

Introduction

John L. Porter Papers

Most of the information in this digital exhibit derives from one small 4¼ x 6½” manuscript notebook housed in the John Luke Porter Collection¹ in the Special Collections Department of Joyner Library at East Carolina University. The Porter family loaned the collection to East Carolina University in December 2001. Among the most significant items in the collection is this little manuscript notebook which contains 234 pages closely written in Porter’s own hand, done at various times from about 1857 until 1882. It is quite fragile at present. The volume has tears in numerous places. The covers and text block are detached. The primary reason for this digital exhibit is to allow researchers continued access to the notebook while minimizing the risk of further damage from handling. The editor also hopes that this digital exhibit will increase the public’s knowledge and understanding of Porter’s role in naval history and in some of the most important events of the American Civil War.

USS MONITOR – CSS VIRGINIA Debate

In the years since the Civil War, the *USS MONITOR*² has always received a better press than the *CSS VIRGINIA*.³ The *MONITOR*’s story was clear and easy to understand and the essential facts in her case are generally agreed. The U. S. Navy built her from scratch for a specific purpose – to maintain the Union blockade on Confederate ports - and she accomplished that purpose. They gave the construction contract to a single individual, John Ericsson, who designed and built her from the keel up. Ericsson intended her to be an ironclad warship from the beginning. Ericsson faced no limitation on supplies or equipment. He incorporated several other notable innovations in her design, including a screw drive⁴ and rotating gun turrets that could fire at any angle. *MONITOR* also boasted the world’s first below-the-waterline flush toilet.⁵

¹ *John L. Porter Notebook*, John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858.

² *Dictionary of America Naval Fighting Ships, Vol. IV* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, 1969), p. 414. See also: <http://www.hazegray.org/danfs/monitors/monitor.txt>

³ *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships, Vol. IV* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Naval History Division, 1969), pp. 337-38. See also: <http://www.Hazegray.Org/Danfs/Erigates/Merrimac.Htm>.

⁴ Propellers

⁵ *Clash of Iron*, by Jackson Dykman. Time Magazine (19 Aug. 2002) See: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1003076,00.html#ixzz0uEPcYjVo>

There is general agreement as to *MONITOR*'s merits and faults as a warship. Critically, she arrived at the vital spot on the battlefield just in time, and prevented the *VIRGINIA* from breaking the Union blockade. The fact that the Union won the Civil War has also given the *MONITOR* a public relations advantage over the years. She accomplished her purpose; she was a clear success. Additionally, the *MONITOR* established a pattern for future ironclad warships followed by virtually all later warships. *MONITOR*'s historical significance is undoubted.

On the other hand, very little is clear about the *VIRGINIA*'s story. All agree that the Confederate Navy built the *VIRGINIA* from the hulk of the *USS MERRIMACK*, which the U. S. Navy had burned to the waterline when they abandoned the Gosport (Norfolk, Virginia) Navy Yard on 20 April 1861. They found *MERRIMACK* resting on the bottom of the harbor, and lacking her superstructure, but the big ship's lower hull and machinery were intact. During the remainder of 1861 and the first two months of 1862, the Confederate States Navy raised and repaired the *MERRIMACK* and converted her into a casemate ironclad ram, a new warship type that the Confederates hoped would defeat the Union's great superiority in conventional warships.

Commissioned as CSS *VIRGINIA* in mid-February 1862, the ship's iron armor made her virtually invulnerable to most naval guns. *VIRGINIA*'s armament consisted of ten guns, including 7-inch pivot-mounted rifles both fore and aft and a broadside battery of two 6-inch rifles and six 9-inch smoothbores. Attached to her bow was an iron ram, allowing the ship herself to become a deadly weapon.⁶ There the clarity ends.

The Confederates had multiple and somewhat conflicting goals for the *VIRGINIA*. They intended to use her to break the Union blockade of southern ports, but they also hoped to use her to control the seas. However, the Confederates had to work hurriedly and faced crippling supply shortages, especially of iron plate, engines, replacement parts, and weapons, which severely limited what they could make the *VIRGINIA* do and forced yet more compromises.

