by chartering or selling their boats to the Confederate government. In September 1861, the Houston Navigation Company offered three of its boats—*Diana*, *Bayou City* and *Neptune No. 2*—for charter or sale to the Confederate government:

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*GALVESTON, September 23, 1861.*

*We (acting for the association known as the Houston Navigation Company) propose to charter to the Confederate States Government three of our steamers, viz, Diana, Bayou City, and Neptune No. 2, on the following terms:*

*(The Government assuming all risk of their loss arising from burning or capture by the enemy or by navigating in any waters more hazardous than voyages to Houston from Galveston by the usual route, rating the value to be paid for in case of loss of each boat at \$25,000.)*

*For \$7,500 per month for each boat—we furnishing them fuel and crew and provisions for crew—the charter to be for not less than one month and to continue for whole months if continued beyond one month, and in ease of contemplated dismissal we shall have ten days' notice of such intention in advance.*

*Or we will charter all or any one or two of the above-mentioned boats for \$4,000 per month (the condition about notice to apply in this ease too)—the Government paying all the expenses of crew, fuel, and provisions—we having the appointment of crews to consist of not less than a captain, a first engineer, a second engineer, a striker, a watchman, a cook, a cabin boy, four firemen, and two deck hands; or we will sell the three boats for \$70,000, or either of them for \$25,000.*

*In case of charter being accepted, the boats are not to carry guns for offensive operations.*

*B.A. SHEPHERD.*

*FW. SMITH.*

*JOHN H. STERRETT.<sup>111</sup>*

The Confederate general in charge of the District of Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, Paul Octave Hébert, must have balked at chartering the rebuilt *Bayou City* at \$7,500 per month, because a month later, Sterrett submitted another offer, this time for *Bayou City* and her barges for \$4,500 per month, with the company absorbing the cost of the crew. Hébert agreed and passed the offer along to his aide-de-camp, who added a notation that the fee would be paid “as soon as the Dept. is provided with funds.”<sup>112</sup>

With little else on offer, most of the serviceable riverboats soon found themselves in Confederate service, probably at terms the steamboatmen deemed favorable to the government. (For their part, the government agents likely thought they were getting the short end of the deal, as well.) Soon the boats were running back and forth between Galveston and points around

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Galveston Bay, on Buffalo Bayou and the Trinity River and to landings on the Brazos River by way of the Galveston and Brazos Canal. While the traffic on Buffalo Bayou probably diminished some, thanks to the rail line between Houston and Galveston completed just before the war, the boats and their crews were kept busy with a variety of mundane but necessary tasks, mostly transporting men and supplies around the bay. Sterrett, by far the most experienced and best-known master on the Galveston–Houston run, was appointed superintendent of transports, while simultaneously serving as owner's agent for the charter of *Neptune No. 2*, *Bayou City* and *Mary Hill*.<sup>113</sup> His job of managing the fleet's operations was not too different than the one he'd held with the Houston Navigation Company before the war, although now he was overseeing a much larger collection of boats.

The Texas Marine Department, an organization unique in the Confederacy, combined the roles of a conventional navy, revenue service and military logistics command. The Marine Department operated under the control of the Army, and its boats



Confederate brigadier general Paul Octave Hébert. *Library of Congress*.



were kept busy ferrying troops, munitions and supplies between the isolated garrisons around Galveston, taking turns as “guard boats” at the entrance to the bay and, on occasion, exchanging messages and paroled prisoners with the Union blockading force anchored just offshore.<sup>114</sup> The rivermen also appear to have done business with the Confederate authorities on their own accounts; in January 1862 Sterrett provided several hundred barrels of shell (probably oyster shell) to Swiss-born engineer officer Captain Julius Kellersberger for construction of the battery at Fort Point, on the eastern end of Galveston Island, and the following month Curtis Blakeman, the old pilot injured in the *Farmer* explosion some years before, delivered seventy-eight cords of wood to the military garrison at Galveston.<sup>115</sup>

Despite the efforts of the Texas Marine Department and officers like Kellersberger, General Hébert did not believe Galveston could be successfully defended. When Union forces assembled a squadron off the entrance to the harbor and demanded the city’s surrender in the fall of 1862, Hébert simply ordered his officers on the scene to stall for time, evacuate the city and spike the guns in the outlying batteries. The senior Confederate officer in Galveston, Colonel Joseph Jarvis Cook, managed to negotiate with the Federals a four-day cease-fire to evacuate non-combatants; during that interval he also managed to remove a large quantity of military stores and some of the artillery pieces that had defended the island. When U.S. Navy Commander William Renshaw’s little flotilla of converted ferryboats finally entered the harbor on October 8, they had captured the best harbor in the Confederacy west of Mobile.<sup>116</sup>

