

Ferryboats Go To War

by Lew Zerfas

During the first two years of the American Civil War, the U.S. Navy drastically increased the number of ship they had. Many were of new construction, others were captured prizes, either Confederate ships or from other countries carrying contraband. Still others were commercial ships changed into supply vessels, auxiliaries, ironclads, and gunboats.

Perhaps some of the most unusual conversions were those converted from steam powered sidewheel ferryboats to gunboats. For some the appearances were changed significantly, while others had minimal modifications. Many were returned to civilian service after the war. *(Photo at right shows the USS Commodore Perry on the Pamunkey River, Virginia in 1864.)*



Twenty New York City ferryboats that served in the Navy as gunboats during the Civil War:

Pre-War Name Owner/ID	USN Name Purch \$\$ Service	Year built Disp – Hull - Pwr LWL X B X DH	Arms Amount and size	Post war disposition Name(s) Fate
<i>Clifton</i> (i) Staten Island & Union Ferry Co.	<i>Clifton</i> \$90,000 W.G.B.S.	1861 (Brooklyn) 892 – W – S - P 210 X 40 X 13	2-9” S.B.,..... 4-32# S.B.	Aground 1864, burned by Confederates
<i>Ethan Allen</i> Williamsburg ferries	<i>Commodore Barney</i> \$38,000 N.A.B.S.	1859 (Brooklyn) 512 – W – S - P 143 33 12	1-100# Rifle 3-9” S.B.	Sold 1866 to Williamsburg ferries SOLD TO Florida interests 1885, lost 9/22/1901 off Jacksonville
<i>Nuestra Senora del Regla</i> (Havana)	<i>Commodore Hull</i> \$25,000 N.A.B.S.	1861 (Brooklyn) 376– W – S - P 141 X 28 X 11	2-30# Rifle, 4-24# Howit.	Sold 1866 to North Carolina interests
<i>(None, new)</i> Union Ferry Co.	<i>Commodore Jones</i> \$83,000 N.A.B.S.	1863? (?) 542 – W – S - P 154 X 32 X 11	1-9” S.B.,..... 1-5.1” Rifle, 2-24# Howit.	Sunk, torpedo, James River, 1864
<i>(None, new)</i> Union Ferry Co.	<i>Commodore McDonough</i> \$42,409 S.A.B.S.	? (?) 532 ? X ? X 8	1-9” S.B.,..... 1-20# Rifle, 4-24# Howit.	Sunk off New Jersey under tow 1865 back to New York
<i>(None, new)</i> Union Ferry Co.	<i>Commodore Morris</i> \$42,409 N.A.B.S.	1862 (new York) 532 – W – S - P 152 X 32 X 11	1-9” S.B.,..... 1-100# Rifle, 4-24# Howit.	Sold 1866 to Union Ferry Co. as <i>Clinton</i> . Requisitioned to U.S. Army for WW-I, then to Carteret until 1931
<i>Commodore Perry</i> Williamsburg ferries	<i>Commodore Perry</i> \$38,000 N.A.B.S.	1859 (Brooklyn) 512 – W – S - P 143 X 33 X 12	2-9” S.B.,..... 2-32# S.B., 1-12# Howit.	Sold 1866 to Williamsburg ferries sold 1898 to Charlston interests abandoned 1907
<i>Atlantic</i> Union Ferry Co #22095	<i>Commodore Read</i> \$91,000 Potomac	1865 (Brooklyn) 650 – W – S - P 179 X 33 X 11	2-100# Rifle, 4-24# Howit.	Sold 1866 to Washington DC interests As <i>State of Marylan</i> , wrecked on March 31, 1876, Chesapeake Bay