The fact that the Confederates were using the hulk of an existing sailing ship, significantly limited the things they could do to redesign her. While it reduced the initial cost to the Confederacy, it forced the Confederate Navy to accept numerous performance deficiencies in *VIRGINIA*. *MERRIMACK* had auxiliary engines intended mainly for maneuvering in and out of harbors. Initially designed as a sailing ship, *MERRIMACK*'s designers had never intended her to use engines for long-distance voyages or rapid, combat maneuvering. Lacking sails and better engines, *VIRGINIA* had to use these auxiliary engines for all her movements.

⁶ *CSS Virginia Confederate Navy Ship*. http://americancivilwar.com/town/civil_war/Navy_Ships/CSS_Virginia.html

Thus, *VIRGINIA* was significantly underpowered, slow, and hard to maneuver. Additionally, the weight of her iron armor made *VIRGINIA* heavier than *MERRIMACK* and thus gave her a much deeper draft than *MERRIMACK*. Besides slowing her, this significantly limited where *VIRGINIA* could sail in shallow waters. In other words, the *VIRGINIA* was too weak and slow to challenge the U. S. Navy on the open ocean but she was too heavy to operate in many shallow, inshore, waters where she might have escaped the Union fleet and gained assistance from shore batteries.

Additionally, most of *MERRIMACK*'s guns lay along the side of the ship as they did in most warships of the day, and could fire only slightly away from right angles to the keel of the ship. Thus, only about half of *MERRIMACK*'s guns could fire at the enemy at any one time. *MERRIMACK* depended on speed to maneuver on the open seas to allow both broadsides to fire at the enemy. In reusing the *MERRIMACK*, the Confederates had to accept the same firing pattern but lacking the speed and maneuverability of the *MERRIMACK*.

VIRGINIA's design was therefore a compromise between old and new construction, between iron and wood, and between blockade-breaker and sea controller. *VIRGINIA*'s was imperfectly suited for either of her intended roles. She drew too much water to serve in many of the rivers and coastal shallows of the south; on the other hand, her engines lacked the power and speed to maneuver her on the open seas.

To these liabilities, the Confederates added divided responsibility for the project. Instead of concentrating overall authority in an individual, they appointed a committee of three, including John Luke Porter and Confederate Navy Lieutenant John M. Brooke who surveyed the hull and found the running gear satisfactory to base conversion of the hull to an [ironclad ram](#). Confederate Navy Captain [French C. Forrest](#) supervised the construction. Together they raised, repaired and re-equipped the *MERRIMACK* as an ironclad ram. However, the divided responsibilities led to debilitating rivalries and conflicts among the constructors and long survived the war.⁷

In battle, *VIRGINIA* proved highly effective against un-armored warships; but unable to defeat other armored vessels. The first ironclad warship to see action, she easily destroyed or dispersed all the wooden U. S. Navy vessels she faced on the first day of battle off Hampton Roads, Virginia, on 8 March 1862. *VIRGINIA*, however, failed to defeat the *MONITOR* in their historic fight on 9 March 1862 and thus failed to break the Union blockade of the South. This allowed *MONITOR*,

⁷ *CSS Virginia*. Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/CSS_Virginia

while equally unable to damage *VIRGINIA*, to accomplish her sole goal of maintaining the Union blockade of the South. *MONITOR* thus became the model for most modern warships, *VIRGINIA* did not.

In the years since the Civil War, historians have given Ericsson the lion's share of the credit for *MONITOR*'s success; the credit for *VIRGINIA* has been in dispute over the years. *VIRGINIA*'s very name is in dispute. The Confederates officially renamed her *CSS VIRGINIA* but most northerners and many southerners continued to refer to her as the "*MERRIMACK*," although they sometimes spelled it "*MERRIMAC*." Confederate Naval Constructor John Luke Porter, for instance, uniformly referred to her as the *MERRIMAC*, not "*MERRIMACK*" or "*VIRGINIA*" in his notebook. For sake of historical accuracy, we have designated her *CSS VIRGINIA* or *VIRGINIA*.