For his failure to mount any sort of real defense of the island, Hébert was promptly sacked and replaced by John Bankhead Magruder, a commander from the eastern theater. Magruder had acquired the not-entirely-complimentary nickname of “Prince John” for both his love of amateur theatricals and his elegant sartorial style. Magruder was a capable commander but had run afoul of Robert E. Lee during the Seven Days Battles, when at Malvern Hill (July 1, 1862) a convoluted mix-up of orders resulted in a series of failed assaults against an impregnable Union line. Lee subsequently reorganized his army, and Magruder, having been relieved of command, soon found himself en route to Texas to see what could be made of the mess there.

Magruder’s first order of business would be to retake Galveston. Even before he arrived at Houston, he was consulting with Confederate officers who were certain that the island could be recaptured. Chief architect of the plan was military engineer Caleb Forshey, who had taught at a military

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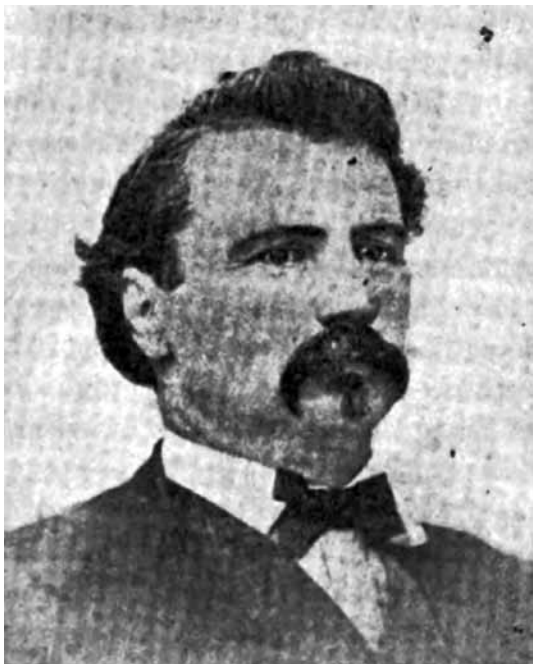
school in Galveston before the war. Forshey proposed a simultaneous attack by land forces in the town and by gunboats that would engage the Federal fleet in the harbor. Most important, Forshey cautioned Magruder, the attack would have to occur at night, to ensure complete surprise. Forshey's rough outline became the template upon which Magruder's effort to retake the island would be built.<sup>117</sup>

One historian has argued that Magruder's true genius "had always been his ability to pull together seemingly unrelated resources and triumph over a more powerful foe."<sup>118</sup> That would certainly prove to be the case in his attempt to retake Galveston. Magruder immediately set to work cobbling together a makeshift military force from disparate parts—an infantry brigade recently returned from a campaign in New Mexico, artillery pieces from *here*, state militia units from *there*—into a command that might just suffice for the job.

For the naval side of things, though, Magruder had only the Texas Marine Department and its collection of civilian steamboats. These he put under the orders of Leon Smith, a civilian mariner whom he'd known in California years before. Smith, who variously claimed the honorific of captain, major or commodore as the immediate circumstances warranted, had spent much of his life at sea, on steamers running between San Francisco and Panama and with the Morgan Line, which ran boats along the Gulf Coast and Atlantic seaboard.

Magruder selected, probably with Sterrett's guidance, two of the Houston Navigation Company's big passenger packets, *Bayou City* and *Neptune No. 2*, to be the lead boats in the naval assault. On Christmas Day 1862, citing Magruder's authority, Engineer Forshey issued instructions to the local Confederate commander, Colonel DeBray, that the latter officer should

*summon Capt. Leon Smith, and direct him to prepare the Bayou City for service immediately; to put a platform on the boat for the thirty-two pounder rifled cannon, which will be sent to Harrisburg to-morrow; to prepare the Neptune in like manner for the two twenty-four-pounder howitzers, now at Harrisburg. He will use cotton on the decks of both to give the appearance of protection, and not wait to fasten it, if it costs time. For this purpose he will use all the mechanics and other force that can be worked with advantage, taking the material and property needed by seizing it, if necessary. He will call for 150 volunteers for each boat, taking citizens and soldiers from all quarters. He will use the small arms already given him. He will be ready to move at noon day after tomorrow to take part in an attack upon the fleet, if things do not change...*<sup>119</sup>

