

CSS *McRae* (1861-1862). NH 46483 courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command.

# CSS *McRae*'s Cancelled Secret European Mission

By Neil P. Chatelain

IN THE EARLY MORNING HOURS OF October 12, 1861, Captain George N. Hollins, CSN, launched a surprise attack at the Head of Passes of the Mississippi River. United States naval forces under Captain John Pope had recently assembled there, where the several channels of the Mississippi River's delta converge, to permanently blockade all delta channels more completely and readily. The Confederate force assembled to strike Pope's blockading force was hodgepodge. The ironclad privateer ram *Manassas* had been commandeered by Hollins that month, making it the Confederacy's first ironclad warship. There was also

the privateer *Calhoun*, rented to the Confederate government to serve as Hollins's flagship, as well as the former privateer *Ivy*, converted gunboat *Jackson*, civilian tug *Watson*, and several fire rafts. Finally, there was CSS *McRae*. While Hollins's attack that October morning was meant to break the blockade and test the ironclad *Manassas*, *McRae*'s sailors also thought the strike's purpose was to facilitate their escape to sea, for *McRae*'s captain held standing orders to do just that and steam to Great Britain on a secret mission.

Originally named *Marquis de la Habana*, the vessel was involved in Mexico's War of the Reform and was



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Moon Light View of the Action off Antón Lizardo, March 6th, 1860. Lithograph by Richard A. Thompson, 1946.9.315, Mable Brady Garvan Collection, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT. *Marquis de la Habana* (far right) is captured by USS *Saratoga* at the Battle of Antón Lizardo in Mexico's War of the Reform.

captured by the U.S. Navy in the 1860 Battle of Antón Lizardo trying to sneak into Veracruz with supplies to support General Miguel Miramon's conservative forces. Taken to New Orleans, *Marquis de la Habana* was condemned as a prize of war and sold, becoming a merchant transporting cargo between New Orleans and Cuba.<sup>1</sup>

Purchased by the Confederacy in April 1861 and renamed *McRae*, the steamer was initially one of the new country's most powerful warships. It was armed with six 32-pounder cannon, a single IX-inch Dahlgren gun, and a 24-pounder rifled gun, all salvaged and forwarded from the captured Gosport Navy Yard in Virginia. The warship was entrusted to South Carolinian Lieutenant Thomas B. Huger, a 26-year naval veteran who was

present at Fort Sumter's bombardment. Outfitting at New Orleans alongside Commander Raphael Semmes's CSS *Sumter*, everyone believed *McRae* would soon act as a commerce raider. It definitely suited the purpose, with a bark rig of three masts augmented by a single screw propeller.<sup>2</sup>

Commissioned in July 1861, *McRae* was first brought by Huger to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, to load powder stores from the captured military arsenal there. The crew drilled furiously in preparation for its work as a commerce raider attacking, capturing, and sinking U.S. merchants. That mission, however, was only a cover story for *McRae*'s true intended purpose. That summer, Huger received confidential instructions from Confederate Navy Secretary Stephen R. Mallory that

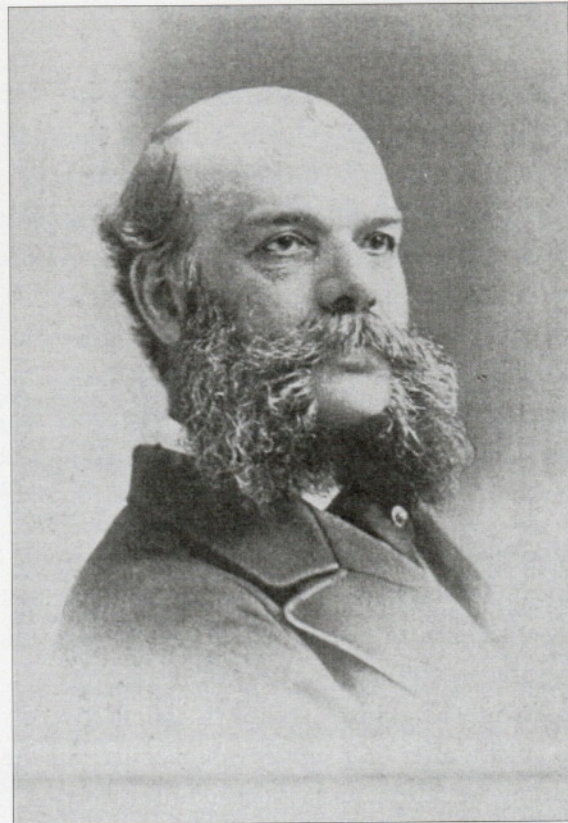




First Lieutenant Thomas Bee Huger, CSN. Huger commanded CSS *McRae*, receiving secret instructions to proceed to England. NH 1875 courtesy of Naval History and Heritage Command.