Biographical Sketch of John Luke Porter 1813-1892

John Luke Porter was a Virginian, born in Portsmouth in 1813. He was from a long-established and prominent Portsmouth family that had been successful as merchants and shipbuilders for a number of generations prior to his birth. John's father, Joseph Porter (d. 1831), owned a small but quite advanced shipyard. The Porter yard lay adjacent to the Gosport Naval Shipyard, a large former Royal Navy shipyard that the Navy had purchased after the Revolution. The Gosport Yard continues to exist (2010) as the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard and it remains one of the largest and most important shipyards in the United States. The Porter shipyard built canal boats and sailing ships but also launched steam ships, including the *FREDERICKSBURG*, as early as 1827.⁸

Porter worked in his father's shipyard from an early age and later served as an apprentice to the famous naval constructor Francis Grice. When Joseph Porter died in 1831, the family sold the shipyard. 18-year-old John and his brothers Joseph and Fletcher then sought employment on their own. John and his one-eyed brother Fletcher soon found work as ship carpenters in Portsmouth area shipyards. Joseph Porter became a master block and gun carriage maker at the Gosport Shipyard.⁹

In 1834, John married Susan Naylor Buxton, from nearby Nansemond County, Virginia. Their home also became the home of John's widowed mother, his

⁸ *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 12-13; *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny*, by Alan B. Flanders, White Stone, VA: Brandylane Publishers, Inc., © 2000, pp.1-5

⁹ *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 15-16; *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny*, by Alan B. Flanders, White Stone, VA: Brandylane Publishers, Inc., © 2000, pp.1-3.

bankrupt uncles, and the four children born to John and Susan Porter. In 1842, Porter moved with his wife and four children to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to work on the *USS ALLEGHENY* for the U. S. Navy Department.¹⁰

In his Record of Iron Ships Built (Notebook p. 209), Porter cites working on the “iron steamer” *WATER WITCH* as early as 1842 when he was stationed at the Washington Navy Yard. However, it was during his stay in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, between 1842 and 1847, that Porter first developed the idea of building an ironclad steam-powered warship. He later said that he drew up plans, made a model of the ship, discussed his ideas with his colleagues and then submitted the plans and models to the Navy but got no reply; however, subsequent researchers have not been able to find the plans or models in the Navy’s records. Nor did Porter patent the concept or pursue the matter further.¹¹

Perhaps feeling that his lack of professional qualifications had counted against him, Porter set about redressing that fault. He began to study to take the U.S. Navy naval constructor’s examination. He traveled to the Washington Navy Yard and took the examination in 1847 but did not pass; he eventually passed it in 1857 after an unknown number of failures. The notes Porter compiled during his naval constructor’s examination studies take up the bulk of his notebook (pp. 5-159).¹²

Meanwhile, the *USS ALLEGHENY* project also proved to be somewhat of a disappointment. Launched in 1846, *ALLEGHENY*, the iron-hulled, paddle-wheel-powered, steam warship, suffered continuing mechanical problems throughout her career. She spent 1851-1852 under repair and having her paddle wheels replaced with propellers, but this did not improve her fortunes. At one point, in 1852, there was some hope that *ALLEGHENY* might accompany Commodore Matthew C. Perry’s expedition to “open” Japan, but she failed her preliminary tests and this hope evaporated. Instead, the Navy struck her from the active service list and put her in “ordinary” at the Washington Navy Yard. She did not see combat service during the Civil War. After some years as the receiving ship in Baltimore, she was again taken out of active service and sold for scrap at Norfolk in 1869.¹³

¹⁰ *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 13-14; *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny*, by Alan B. Flanders, White Stone, VA: BrandyLane Publishers, Inc., © 2000, pp.7-9.

¹¹ *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 13-14; *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny*, by Alan B. Flanders, White Stone, VA: BrandyLane Publishers, Inc., © 2000, pp.7-10.

¹² *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 13-14; *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny*, by Alan B. Flanders, White Stone, VA: BrandyLane Publishers, Inc., © 2000, pp.8-9.

¹³ *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 15-16; *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny*, by Alan B. Flanders, White Stone, VA: BrandyLane Publishers, Inc., © 2000, p.9.