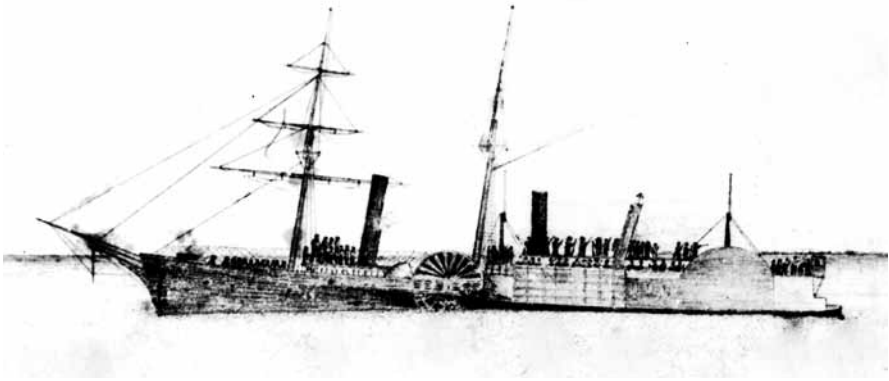


Leon Smith, commander of the "cottonclad" flotilla at the Battle of Galveston. From Lubbock's *Six Decades in Texas*.

Smith set about converting the boats as best he could, with the materials at hand. *Bayou City* was to carry a single, thirty-two-pounder rifle on her foredeck, while *Neptune No. 2* would be fitted with two twenty-four-pounder howitzers. Several hundred cotton bales were stacked, two and three deep, on each boat to a level well above the boiler deck. The cotton, placed "to give the appearance of protection," did provide some security from small arms fire, but that was about all. When a soldier asked Smith what protection the cotton was against artillery, the commodore's answer was blunt: "None whatsoever...our only chance is to get alongside before they hit us."<sup>120</sup> The bales also offered protection to the boilers and machinery on each boat's main deck. The forward end of the superstructure on each boat was closed in with planking, leaving the artillerymen on the foredeck somewhat exposed and vulnerable. From this improvised protection, Smith's boats would be informally known as "cottonclads."

On the hurricane deck of each boat, Smith arranged a pair of boarding devices, one on each side, to mimic the Roman *corvus* from classical times. Probably Smith used the boats' own landing stages, fitted with small anchors

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Detail view of an eyewitness sketch of the Battle of Galveston, showing the cotton bales stacked “to give the appearance of protection.” *Rosenberg Library, Galveston.*

or grapnels at the outer end, that could be released to crash down onto an enemy vessel’s deck and hold fast. In the heat of battle, men would use the landing stage to rush across to the enemy ship in hopes of capturing her; for now, they loomed high above the makeshift gunboats, poised menacingly against the early winter sky.

The attack was originally planned for the night of December 27, but difficulties in assembling all the forces delayed it until New Year’s Eve. Each evening, though, one or more of Leon Smith’s boats would creep down the bay, past Red Fish Bar, to probe the Federal fleet’s defenses, to see if their appearance was noticed and triggered any response. The Confederates noticed none and became increasingly confident they could pull off a surprise. The Union navy had, in fact, noticed them, and rumors about an imminent Confederate attack had been swirling since Magruder’s arrival weeks before.

On the afternoon of the thirty-first, final arrangements were made aboard *Neptune No. 2* and *Bayou City* at Harrisburg. Three hundred dismounted cavalymen, recently returned from a disastrous campaign in New Mexico, were divided up between the two boats to serve as sharpshooters and, if the opportunity arose, a boarding party. Their commander, Colonel Tom Green, had assembled them before the expedition set out and, with a bit of patriotic hyperbole, called for volunteers for “the most dangerous enterprise that men ever engaged in.” So many men stepped forward that officers had

to pick and choose among them to narrow them down to the three hundred that could be accommodated. To man the artillery pieces on each boat's foredeck, detachments were counted off from Companies B and C of the First Texas Heavy Artillery. Captain Armand Wier of Company B was in command, supported by Captain E.B.H. Schneider of Company C—the same Captain Schneider who had foolishly marched his company into Buffalo Bayou more than a year and a half before.<sup>121</sup>

The little cottonclad fleet set out from Harrisburg on the afternoon of the thirty-first, with *Neptune No. 2* leading the way, followed by *Bayou City*, the flagship of the expedition, and then *John F. Carr* and *Lucy Gwinn*, which were to be used as tenders to the two bigger boats. Sterrett was in charge of *Lucy Gwinn*. They reached Morgan's Point around sunset and waited there until about 9:00 p.m. While at Morgan's Point, a courier arrived from General Magruder, ordering Smith to bring his little fleet down into the upper part of the Galveston Bay and to wait there until he heard the rumble of Magruder's artillery opening fire on the Federals. Only then, Magruder warned, should Smith commit his flotilla to the action.<sup>122</sup>