instead of raiding U.S. commerce, *McRae* would proceed directly to Europe. With its eight cannon, three masts, and screw propeller, *McRae* was the most heavily armed and modern war steamer in the Confederacy's summer 1861 order of battle and Mallory wanted to use such attributes to his advantage by having Huger's ship facilitate an entire convoy of blockade runners packed with modern weapons for arming Confederate field armies.

The entire plan was explained in a letter of introduction dated July 23, 1861, that Mallory intended to be delivered by Huger to James D. Bulloch and James North in Great Britain. Both Bulloch and North were in Britain to facilitate the creation of a European-built naval force. North was initially charged with building and purchasing ironclad warships, while Bulloch was



James D. Bulloch was responsible for building or acquiring commerce raiders and blockade runners. As part of *McRae*'s secret mission, Bulloch was instructed to assemble a host of blockade runners to be conveyed to the Confederacy. From: Theodore Roosevelt. *An Autobiography* (New York, NY: The MacMillan Company, 1913), p 18.

responsible for acquiring blockade runners and dispatching commerce raiders from British shipyards to hunt the U.S. merchant fleet. To meet these needs, Bulloch spent much of 1861 working with Fraser Trenholm and Company, the British office of South Carolina's John Fraser and Company, to acquire steamers to run the blockade.

The letter opened with Mallory announcing the "signal success" Confederate military forces achieved at the First Battle of Bull Run (First Manassas) before shifting to explain that Huger's *McRae* was to steam "to England direct" and deliver the note.<sup>3</sup> Bulloch and North were instructed to purchase "10,000 good Enfield rifles" and store them on *McRae* for transport back to the Confederacy, enough rifles to arm an entire division of troops!<sup>4</sup> Two days later on July 25, Mallory penned another letter to Bulloch advising that *McRae* was going



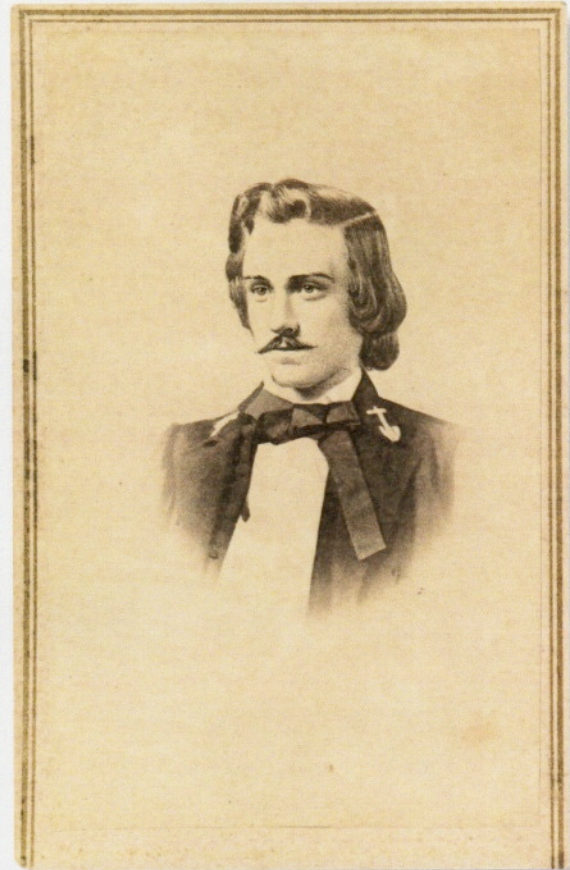
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to be packed with “good pilots” and that Huger’s war steamer should “sail in company” with Bulloch’s blockade runners as they crossed the Atlantic to the Confederacy.<sup>5</sup> Mallory further advised that if Bulloch was able to acquire any wooden steamers suitable “for a gunboat,” they were to also accompany *McRae*’s blockade running convoy, all packed with rifles, as much as 500 tons of gunpowder and “woolens for clothing, shoes, and blankets.”<sup>6</sup> “Time is highly important,” Mallory closed this final dispatch, “as the enemy will increase the numbers of his blockading forces as the cool season approaches.”<sup>7</sup>