Despite this disappointment, Porter returned to Portsmouth, in 1850, and resumed his career as a ship carpenter and his naval constructor studies. He and his brother Joseph became active politically. John also became active in social and civic life and was a leader in the Methodist Church. He won election as the first president of Portsmouth's city council in 1852.¹⁴

In Portsmouth, Porter served under Samuel Hartt, who was the Gosport Navy Yard's maters shipbuilder. In 1853, Hartt became chief of the Navy's Bureau of Construction, which required him to travel and supervise many projects. This left Porter as acting Naval Constructor at the Gosport Yard, a very senior position for the 40 year old who had not yet passed his naval constructor's examination.¹⁵

As acting naval constructor Porter's most notable accomplishment prior to the Civil War was salvaging, rebuilding and resurrecting the historic frigate *USS CONSTELLATION*, of War of 1812 fame as a new sloop of war. Built in 1797, the old *CONSTELLATION* was in very poor condition by the 1853.¹⁶ The timber inspector thought that the Navy should send her to "rotten row" and forget about her. Yet Porter succeeded in restoring her and making her fit for active service by 1854. While technically still under Hartt's supervision, Porter was chiefly responsible for the success of the restoration project. He broke up the old *CONSTELLATION*, saved significant parts of the ship, and then rebuilt her as a virtually new sloop of war, also known as *CONSTELLATION*.¹⁷ As a result of Porter's work, the new *CONSTELLATION* went on to have a successful career in the anti-slavery patrols off the coast of Africa, as a sloop, and as a picket boat in the Mediterranean and the Caribbean protecting American shipping from Confederate raiders. From 1865 to 1933 *CONSTELLATION* served as a receiving and training vessel at Norfolk and other Navy posts. The Navy finally struck her from the active list in 1955 and she became a museum on the Baltimore waterfront.¹⁸

In 1856, Porter helped work on the frigates *USS COLORADO*¹⁹ and *USS ROANOKE*.²⁰ In hindsight this proved a stroke of luck for the *COLORADO*'s

¹⁴ *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 14.

¹⁵ *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 14-15; *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny*, by Alan B. Flanders, White Stone, VA: BrandyLane Publishers, Inc., © 2000, p.15-18.

¹⁶ *USS CONSTELLATION (1797)* <http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/c13/constellation-i.htm>

¹⁷ *USS CONSTELLATION (1854)* <http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/c13/constellation-ii.htm>

¹⁸ *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 14-15; *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny*, by Alan B. Flanders, White Stone, VA: BrandyLane Publishers, Inc., © 2000, p.15-18; *USS CONSTELLATION (1855)* <http://www.history.navy.mil/danfs/c13/constellation-ii.htm>

¹⁹ *USS COLORADO (1856)*. Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Colorado_\(1856\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Colorado_(1856))

²⁰ *USS ROANOKE (1855)* Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Roanoke_\(1855\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Roanoke_(1855))

sister ship was the *USS MERRIMACK*. Later, Porter was able to use his experience in rehabilitating the *CONSTELLATION*²¹ and building the *COLORADO*, in raising and converting the *MERRIMACK* into the *CSS VIRGINIA*.²²

The following year – 1857 - Porter finally passed his naval constructor's examination. This triumph was somewhat diminished by the fact that the Navy obliged U. S. naval constructors to go to whatever post the Navy assigned them. The first of Porter's three such assignments turned out to be at the Pensacola Navy Yard in Pensacola, Florida. By fall 1857, the Porter family and their two slaves Willis and Matilda Hodges had all arrived in Pensacola and settled down to what they probably assumed would be a lengthy stay. They became active in the local Methodist congregation. However, the phase in Porter's life did not prove to be lasting. John's oldest son, George, soon returned to Portsmouth, where he married. His son John and daughters Martha Brent and Alice also left to continue their educations in Virginia and North Carolina. The second daughter, Mary, married the Methodist minister, John S. Moore. Then the Civil War intervened.²³

The Pensacola Navy Yard was far smaller than Gosport Yard but it gave Porter a fine opportunity to develop his skills. While in charge of the Pensacola Yard, Porter designed and built the *USS SEMINOLE*, a screw sloop, launched in 1859. Unfortunately, Porter became embroiled in a lawsuit alleging that he had used inferior materials in constructing *SEMINOLE*. The case ended satisfactorily as far as Porter was concerned but it must have diminished the pleasure he experienced in completing his first ship as a U. S. naval constructor. *SEMINOLE* later did useful service during the Civil War capturing three blockade-runners and participating in the *MONITOR-VIRGINIA* battle and the Battle of Mobile Bay.²⁴

Porter was still working at Pensacola when Abraham Lincoln won the presidential elections in November 1860 thus precipitating the secession crisis. The Porter family felt the shock very quickly. Before the end of November, the Navy Department stopped paying the salaries of the workers at the Pensacola Yard, causing a great deal of distress among the workers' families. Then, on 10 January 1861, Florida voted to secede from the United States and two days after that local

²¹ *USS CONSTELLATION (1797)* Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Constellation_\(1855\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/USS_Constellation_(1855))

²² *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 14-16.