Pre-War Name Owner/ID	USN Name Purch \$ Service	Year built Disp - Hull - Pwr LWL X B X DH	Arms Amount and size	Post war disposition Name(s) Fate
<i>Ellen</i> Union Ferry Co.	<i>Ellen</i> \$23,100 S.A.B.S.	1853 (Greenpoint) ... 341 – W – S - P 125 X 28 X 10	2-30# Rifle, 2-32# S.B.	Decom. 1862, used as a carpentry shop. Sold to South Carolina interests
(None, new)..... Union Ferry Co.	<i>Fort Henry</i> \$69,690 E.G.B.S.	1862 (New York)..... 579 – W – S - P 148 X 21 X 11	2-9” S.B.,..... 4-32# S.B.	Sold 1865 to East River Ferry Co. as <i>Huntington</i> destroyed (fire 11/2/1868) at Hunter’s Point, Long Island, N.Y.
<i>Hunchback</i> Staten Island & New York Ferry	<i>Hunchback</i> \$45,000 N.A.B.S.	1852 (New York)..... 578 – W – S - P 179 X 29 X 10	1-100# Rifle, 3-9” S.B.	Sold 1865 to Williamsburg Ferrys then resold for Boston service until 1880
<i>John P. Jackson</i> New Jersey RR #12982	<i>John P. Jackson</i> \$60,000 W.G.B.S.	1860 (Brooklyn) 750 – W – S - P 192 X 32 12	1-9” S.B.,..... 4-32# S.B., 1-6” S.B.	Sold 1865, J.P. Jackson New Orleans interests, abandoned 1871
<i>Marion</i> Williamsburg ferries #14647	<i>Morse</i> \$40,000 Patomac	1859 (New York)..... 513	2-11” S.B.,..... 2-24# Howit.	Sold 1865, Lincoln until 1885 Boston interests
<i>Southfield</i> Staten Island & New York Ferry	<i>Southfield</i> \$65,000 N.A.B.S.	1857 (Brooklyn) 751 – W – S - P 200X 34 X 11	,1-100# Rifle, 3-9” S.B., later, 1-12# S.B.	Sunk at the mouth of the Roanoke River in April 1864 by the CSS <i>Ambemarle</i>
<i>Clifton (ii)</i> Staten Island & New York Ferry	<i>Shokokon</i> \$100,000 N.A.B.S.	1862 (Greenpoint) ... 892 – I – S - P 210 X 40 X 13	2-30# Rifle, 4-24# Howit.	Sold 1865, <i>Lone Star</i> New Orleans interests
<i>Somerset</i> Union Ferry Co. #22876	<i>Somerset</i> \$69,690 E.G.B.S.	1862 (Brooklyn) 521 149 X 34 X 11	2-8” S.B.,..... 4-32# S.B.	Sold 1866 to Union Ferry Co., retired in 1914
<i>Stepping Stones</i> Edward Haight	<i>Stepping Stones</i> \$20,000 N.A.B.S.	1861 (New York)..... 226 110 X 24 X 8	1-20# Rifle, 3-12# Rifle, 2-12# Howit.	Sold 1865 to Boston interests as <i>Cambridge</i>
<i>Westfield</i> Staten Island & New York Ferry	<i>Westfield</i> \$20,000 N.A.B.S.	1861 (Brooklyn) 822 – W – S - P 213 X 34 X 12	1-100# Rifle, 1-9” S.B., 4-8” S.B.	Blown up 1863 to avoid capture
<i>Whitehall</i> Union Ferry Co.	<i>Whitehall</i> \$90,000 W.G.B.S.	1850 (Brooklyn) 323 – W – S - P 126 X 28 X 10	2-30# Rifle, 2-32# S.B.	Blown up in Galveston Bay in 1863 to avoid capture
<i>Wyandank</i> Union Ferry Co.	<i>Wyandank</i> \$19,000 Patomac	1847 (New York)..... 399 – W – S - P 132 X 31 X 10	2-12# S.B.,..... 1-20# Rifle	Remained in U.S. government service until 1880, then scrapped

Key to armament: Howit = howitzer S.B. = smooth bore

Key to “Disp - Hull - Pwr” = Displacement – Hull (W = wood, I = Iron) – Power (S = steam, P = paddle)

Unusual “Ferry-Gunboats”

Some of the ferries turned gunboats saw sever service, some somewhat mundane service. Some did not survive the war, while others returned to the service they were originally built for, a few seeing the new century. Below is some information on a few of those ferries.

The U.S.S. *Somerset*

An ex-ferry that served of Florida’s Gulf Coast (some of the time in the same area as the U.S.S Fort Henry), and almost 50 years’ of public service after the war.

After peace returned, the steamer *Somerset*, badly in need of repair, was towed to New York. She was sold at public auction there on 12 July 1865 to the Union Ferry Co. Documented on 14 February 1866, the rejuvenated *Somerset* began a career as a New York ferryboat which lasted until she was retired in 1914.

The U.S.S. Commodore Morris

The *Clinton*, officially #4870, went directly from the builder’s yard to military service as the *Commodore Morris*, without first seeing commercial service. This ferry was in service longer than any other ferry that saw service as a gunboat during the Civil War.

In 1866, the Commodore Morris was sold back to the Union Ferry Company, and finally served as the *Clinton*. However, the Army took title of the Clinton during WW-I, but this time she did not see behind the lines service. The Army ran her in New York Harbor. as the *General John Simpson*.

In late 1920, the ferry again returned to civilian service, and again became the Clinton, but now under the ownership of Carteret Ferry Corporation. She ran between New Jersey and Staten Island. and possibly over to Brooklyn as well.

After 70 years of service, on February 24,1931, the ferry was scrapped, and the words “Dismantled – sold for junk” was written on the enrollment certificate.

The U.S.S. John P. Jackson

Built in 1860, the *John P. Jackson*, on February 21, 1861 with flags flying and bunting on the railings, transported President Lincoln and other dignitaries across New York’s bay. Salutes from forts, whistles blowing and tributes from all sorts of harbor craft filled the air as he traveled to his inauguration. The Jackson returned to regular ferry service the next day, only to be sold to the Navy to be used as a gunboat until October, 1865.

The ferry then became the *J. P. Jackson*. This time she served between New Orleans and Mobile. It was abandoned in 1871.

Civil War photos typical of ex-ferry Gunboats



The USS *Hunchback* back in commercial service well after the war.