A successful convoy of blockade runners by *McRae* would mark significant military, naval, and diplomatic victories. The delivery of supplies to sustain at least one full division would better prepare Confederate field armies for future battles. Successfully breaking past the Mississippi River’s blockade so quickly after CSS *Sumter* would embarrass the Gulf Blockading Squadron, just as successfully escorting blockade runners into the Carolinas would do the same for the Atlantic Blockading Squadron. Finally, having the new country’s largest and most powerful warship of the time be the first to fly the Confederate flag in Europe would mark both the Confederacy and its naval forces as legitimate at a time when European powers openly debated Confederate recognition. With all of the unknowns of 1861, there was plenty riding on *McRae*’s secret European mission.

Besides the written documents between Mallory, Huger, and Bulloch, there is evidence supporting Huger’s clandestine mission. Acting Master Charles W. Read remembered how Huger and Hollins were “anxious” to get *McRae* to sea.<sup>8</sup> The ship received additional materials to support its mission. Eighteen pairs of “Hand Cuffs” and “Leg Irons” were fabricated for the ship, supporting the idea *McRae* would have to deal with prisoners captured from enemy merchants or warships encountered on the transatlantic voyage.<sup>9</sup> *McRae* also loaded \$12,000 in specie from the New Orleans mint to help cover expenses, as Britain would not accept Confederate paper notes.<sup>10</sup>

*McRae* was also packed with sailors. The similarly sized CSS *Sumter* held a crew or less than 100 officers and men, but *McRae* always remained crowded with a crew of

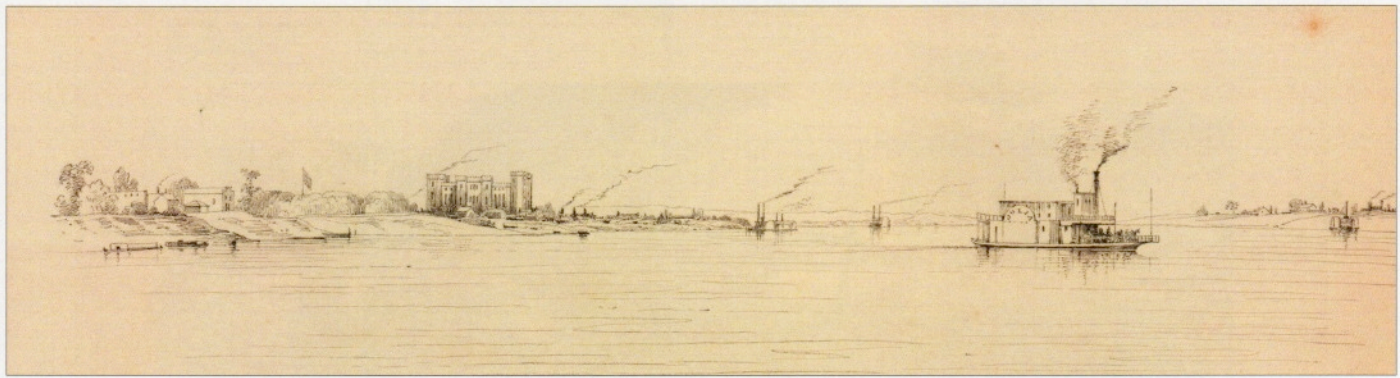


Carte de visite photograph of Midshipman Charles W. Read, U.S. Naval Academy, Class of 1860. William Emerson Strong Photograph Album, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Raleigh, NC. Acting Master Charles Read was CSS *McRae*’s sailing master in 1861. After the ship failed to escape the blockade and *McRae*’s secret mission was abandoned, Read eventually became the warship’s executive officer, assuming command in April 1862 after First Lieutenant Thomas Huger was mortally wounded.

between 115 and 150. There was also an unusually large complement of officers for its size. Assisting Huger were no less than three lieutenants, two masters, three midshipmen, and ten engineering officers.<sup>11</sup> Such a strong complement suggests *McRae* had spare officers and sailors to possibly take leadership positions within and help man the convoy of blockade runners *McRae* was intended to escort.