²³ *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 16-17; *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny*, by Alan B. Flanders, White Stone, VA: BrandyLane Publishers, Inc., © 2000, p.25-26.

²⁴ *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 16; *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny*, by Alan B. Flanders, White Stone, VA: BrandyLane Publishers, Inc., © 2000, p.27-29.

militia forces seized control of the Pensacola Yard in bloodless coup. The militia then told the small U. S. Navy contingent to leave the Yard.²⁵

By this time, John's wife Mary had returned to Portsmouth with their daughters, Mary and Alice, and their son, James. Luckily, John quickly received a new assignment, his second, at the Washington Navy Yard in Washington, DC. There he began work outfitting the *USS PAWNEE* and installing machinery in the *USS PENSACOLA*.

While engaged in this work, Porter testified in the court martial of Commodore James Anderson, who had surrendered the Pensacola Navy Yard without a fight. Porter gave a simple factual account of what happened. The court martial found Anderson guilty and suspended him from the service for five years. Luckily for Anderson, however, the initial public indignation at the surrender of the Pensacola Navy Yard to the Confederates passed. Navy then reconsidered the court's decision and allowed Anderson to serve throughout the war. He even returned to command the Pensacola Navy Yard. Apparently, the Navy came to realize that there was little that Anderson could have done to defend the Yard with the few men at his disposal. Porter has left an account of his service in Pensacola in his notebook.²⁶

Porter's situation in Washington must have left him seriously conflicted. Professionally, he could have asked for no better assignment for a naval constructor: in the national capitol with the prospect of war looming. Personally, however, the situation was not nearly so advantageous. His assignment in Washington had separated Porter from his wife and family, who had returned to the family home in Portsmouth, Virginia. If Virginia were to join the Confederacy, the Porters would find themselves divided by the battle lines for an indefinite period. As the prospect of Virginia's secession grew larger, Porter grew more worried and began to request a transfer to be near his family. The chance of this happening, however, seemed low in view of the short period of time he had spent in Pensacola and his recent arrival Washington.

At this point, fate intervened, in Porter's life. Samuel M. Pook, the chief naval constructor at the Gosport Navy Yard, in Portsmouth, Virginia since 1859, and one of Porter's earliest teachers as a naval constructor, decided to leave the South. A strong Unionist, who had no desire to find himself in the South in the event of war, Pook had requested a transfer to a northern shipyard. The request granted, he

²⁵ *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 16; *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny*, by Alan B. Flanders, White Stone, VA: BrandyLane Publishers, Inc., © 2000, p.29-35.

²⁶ *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 205-207. John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858.

moved to St. Louis where he designed and built gunboats for the U. S. Navy. On 1 April 1861, when Porter learned of Pook's transfer, he applied for the vacancy created at Gosport.

Events at this stage were moving with great rapidity. On 12 April, Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter, in the harbor at Charleston, South Carolina. President Lincoln issued his call for 75,000 state militia troops for 90 days service on 15 April. On 17 April, Virginia voted to secede from the Union. Also on 17 April, the Navy Department ordered Porter to report posthaste to the Charles Stewart McCauley, the Commandant of the Gosport Navy Yard to begin his third, last, and shortest assignment for the United States Navy.²⁷

When Porter arrived at the Gosport Yard to report to McCauley, he found all in confusion. The workers were all "standing around" idle, some loyal to the Union, others to the Confederacy, but all uncertain about what to do. Porter was probably equally uncertain and immediately headed home to convene a family conference. He was convinced that the South had little or no chance of winning a war against the North but he was a Virginian, first, and more loyal to Virginia than the United States.²⁸

