

# The Last Train from Fernandina

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*On March 2, 1862 the U.S Gunboat Ottawa fired on a Confederate steam train departing from the town of Fernandina in Florida. This little publicized incident was undoubtedly a previously unmentioned “Civil War first” as the first “warship versus a moving train” in history took place.*

**E**arly in the American Civil War, the United States Navy decided that deep water coastal supply stations in Federal hands were spaced too far apart for blockading ships to operate effectively. Initially, a fleet was sent to capture Port Royal Sound (South Carolina) and that was completed on November 8, 1861.

The next objective was Fernandina, Florida (*enhanced early map, right*), located twenty-five miles north of Jacksonville on the Atlantic coast. Fernandina was also the eastern terminus of the railroad that crossed Florida to Cedar Keys on the Gulf of Mexico. Near Fernandina was Fort Clinch, built but not completed before the war. Fort Clinch was in Confederate hands, so a significant Federal Navy force was sent south.

## Securing Fernandina

Very little resistance to the squadron of Federal ships was encountered. A few scattered shots were heard as the ships arrived. The fifteen smaller gunboats of the squadron that had passed through the inner waterway anchored in the harbor by 10:30 AM on March 2, 1862. They were waiting for a high tide and the arrival of the larger ships on the ocean side. Finally the squadron of war ships and transports with a battalion of marines and a brigade of army troops had secured the port.

Having found Fort Clinch (*photo, right*) abandoned, Commander Drayton ordered an officer to go and hoist a white flag of surrender at the fort. A force of sailors and marines had secured the fort and smaller steam launches were sent about looking for enemy boats and resistance. Being the navy restrained on any destruction of the town, some residents had passed information that the fort was abandoned and the Confederate garrison had left the fort with all the supplies they could carry, and planned to depart by train.



The *Ottawa*'s captain, Lt. Cmdr. T. H. Stevens, was told by the local sheriff that the train they could see at the railroad depot with the Confederate garrison from Fort Clinch on board and ready to depart.

### **The Train Chase**

Stevens quickly obtained General Wright's permission and ordered his warship to steam toward the train depot. Commander Drayton was also on board the *Ottawa*.

Perhaps foolishly, the Confederate garrison drew the navy's attention by firing at the gunboat from the train and nearby woods. The *Ottawa* neared the train and the two engines throttled up to leave the station. Musket shots from the train were answered by the *Ottawa*'s guns, including the 11-inch Dahlgren. As naval personnel signaled for the train to stop, the warship directed most of the firing at the two steam locomotives trying to disable them. A witness stated that the train's passengers "hooted, jeered, and waved handkerchiefs derisively from the car windows."

Chasing the train for about two miles the *Ottawa* fired shells at it, some of which took effect. One shell killed two men on a flatcar, M. Savage and John M. Thompson. (These two men have been identified as clerks in one source and soldiers in another, but are not listed on the fort's garrison list.)

While the *Ottawa* fired at the train, the conductor had cut loose some of the rear cars and put on extra steam and the train managed to escape as it successfully crossed the bridge and passed on to the mainland. The *Ottawa* was unable to proceed any further because of the bridge. Later, the Confederates burned enough of the railroad bridge to disable it for the rest of the war.

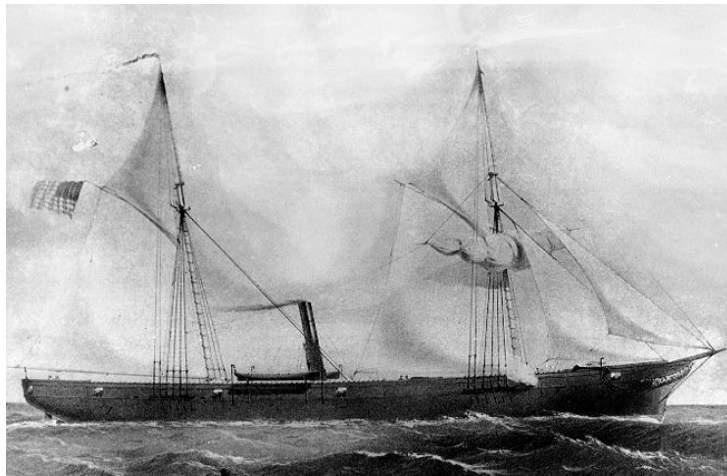
### **Casualties**

The men of the *Ottawa* did not know it at the time, but in addition to troops, the train was also carrying the management team of the Florida Railroad. Also on board was David Levy Yulee, a former U.S. Senator from Florida and financier of the Florida Railroad. Yulee was unhurt, but a shell fragment from the gunboat fatally wounded the man sitting next to him and Lt. Cmdr. Stevens unknowingly had come within inches of killing the ex-senator. Yulee is said to have escaped into the bushes and continue fighting the Federal forces throughout the war.

### **The U.S. Gunboat Ottawa**

One of the warships that arrived at Fernandina was the U.S. Gunboat *Ottawa*, commanded by a forty-two year old navy officer, Lieutenant Commander Thomas Holdup Stevens, Jr.

Stevens and his crew were already experienced in naval warfare having participated in the battle for Port Royal resulting in the capture of Confederate Forts Beauregard and Walker and covering the landing U.S. Army troops at Warsaw Sound, Georgia in January 1862.



Launched on October 7, 1861, the steam powered (with auxiliary sails) *Ottawa* (abovet) was a formidable "90-day class" gunboat, armed with one 11-inch Dahlgren pivot gun mid-ship one 20-pounder and two 24-pounders, all being very potent guns all able to fire solid and exploding shot. She carried a crew of about ninety-five men.

## Analysis of the Incident

In examining and comparing original pre-Civil War maps (*one, below left*) with a current mapping photo (*right*), the current CSX Railroad seems to follow the same path of the old Florida Railroad roadbed. The distance from the depot to the bridge is about 3.7 miles. Records show the gunboat followed the train about “two” miles, which might have been a guess.

The Amelia River (follows the path of the “3.77 miles” on the photo) diverged from the railroad as it turned west before continuing south again. This would put the railroad about 1.6 miles from the river until the rails turned west toward the bridge. This is certainly within the 11-inch Dahlgren’s range.

Looking at the overhead photo, most of the area between the train and gunboat was flat marshland so the train could easily be spotted from the gunboat’s tall masts.



Lastly, with the help of an 1857 (updated in 1862) navigation map, the Amelia River’s depth was at least 3 fathoms (18 feet) at low tide up to the point of where the river branches left and right (see photo, about 2/3 way down left edge). This is enough clearance for the less than 12 foot draft of the *Ottawa*. (This period map does not list the soundings past this point.)

## Postscript

As for the *Ottawa* and its crew, they would go on fighting in Florida and along the South Carolina and Georgia coastline for the remainder of the war. They were instrumental in recovering the original yacht *America*, the 1852 winner of what became the “America’s Cup” on the St. Johns River south of Jacksonville. Lt. Cmdr. Stevens was to command the ironclad USS *Monitor* for a month then moved on to command several other ships. He eventually retired as a rear admiral in 1871. Stevens died in 1896 and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. The *Ottawa* was sold at auction after the end of the war.

There are a number of references of the U.S. Gunboat *Ottawa* firing on the last train from Fernandina, but no one has recognized that this was most likely the first time in history that a warship fired on a moving train. It was during the Civil War that trains were first used in full support of troop and supply movements. Prior to this, the only usage of a train during a war was in France, and that was a short line to bring supplies inland only a few miles. The Civil War had many historical “firsts” identified, but so far no one has recognized this unusual event in this respect.