Once he got underway, though, Smith may have pushed his instructions well beyond Magruder's intent, as one source describes the cottonclad fleet creeping to within two miles of the harbor at Galveston by one o'clock in the morning. (See Battle of Galveston map, Event 1.) There they hove to and waited. Smith had been told to expect Magruder's bombardment to start at midnight, but so far he had heard nothing. Smith signaled for *Neptune No. 2* to come alongside, and the senior officers held a brief council of war. About this same time, lookouts spotted colored signal lights flashing back and forth between the Federal vessels in the harbor, which Smith correctly took to mean that they had been spotted. Smith ordered the flotilla to fall back up the bay to Half Moon Shoals, about seven statute miles north of Galveston. Here they continued to wait until about 4:00 a.m. when, having heard neither gunfire to indicate the land attack had begun nor had any communication from Magruder, Smith ordered a further withdrawal to Red Fish Bar, where they would be out of sight of the Federals at dawn.<sup>123</sup>



What Leon Smith could not know was that, even as he reluctantly turned his boats north toward Red Fish Bar, General Magruder was pressing forward, still scrambling to get his forces into position. He had carefully assembled his force at Fort Hébert, at the mainland end of the railroad trestle connecting

## Battle of Galveston

January 1, 1863

All vessel positions and track are approximate.



Key events in the Battle of Galveston, as explained in the text. Map by the author.

to Galveston, and had arranged to have the trestle planked over with wood to enable artillery, wagons and hundreds of infantry to pass over easily. The artillery was especially important, as it formed the core of his land force. Between the guns Colonel Cook had managed to remove from Galveston during the cease-fire the previous October and other artillery he had managed to scrape together since, Magruder now had a remarkable twenty-one guns at his disposal—six pieces of siege artillery, fourteen field pieces and a gun mounted on a flat rail car, protected (like his steamers) by bales of cotton. All depended on his artillery and the cottonclads; no amount of infantry, no matter how brave, would be able to strike a blow at the Union ships in the harbor.

But Magruder and his staff had failed to anticipate the stubbornness of the mules in the Confederates' artillery train, who balked at stepping out on the planked-over rail trestle and refused to budge. After a long and futile effort to get them moving across the bridge, the exasperated soldiers removed their harnesses, picked up the traces themselves and started out. Precious time had already been lost, but it soon got worse: Magruder received a report that the Federal fleet in the harbor was signaling, and he assumed that his land force had been detected. Still more than four miles from their assigned positions, the Confederate troops now received orders to follow a circuitous route to the waterfront, in the dark, using back roads and paths few of them were familiar with. It would be three hours more before everyone was in position.

Finally, just after 4:00 a.m.—and four hours late—all was ready. Magruder positioned himself at a field piece along the waterfront at Twentieth Street, aimed at the Union gunboat *Owasco*, lying just opposite in the harbor (Event 2). Magruder jerked the gun's lanyard, setting it off with a roar. The theatrical officer then turned to the gun's crew and reportedly said, "I have done my best as a private; I will go and attend to that of a general."

Soon the firing became general, up and down the waterfront (Event 3). The only Federal troops in the city were a few companies of the Forty-second Massachusetts Infantry, who had billeted themselves on Kuhn's Wharf, near the head of Eighteenth Street. Some of the Confederates' smaller artillery pieces had been hauled onto the upper floors of buildings overlooking the harbor and were now firing both at the beleaguered Massachusetts soldiers and on Federal ships. Colonel Cook took command of the second phase of the attack. The wharf could not be taken by direct assault; the Massachusetts infantry was safe behind hastily built barricades, and near the shoreward end of the wharf, all but a single, narrow plank had been pulled up, making it necessary for anyone approaching the barricade to proceed single file. Cook's troops had prepared for this and carried ladders that, they planned, would allow them to wade out into the gradually deepening harbor and clamber up directly onto the wharf. They plunged ahead in the dark, cold water, braving sporadic (and largely inaccurate) fire from the Federals on the wharf, only to discover that the ladders were either too short or settled into the oozy bottom when the soldiers tried to scale them. Cook's men withdrew, scrambling wet and chilled back onto the shore (Event 4).

By now it was beginning to get light, and the gunners on ships in the harbor were able to accurately target the Confederate batteries on shore (Event 5). Many Union shells also went well wide of their marks, striking buildings

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and causing casualties across the city. The Confederate attack had lost its momentum, and troops began seeking refuge behind whatever structure looked solid and out of the Federals' line of fire (Event 6). With sunrise approaching, and no news whatever of his cottonclad fleet, Magruder began giving orders for his troops to fall back (Event 7). The attempt to retake Galveston from the Federal occupation appeared to be a complete failure.