Meanwhile, in response to the growing threat from secessionist forces, the Navy Department had been taking steps to increase the strength of its naval forces at the Gosport Navy Yard since the middle of March. By the middle of April McCauley, at age 68, was in the same situation that Commandant Anderson had faced in Pensacola. He was desperately trying to avoid blame for "losing" the Gosport Yard if the Confederates seized it. McCauley could take no overt act to protect the Yard because the Navy Department had ordered him to do nothing that the Confederates might see as a hostile act, but he did not have sufficient forces to defend the Yard against serious attack. McCauley had at least eight warships available to help defend the Yard, although some, like the *USS MERRIMACK*, were undergoing repairs. His main problem however was that the federal government had written off the whole Portsmouth area as indefensible lacking a major military relief campaign. Neither the Army nor the Navy had sufficient forces to conduct such a campaign. The main federal interest was to force the South to take the first aggressive steps to seize the Gosport Yard.²⁹

After Virginia voted to secede, the federal interest changed to trying to save the Navy Yard and ships berthed there. This complicated McCauley's problems

²⁷ *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 207-211. *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, pp. 17-21; *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny*, by Alan B. Flanders, White Stone, VA: Brandylane Publishers, Inc., © 2000, p.37-39.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

because all his junior officers and most of the workers were Southerners. They passed information on McCauley's plans and intentions and they tried to keep him confused about Confederate plans and intentions. Unsurprisingly, McCauley turned to drink and became incapable of effective action. Secretary of the Navy Sumner Welles decided to replace him. Welles sent Commodore Hiram Paulding to succeed McCauley. When Paulding arrived on the *USS PAWNEE*, on 20 April, he found that McCauley had decided that the situation was hopeless and had issued orders to destroy the Navy Yard and the ships in it. After a brief survey of the situation, Paulding agreed with McCauley's assessment and ordered that the destruction to continue. With the help of several hundred U. S. troops from the 3rd Massachusetts Regiment, 100 sailors from the *USS CUMBERLAND*, the Marines stationed at the Yard, Paulding began to destroy everything he could destroy. Prior to his arrival, the Navy personnel had scuttled all the ships in the Yard. He ordered the destruction of the warehouses and equipment. In the case of the *USS MERRIMACK*, however, the fires had the effect of protecting the engines and boilers. When the upper decks burned, the engines and boilers were safe below the waterline. More seriously, the attempt to blow up the dry dock failed when the powder charges failed to ignite. The *PAWNEE* and the tug *YANKEE* managed to tow the *CUMBERLAND* out of the Yard to safety but the U. S. Navy had to abandon all the rest of the ships.³⁰

The Navy treated McCauley in much the same way as they had treated Commodore Anderson who had lost Pensacola, except that the Navy forced McCauley to face a court martial. The Navy allowed McCauley to retire from the Navy in December 1861. The Navy judged that McCauley did the best he could in an impossible situation and perhaps did not want to provide the media an opportunity to review its own contribution to the loss of the Yard. McCauley died shortly after the war in May 1869.³¹

Porter says that he resigned as a U. S. Naval Constructor the same day that he reported for duty at Gosport and immediately reported to Commandant French Forrest, who had assumed command of the yard for the State of Virginia.³²

Porter immediately began to work for the Confederacy creating a new Navy at the Rocketts Shipyard near Richmond. He made a beginning with equipment and supplies salvaged from the Gosport Yard. At another yard across the James River from Rocketts he began building ships for the new James River Squadron for the Confederate Navy. During the war, Porter also worked with James Mead to design and supervise construction of a series of ironclads based on the *CSS VIRGINIA*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

They all had shallow draft and casemates like the *VIRGINIA*'s. However, none of these ironclads proved very successful. While lighter than the *VIRGINIA*, they were too under-powered to venture out to sea and too clumsy to navigate in the confined waters of the James River. They served, essentially, floating gun platforms to protect fixed positions, like cities. In the end the Union only destroyed one of Porter's ironclads: the *CSS ALBEMARLE*. Of the twenty-three others, the Union captured three; the Confederates had to destroy the other twenty to prevent them falling into Union hands.³³