In fact, rumor spread through the U.S. that *McRae* actually already left on its journey. Hartford’s *Daily*





Approach to Baton Rouge State Capital of Louisiana U.S. Arsenal Grounds, &c., December 6, 1853. Drawing by Thomas K. Wharton. Thomas Kelah Wharton Diaries and Sketchbook, Manuscripts and Archives Division, NYPL Catalog ID b12428470, New York Public Library Digital Collections. CSS *McRae* encountered engineering troubles while at the Baton Rouge arsenal loading gunpowder. Such difficulties eventually prevented *McRae* from escaping the Mississippi River to complete its confidential mission.

*Courant* was adamant in reporting that *McRae* “ran the blockade” on July 30, 1861, while the *New York Times* speculated *McRae* “has probably gone to the Mediterranean.”<sup>12</sup> When Navy Secretary Gideon Welles wrote to Flag-Officer William Mervine, commander of the Gulf Blockading Squadron, demanding an explanation, the flag officer insisted, “The first notice I have of the escape of the privateer *McRae* I obtain from your dispatch” and that “the Passes of the Mississippi River are so thoroughly guarded that I doubt if she could escape unseen.”<sup>13</sup>

*McRae* never escaped the blockade. Engineering problems plagued the warship that summer, just as when the steamer flew Mexico’s ensign. While making a trial trip, *McRae*’s “lugs in the driving wheels tore out,” forcing repair delays. At the Baton Rouge arsenal receiving its powder, the ship “had the misfortune to break or crack two of the wheels which drives the propellor [*sic*] shaft.”<sup>14</sup> *McRae*’s engineers now lacked confidence in their machinery. When everything was finally repaired in September, illness struck the crew, disabling Huger and 30 crew members with fever.

The crew had recovered by October 1861 and the ship’s engines were finally in proper order, just in time to participate in the Battle of the Head of Passes. The day before the battle, Huger forwarded payrolls and logs of expenditures and receipts, a standard practice for any warship just before embarking on an extended cruise.<sup>15</sup> Such hinted that Hollins commandeering *Manassas* and striking the blockade on October 12 was at least in part

to provide *McRae* the chance to slip the blockade for England. Supporting this were claims of two officers at the Head of Passes that morning. Lt. Francis Winslow, commanding USS *Water Witch*, reported that after *Manassas* rammed USS *Richmond* to start the battle, he sent an officer to *Water Witch*’s masthead, who observed “a large bark-rigged propeller,” making Winslow quickly believe that morning’s attacks were “a design on the part of the enemy to run the bark out to sea.”<sup>16</sup> Read, *McRae*’s sailing master, recalled that once *Manassas* surprised the blockaders and the U.S. ships withdrew down the Southwest Pass, “Captain Huger was about to proceed to sea in obedience to his orders from the Secretary of the Navy, and to take advantage of what was regarded as the object of the expedition,” when *McRae* was instead ordered upriver.<sup>17</sup>

Though *McRae* was ready to steam into the Gulf of Mexico for Europe during the Battle of the Head of Passes, Hollins instead signaled for all of his ships to return upriver. Instead of escorting a convoy of blockade runners packed with critically needed supplies, *McRae* instead became the flagship of Hollins’s Mississippi River Squadron fighting at Island Number Ten, Fort Pillow, and Forts Jackson and Saint Philip—where Huger was mortally wounded—before sinking at New Orleans on April 29, 1862.

With *McRae* remaining in the Mississippi, Mallory was adamant about getting a warship to Europe. Nine days after the Battle of the Head of Passes, the cruiser *Nashville* escaped Charleston’s blockade, docking in