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Fourteen miles north-northwest of Galveston, at Red Fish Bar, Leon Smith may have heard the report of Magruder's initial shot rumbling across the water. The sound was followed by more guns, until everyone on deck must have heard it clearly. The loud clang of engine-order bells was followed by a churning, thrashing of the water around the steamboats' paddlewheels, and they were off again for Galveston harbor. Firemen bundled resinous pine knots and other hot flammables into the fireboxes to generate more steam.

Even so, it must have taken the cottonclads well over an hour to reach the western end of the harbor. The sky was becoming brighter in the east. As soon as they could clearly make out the nearest Federal warship, which proved to be USS *Harriet Lane*, the Confederate gunners on *Bayou City* opened fire (See Buffalo Bayou and Galveston Bay Map, Event 4). Captain Armand Wier, the artillery officer from the First Texas Heavy Artillery, had already fired off three rounds with the big thirty-two-pound rifle when a bystander, caught up in the adventure of the moment, suggested Wier give the Federals a New Year's present on his behalf. Wier nodded and replied, "Here goes your New Years present!" and yanked the lanyard. The breech of the gun burst, killing Wier instantly and wounding several men of the gun's crew standing nearby. Wier's fellow company commander in the First Texas Heavy Artillery, Captain Schneider, lost an eye to the flying metal. After a period of recovery, Schneider would return to Confederate service as a recruiting officer and live until January 1, 1903—forty years to the day—as a minor hero of the Battle of Galveston, his disastrous attempt at close-order drill on the banks of Buffalo Bayou forgotten by almost all.<sup>124</sup>

*Bayou City* continued on. The tide was running out, moving along with the boat and making it hard to steer. In her first attempt to strike and board the former revenue cutter, barely under control as she was pulled along by the tide, the cottonclad ran under *Harriet Lane*'s bow, damaging the cottonclad's pilothouse. On *Bayou City*'s upper deck, the soldiers cut the lines on the



portside gangway, hoping to latch on to the Union gunboat, but the distance between the vessels was too great, and the boarding stage crashed into the water. The heavy gangway dragged astern, sweeping its guy lines along and further wrecking the boat's pilothouse. *Bayou City* steamed on past the Union gunboat, as the men aboard scrambled to clear away the wreckage and get the boat back under control.<sup>125</sup>

Now *Neptune No. 2*, close behind *Bayou City*, steered for *Harriet Lane*. As the two twenty-four-pounder howitzers on her foredeck opened fire on the Union gunboat, the steamboat's master, William H. Sangster, tried to bring *Neptune No. 2* close up on the Union gunboat's starboard side. *Harriet Lane* had gotten underway, though, and this cottonclad was finding it as hard to steer as her consort had. *Neptune No. 2* slammed hard into *Harriet Lane*'s starboard side, crunching and splitting the cottonclad's bow timbers as she did. *Harriet Lane* continued slowly forward, and Sangster brought *Neptune No. 2* around under the Union gunboat's stern, with Confederate sharpshooters sweeping *Lane*'s deck with rifle fire. Reports reached the pilothouse that the cottonclad was flooding, and Sangster wisely abandoned the attack on the Federal vessel and steered his boat for shallow water. *Neptune No. 2* settled in six or eight feet of water near the St. Cyr Wharf, while sharpshooters on her upper deck continued plinking away at any Union officer or sailor who exposed himself above *Harriet Lane*'s bulwark (Event 8).

*Bayou City*, meanwhile, headed first toward the wharves and then swung around to the left, coming back again on *Harriet Lane*'s port quarter. At this moment, the Federal gunboat had begun to back her engines, the paddlewheels running astern. The cottonclad struck the Union gunboat squarely this time, just aft of the latter's port paddlewheel. The impact heeled *Lane* over to starboard, and as she rolled back level, the iron frame of her turning paddlewheel punched through the Confederate vessel's deck. About this same time, either the shock of the collision or a lucky shot carried away one of *Lane*'s catheads, the heavy timber used to suspend a ship's anchor out over the water, away from the hull. The anchor splashed into the harbor, killing the Federal warship's way and effectively immobilizing her. The Union vessel was now locked in combat with the Confederate gunboat (Event 9).<sup>126</sup>

Though Colonel Green's men had little experience in maritime combat, storming an enemy position was something they understood very well, and they swarmed across from the cottonclad to the Federal warship. There was a short, sharp fight on deck, and it was quickly over. *Harriet Lane*'s commander, Jonathan M. Wainwright, had been killed by an earlier shot