As the war neared its end, Porter was in Wilmington, North Carolina working on the *CSS ALBEMARLE*. When Fort Fisher fell and, with it, Wilmington, in late February 1865, he helped burn the *ALBEMARLE* and the other permanent Navy yard facilities. Porter then collected his men and movable equipment and retreated to Halifax, North Carolina, hoping to find a place where he could resume work on the ironclads but found himself blocked by Sherman's Army marching north from Georgia. Soon thereafter, he learned that Richmond would soon fall. At this, Porter seemed to lose heart, too. He furloughed his men and tried to head home, living off the unpaid wages of men who had deserted. However, when he arrived in Raleigh, he learned that Richmond had already fallen and that President Davis had retreated to Danville while General Lee had moved to Appomattox Court House and surrendered his remaining forces to Union commander General Ulysses S. Grant. Barred from returning to Portsmouth, Porter moved on to Greensboro, North Carolina, where General Joseph E. Johnston in command of the last large Confederate Army in the East, had his headquarters, and rented a room. Soon the Confederate cabinet arrived in town, including President Davis, and as Porter recalled, "everything for a while seemed in a fog."³⁴

Porter remained in Greensboro for about a month. During that time General Joseph E. Johnson determined

"that the cause was lost, and made arrangements with General Sherman who was then near Raleigh to surrender his forces which was done on the first day of May /64 [ie 65] and we were paroled, and allowed to go to our homes and not to be molested by the U. S. Government so long as we did not violate the terms of the agreement. I went to Richmond found my family had gone to Portsmouth"³⁵

³³ *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, p. 213.

³⁴ *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 216-233. John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858; *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, p. 214-228.

³⁵ *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. pp. 227-228. John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858.

When Porter got to Portsmouth, he found that his home on County St. “was confiscated and sold to a man named Husted for \$700, by the U. S. Marshall.” The community had fallen apart and “every one seemed for himself, no one seemed to sympathise with me for my losses of house, negroes and situation as U. S. N. constructor.”

The next few years were very hard on Porter both financially and psychologically. From time to time, he applied for various city government positions but without success. When he had been a constructor in the Navy, he remembered,

“I had friends a plenty, but after the war I had none, being left poor, and needy, and I often regretted that I ever gave up my situation which offered me a good living for life, instead of roughing it for a living which I had to do afterwards in the ship yards.”³⁶

In July 1877, George R. Boush, a naval constructor whom Porter had befriended when he had been in charge of the Gosport Yard, hired Porter and put him in charge of the whip sawyers. This, he wrote, “was the first kindness I had received from any one, in these parts, since the close of the war.”³⁷ He later became superintendent of construction at the Barkley Shipyard.

In his final years, Porter carried on a public debate with John Mercer Brooke and Catesby ap Jones who had denied that he had “invented” the *CSS VIRGINIA*. Together with his son, Porter published the story of how he had designed and built the *VIRGINIA* and how Brooke and Jones had distorted the truth of the matter. In doing this, Porter has preserved for history both his own role in Confederate ironclad development, and the best remaining images and accounts of the *VIRGINIA* and her reconstruction.³⁸

Towards the very end of his life, Porter managed to achieve a measure of success. In 1883, at the age of seventy, he won election as superintendent of the Norfolk County Ferries. As superintendent, he also designed several ferries. He served until 1888, when he retired. Financially secure once more, he was able to buy his wife’s old family home and live comfortably. Porter died at age eighty, on 14 December 1893.³⁹

³⁶ *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 233-234. John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858.

³⁷ *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 234, John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858. *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny*, by Alan B. Flanders, White Stone, VA: Brandylane Publishers, Inc., © 2000, p. 127-131.

³⁸ *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, © 2007, p. 214-215.

³⁹ *Norfolk County Ferries Superintendent Election*, in *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 3-4, John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858.

John L. Porter - John M. Brooke Feud

In many instances, the southern version of Civil War history has triumphed over the northern version but this has usually depended on the southerners having a simple and unified point of view. The long-running and bitter *MONITOR* – *VIRGINIA* feud is an exception to this rule. In this battle, a simple and unified southern point of view has been entirely lacking.

The dispute between Naval Constructor John Luke Porter and Lt. John M. Brooke, who also served on the Confederate committee charged with raising and rebuilding the *Merrimack*, about who deserved credit for designing the *VIRGINIA*, began during the rebuilding process and broke into print almost immediately after the *MONITOR* - *VIRGINIA* clash in March 1862. The debate continued for more than thirty years until Porter's death in 1893.

