

Ramblin' Man: An Impatient Iowan in the Confederate Navy

For two years at the U.S. Naval Academy, Midshipman William H. Wall had shown “a good aptitude for the naval profession.” But the 20-year-old longed for a business career. He resigned in 1858 and went back home to New London, Iowa. His life would never be the same.

Wall's timing was terrible. He became a clerk as Iowa's economy ground to a halt. After a year in financially depressed New London, he tried to regain his place at the naval academy. No luck: The vacancy had been filled. Wall went to Mississippi in summer 1860 where job prospects were brighter.

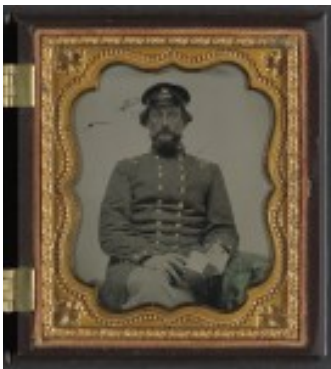
Political aptitude

Wall quickly made political contacts in Sardis. He enjoyed “the full confidence of the entire community” in less than a year. In spring 1861, before the war started, local residents asked President Jefferson Davis to appoint Wall a Lieutenant in the Confederate Army. The men stated, “You will greatly oblige your friends.”

But Wall didn't wait for an appointment. Instead, he enlisted as sergeant in the 12th Mississippi Infantry. The unit was too late to fight at Bull Run, so they returned to Mississippi. Wall served as adjutant in Col. Henry Hughes's partisan cavalry.

Back in New London, Wall's younger brother, Charles – an Iowa native – enlisted in the Sixth Iowa Volunteer Infantry.

A commission at last



Unidentified midshipman in Confederate uniform. (Library of Congress)

Wall told Confederate Senator A.G. Brown that he was determined to be a career officer. Wall's first choice was a commission in the army, his second choice, the navy. He was quickly appointed to serve on the gunboat *Atlanta*, outside of Savannah, Georgia.

The *Atlanta's* commander, William McBlair, complained: “The lieutenants I have now are from civil life, miserable sticks. I would not give a penny for a cord of them.”

Wall moved to Charleston, South Carolina, serving two years aboard the ironclad *Chicora*. The next stop was Richmond, Virginia, where Wall commanded the gunboat *Drewry* until Union artillery destroyed her in January 1865.



An audacious plan

Wall and superior officer, Capt. Charles W. Read, headed across the shrinking Confederacy for Shreveport, Louisiana. They had a bold plan. They would run the gunboat *Webb* down the Red River, past New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico, “to be used as a privateer.”

The Union Navy controlled the Mississippi River. Federal gunboats lined its banks “every 10 to 15 miles.”

Wall and Read crossed the river into northern Louisiana and found the *Webb*, a side-wheel boat, docked in Shreveport.

Outfitting a new cotton-clad

They loaded the *Webb* with firewood and coal, and used 190 cotton bales as armor to protect the machinery. The *Webb* bristled with weapons: a 30-pound Parrot gun, two 12-pound howitzers, and five torpedoes, one of which was “projecting from the bow, supported by a long pole.”

On April 7, 1865, the *Webb* left Shreveport, northwest Louisiana, chugging toward Alexandria in the center of the state. Two days later, Lee surrendered at Appomattox. By late April, the future of the Trans-Mississippi Department was in doubt, and Louisiana residents were increasingly demoralized.

Two weeks after Appomattox: The race begins

On April 23, 1865, under a murky pre-dawn sky, the *Webb* shoved off from Alexandria, disguised as a Federal boat. Slipping past a squadron of Union vessels below Simmesport, it entered the Mississippi River. The *Webb's* crew cut telegraph lines as they traveled.

Federals identified the *Webb* as Confederate outside of Donaldsville, but she faced no opposition until she approached New Orleans. Raising a U.S. flag, she went full speed ahead (25 miles per hour) past the city. Dodging cannon balls from Union picket boats, she took three minor hits. Pursued by a Federal gunboat for twenty miles, the *Webb* raised the Confederate flag.

Practically tasting freedom, the *Webb* sailed within range of the Federal steam sloop *Richmond*.

As the *Richmond* opened fire, Capt. Read headed back north but was trapped between the two Federal vessels. Battered by shells, Capt. Read ran the *Webb* aground on the east bank of the river. Read and Wall set the *Webb* on fire.

Captured later that day, April 25, 1865, they were sent to Fort Warren in Boston Harbor. Wall took the oath of allegiance to the U.S. government on June 13, 1865, and returned to Mississippi.

Putting down roots

Thereafter a Mississippian, Wall married, had children, and worked in business and banking.