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Eyewitness sketch of the aftermath of the Battle of Galveston, showing *Harriet Lane* and *Bayou City* locked together at center left and the sunken *Neptune No. 2* at extreme left. *Rosenberg Library, Galveston.*

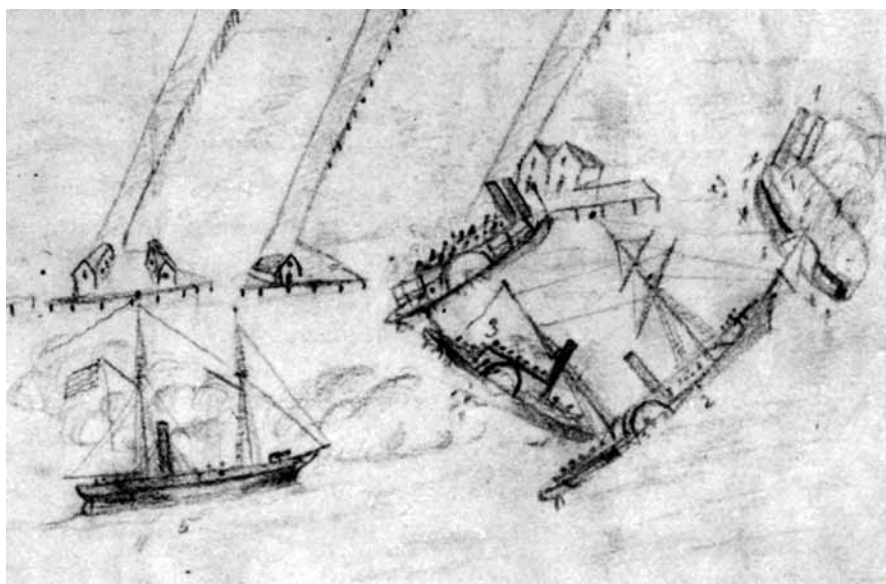
and his executive officer, Edward Lea, mortally wounded. The Stars and Stripes were quickly hauled down. Green's horsemen, many of whom had probably never been aboard a ship twenty-four hours previously, had taken one of the most veteran ships of the Union navy. Green's dismounted cavalry would afterward be known as the Confederacy's "horse marines" for their action this day.

With *Harriet Lane* now in Confederate hands, and the soldiers of the Forty-second Massachusetts hopelessly pinned down on Kuhn's Wharf, the action was all but over. The steamer *Owasco* closed to within 300 yards of the locked, immobile pair of *Harriet Lane* and *Bayou City*, then went about when the Confederates on board the latter ship prominently displayed their Federal prisoners on deck, effectively using them as human shields.

Two miles away, the senior Union naval commander, William Renshaw, had been kept completely out of the action by a stroke of misfortune (Event 10). His ship, the converted New York ferryboat *Westfield*, had gotten underway in the early morning darkness in an effort to close with and identify the steamers that had been reported north of Galveston. Unfortunately, he had no local pilot on board to guide him past the shoals, and his ship grounded hard on Pelican Spit. Running aground would have been a problem regardless, but now the timing was disastrous—it was near high tide, and the falling tide would assure that *Westfield* remained stranded until the next high tide, hours away. And there *Westfield* remained, distant and impotent, through the Confederate attack on Kuhn's Wharf, the bombardment of the waterfront by the other Union gunboats and the capture of *Harriet Lane*.

## THE GALVESTON-HOUSTON PACKET

The firing eventually died away, and in due course, Renshaw's stranded vessel was approached by a boat bearing Richard Law, commander of the Union gunboat *Clifton*. Law explained that the harbor was under a flag of truce. Henry Lubbock, captain of *Bayou City*, had come aboard Law's ship and demanded the surrender of all the Union vessels in the harbor. Under the terms offered, the Federals would be allowed to keep one vessel, to gather up the crews of the other ships and remove them safely to Union territory. It was an audacious bluff, relying as it did on the threat of the Confederates turning *Harriet Lane*'s guns on her former allies. But Law and Renshaw were unaware of the disabled status of that ship, and the threat seemed real enough. Renshaw angrily refused but also knew he could not now save his own ship. He had the crew transferred to other Union vessels nearby and had turpentine and flammable materials spread all over *Westfield*'s deck. Renshaw himself lit the fuse to the powder train to the ship's magazine. Exactly what happened next is unclear—either the fuse burned too quickly to allow Renshaw and his boat's crew to escape, or he and the men did manage to get off a safe distance but returned to *Westfield* when the magazine didn't detonate as expected. In any case, with a thunderous



Another eyewitness sketch of the Battle of Galveston, showing the sunken *Neptune No. 2* (upper right), *Harriet Lane* and *Bayou City* (center) and the Union gunboat *Owasco* (left). *Rosenberg Library, Galveston.*

## Steamboats on Buffalo Bayou

concussion, *Westfield* exploded, killing Renshaw and his boat's crew instantly (See Buffalo Bayou and Galveston Bay Map, Event 5). It was about 8:45 a.m. on New Year's Day 1863.