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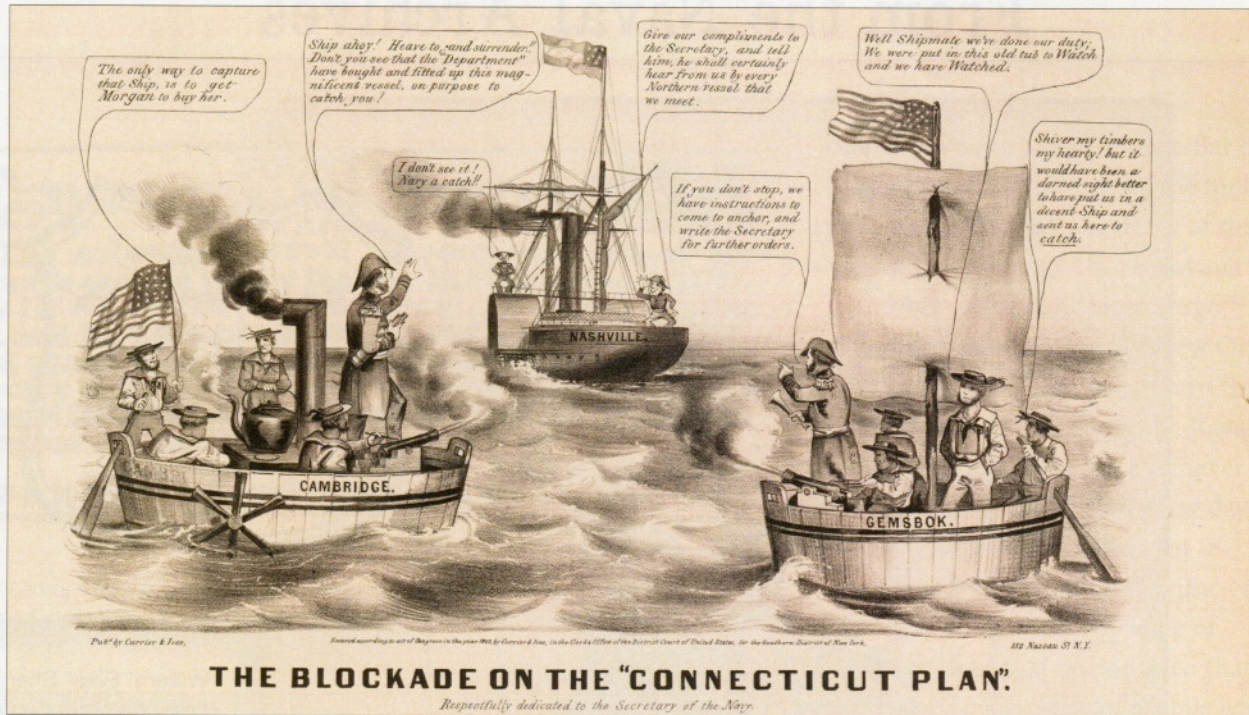
The “*Nashville*” and “*Tuscarora*” at Southampton, England. Illustration published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume VI, No. 268, p 97, February 15, 1862. CSS *Nashville* is at the dock in Southampton, circa January 1862, while USS *Tuscarora* is keeping watch in the right distance.

England on November 21. She instead became the first Confederate warship to reach Europe, causing “considerable stir” upon its arrival.<sup>18</sup>

Even without *McRae*, the mission continued in England as Bulloch did contract for several blockade runners. However, without an escort he was apprehensive about running all of them into the Confederacy simultaneously. Instead, On October 15—three days after the Battle of the Head of Passes and six days before *Nashville* began its transatlantic journey to Britain, Bulloch boarded the British steamer *Fingal* and steamed west, packed with 11,000 rifles, 24,000 pounds of

powder, a half million cartridges and percussion caps, and other critical supplies.<sup>19</sup> When it reached Confederate waters on November 12, *Fingal's* run became one of the most successful of the war, providing critical weapons to help arm Confederate armies in Kentucky and Tennessee for 1862's campaigns. If *McRae's* engines had cooperated better, perhaps Huger would have fully carried out his secret orders and *Fingal's* success might have been multiplied into an entire convoy of runners, an act that surely would have boosted Confederate military readiness as much as it would have embarrassed the blockade.





The Blockade on the "Connecticut Plan": Respectfully Dedicated to the Secretary of the Navy [Gideon Welles]. Lithograph by Currier & Ives, 1862. Item bdr:233607. Prints, Drawings and Watercolors from the Anne S.K. Brown Military Collection. Brown Digital Repository, Brown University, Providence, RI. Cartoon making fun of the ineffectiveness of Secretary Welles's (who was from Connecticut) early blockade efforts, with CSS *Nashville* readily escaping slower and docile Union blockading vessels.

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Neil P. Chatelain, MA, MEd, a former U.S. Navy Surface Warfare Officer, is an educator and historian of U.S. Naval History. He authored *Defending the Arteries of Rebellion: Confederate Naval Operations in the Mississippi River Valley, 1861-1865* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2020) and *Fought Like Devils: The Confederate Gunboat McRae* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2014). Learn more at [www.neilpchatelain.com](http://www.neilpchatelain.com)