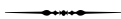
After this last unexpected setback, the remaining Union ships got underway and, still nominally under a flag of truce, steamed out of the harbor. Law, now senior officer of the Union squadron, even failed to have his ships take up blockading positions off the entrance to Galveston Bay and instead took his ships all the way to New Orleans to report the calamity. The Confederates made some small attempt to pursue, but in fact, they had won an almost complete victory, one that had very nearly been lost before the arrival of Leon Smith's little cottonclad flotilla. The Union would not attempt to take Galveston again, and the island city would hold the distinction of being the only Confederate port that, once taken by the Union, would be recaptured by the Confederacy.

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Just as the sudden detonation of *Westfield* rattled the crews of the remaining Union ships in Galveston harbor, so too the recapture of Galveston rattled the confidence of Union naval officers on blockade duty in the Gulf of Mexico. Many Federal officers had a bit of "ram fever" during the war,<sup>127</sup> with the havoc wrought by the Confederate casemate ram *Virginia* a few months before being fresh in their minds. *Bayou City* seems to have caused more than a few worried headaches for the officers of the blockading squadron, for the converted packet is listed several times in dispatches to the Navy Department. Federal commodore H.H. Bell, who reestablished the Union blockade off Galveston, was convinced by *Bayou City's* collision with *Harriet Lane* that the cottonclad was built specifically as a ram. Not long after arriving at Galveston, Bell wrote that "a formidable looking ram, having one smokestack, looking like the *Bayou City*, came down the bay and took station at Pelican Spit." The Union navy's fear of *Bayou City* may have done more to protect Galveston than any number of coastal artillery pieces.<sup>128</sup>

Rear Admiral David Farragut, commanding the Union's West Gulf Blockading Squadron, was both dismayed and infuriated at the Galveston debacle. He had Law court-martialed and suspended from the navy for abandoning the blockade of Galveston and wrote that a tension, a nervousness, a "nightmare" had afflicted his officers. "All our disaster at Galveston has been caused by it," Farragut wrote. The assistant secretary of the navy, Gustavus Fox, wrote to Farragut that "the Galveston disaster is the

most melancholy affair ever recorded in the history of our gallant navy. Five naval vessels driven off by a couple of steam scows with one gun which burst at the third fire and the attack made by soldiers, our prestige is shaken.”<sup>129</sup>



A year before, Confederate general Paul Hébert had judged Galveston Island to be indefensible. Now, at the beginning of 1863, the officer who had retaken it was determined not to let it change hands again. General Magruder quickly turned the island into an armed camp. The engineering officers who had helped plan the recapture of Galveston were set to work building miles of earthworks and forts, some of which were connected by rail to enable the rapid transfer of guns and munitions. Many hundreds of slaves were contracted from area planters to do most of the actual labor. Piles were driven in lines across the harbor to prevent Union warships from entering unmolested as they had in October 1862, and mines were placed, as well. *Neptune No. 2* was left where she was, sunk in shallow water by the St. Cyr Wharf, and finally had her machinery salvaged in June 1863. *Bayou City*, having proved the concept of the cottonclad, was formally purchased by the state and permanently fitted out as a gunboat soon after the battle. The national Confederate government eventually purchased *Bayou City* from the Texas Military Board for \$50,000, “which sum reimburses the State in full for all cost and expenditures on said vessel.”<sup>130</sup>

In the fall of 1863, Superintendent Sterrett was requested to provide a status report on the vessels being operated by the Texas Marine Department. His report offers a useful snapshot of the department in late October of that year, providing as it does not only a list of vessels (several of which operated on other streams, including the Trinity, Sabine and Brazos Rivers), but also notes on their location and condition:

*Steamer Sunflower (chartered), now undergoing repairs at Beaumont; will soon be in running order; light draft.*

*Steamer Grand Bay (chartered), in the engineer department; not in good order; some work to be done to her heaters, but can run for a short time; very light draft of water.*

*Steamer Uncle Ben (owned by Government), in good order; now running as a transport, but of heavy draft of water, say 3 feet, light.*

*Steamer Roebuck (chartered), in very bad order; not in a condition to run without undergoing heavy repairs; heavy draft, say 3 feet.*

*Steamer Jeff Davis (chartered), laid up; broken shaft; not of much service.*

## Steamboats on Buffalo Bayou

*Steamer Dime, tender to gunboats; very small.*

*Steamers in Galveston Bay.*

*Steamer Island City (owned by Government), now running as a food transport; not in good order, but can be run for a few weeks.*

*Steamer Colonel Stell (owned by Government), now as a transport in the engineer department; in good order; just repaired; light draft.*

*Steamer Lone Star (chartered), in the engineer department, at shipyard; will be ready to run on next Friday; in very good order; just repaired, and very light draft of water.*

*Steamer A. S. Ruthven (chartered) at shipyard; will be ready to run on next Friday; in very good order; just repaired, and very light draft of water.*

*Steamer Era No. 3, on the Brazos River, from Columbia to Velasco; wants repairs; can run a short time; light draft.*

*Steamer Lucy Gwin (owned by Government), in Matagorda Bay; in good order; just repaired; she is under control of Colonel [W.R.] Bradfute; she is of very light draft.*

*I would say that the Government owns three barges. Two in good order; engineer department using one, and the transport department using one for transportation of wood. The third barge has to be repaired, lying sunk on the flats at Galveston.<sup>131</sup>*

Sterrett's list underscores the difficulty of keeping the Marine Department's boats in operation. Fully half the boats were mechanically deficient by this point, a bit past what would become the midpoint of the war. Phrases like "undergoing heavy repairs" and "not in a condition to run" appear throughout the document. Riverboats like those making up the Texas Marine Department had short life expectancies even in the best of times; a shortage of materials and hard, constant running inevitably took its toll on the boats. Still, they soldiered on, ferrying men, supplies and materiel to posts around the bay and other parts of the coast.

In early August 1864, Admiral Farragut's ships forced the entrance to Mobile Bay, closing off that port as a destination for blockade runners operating from Cuba. Up to this point, Galveston and the rest of Texas had been too far removed from the seat of the war, east of the Mississippi, to be of much interest to the runners. After the Battle of Mobile Bay, though, Galveston was the only substantial port on the Gulf of Mexico remaining in Confederate hands. Every several days, a long, low steamship would run in or out of the port under cover of darkness, in aggregate

more than a hundred entrances and departures, mostly in the last few months of the conflict.<sup>132</sup> These stealthy visitors included some of the most famous blockade runners of the conflict, among them *Will o' the Wisp*, which was wrecked on the Gulf beach south of the city in February 1865, and *Denbigh*, a ship that had caused such frustration to Farragut off Mobile that he described her master as "a bold rascal, and well he may be, for if I get him he will see the rest of his days of the war in the [Federal military prison in the] Tortugas."<sup>133</sup>

During the resurgence of naval activity around the harbor, the few remaining serviceable transports of the Texas Marine Department continued their work, assisting with the maintenance of harbor defenses, setting out signals for the runners and towing the runners in and out of the harbor. Occasionally, more exciting events arose. One dark night in April 1865, just days after Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox, the famous Confederate naval officer John Newland Maffitt (1819–1886) got his runner, *Owl*, aground on Bird Key, a sandbar just off the entrance to the bay. Maffitt managed to signal his predicament to soldiers on shore, and Captain McGarvin took the old Buffalo Bayou steamer *Diana* out to provide assistance. *Diana* and another runner, the British steamer *Lark*, managed to get Maffitt's ship off the sandbar and safely into harbor before dawn.<sup>134</sup> The Federal blockading squadron off Galveston never knew they were there.

But no amount of bold action like Captain McGarvin's could stave off the inevitable collapse. Weeks later, after a flurry of negotiations, the Federal fleet steamed into Galveston harbor unopposed on June 5, 1865.<sup>135</sup> Galveston had been the last Confederate port to fall.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Hall is a native of Galveston and has spent most his life on the Texas coast. He spent his early working years, beginning while still an undergrad student, in local history museums, including the Texas Maritime Museum in Rockport. Hall holds degrees from the University of Houston–Clear Lake and Texas Tech University.

For the last twenty years, Hall has served as a volunteer with the Texas Historical Commission in investigating shipwrecks and in 2001 was part of the first group of state marine archaeological stewards appointed in the United States. Hall has worked on numerous marine archaeology projects in Texas, notably from 1995 to 2002 on the *Denbigh* Project, the most extensive excavation and research program on a Civil War blockade runner in the Gulf of Mexico. When he's not working with the Historical Commission on sites in the "Wet Texas" region of the state, he blogs at [MaritimeTexas.net](http://MaritimeTexas.net), [DeadConfederates.com](http://DeadConfederates.com) and at the new historical magazine, the *Civil War Monitor*.