Significant evidence supports both sides of the argument. To this day, some historians give the credit to Brooke while others give it to Porter. Both sides have partisans. The evidence in the notebook completely vindicates Porter but it is also completely one-sided. However, it is not the purpose of this exhibit to settle the argument; rather its purpose is to present Porter's position as he argued it to himself.⁴⁰

In recent years, with the discovery and recovery of the *MONITOR* from the seabed off North Carolina's Outer Banks attention has focused even more strongly on the *MONITOR* and away from the *VIRGINIA*. Thus, it may be useful to bring, again, to the public's attention some information concerning the history of the *VIRGINIA* and one of her designers and builders, John Luke Porter.

Origin of Porter's Naval Constructor's Notebook

Porter began

making entries in this notebook in 1859 while serving at the U. S. Navy Yard in Pensacola, Florida. He intended it as a guide for future naval constructor candidates. In a "Preface" to the notebook, Porter describes that initial purpose:

This little book contains what is requisite for a candidate to know before he can pass a creditable examination as a constructor in the U. S. Navy. It was completed by myself after my examination as such for a reference, for it will readily be seen after a full perusal of it, that it would be next to impossible for any person to retain it all for any length of time, but if the book is at

⁴⁰ For more on the Porter-Brooke dispute, see for example: *Ironclad Down: USS Merrimack-CSS Virginia from Design to Destruction*, by Carl D. Park, Annapolis, MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2007, p. 194.

hand, he could soon refresh himself in case he forgot any part of it. . . . The workings of the displacements, centre of gravity, meta centre, centre of effort of the sails, scale of capacity, &c, &c, have been taken from Steele's works on naval architecture and are the best and plainest now in use⁴¹

The initial appraisers of the notebook took Porter at his word and assumed that he had filled the entire volume with this notebook of information required to pass the naval constructors examination. Upon further processing of the collection, however, the curatorial staff realized that this was untrue. They discovered that the *Naval Constructor Candidates Examination Notes* was limited to the first 191 pages of the notebook.⁴² Derived from earlier published works, it was a compendium of useful information for passing the U. S. naval constructor's examinations.

Interspersed throughout the notebook, the curatorial staff found a fascinating series of other entries. Inside the front cover, Porter had pasted the *Directions for Loading and Handling the [Fixed Fuze] Shell*. A printed broadside, it apparently removed it from the munitions' packaging.⁴³ Between the Title Page and the Preface Porter had inserted an account of his election as Superintendent of the Norfolk County Ferries on 27 December 1882.⁴⁴ Later, they discovered copies of several letters and autobiographical accounts of Porter's Civil War experiences, probably written or re-written between 1872 and 1878 in his own hand. Porter wrote some of these accounts on blank pages within the text of his earlier naval constructors' notebook; he wrote others on separate pages and pasted them into the notebook. He also included in the postwar material a draft or copy of a letter he had written to Thomas Oliver Selfridge, a naval officer who had come out of retirement to command the Boston Navy Yard and father of Lt. Thomas Oliver Selfridge, Jr. who had been wounded while serving aboard the USS CUMBERLAND during its battle with CSS VIRGINIA.⁴⁵

The notebook also includes the texts of two autobiographical accounts described below. These autobiographical accounts, entitled *True History of the Iron-Clad*

⁴¹ *Preface*, in *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 5, John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858.

⁴² *Naval Constructor Candidates Examination Notes*, in *John L. Porter Notebook* pp. 5-163, 182-191, John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858.

⁴³ *Directions for Loading and Handling the [Fixed Fuze] Shell* in *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. Inside Front Cover. John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858.

⁴⁴ *Superintendent of the Norfolk County Ferries*, in *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 3-4. John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858.

⁴⁵ *John Porter's Letter to Thomas Oliver Selfridge (21 December 1872)* in: *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 195-204, John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858; See also Biographical Notes.

*Steamer Merrimac 1861 & 2 (1874)*⁴⁶ and *A Short History of Myself during the War of 1861 (27 May 1878)*⁴⁷ partly overlap with one another and are generally consistent with Porter's wartime testimony and his reports to the Confederate Congress. They are also consistent with his letters to various newspapers disputing Lt. Brooke's claims to have designed the *CSS VIRGINIA*, which have appeared in print elsewhere.⁴⁸

In these accounts, Porter describes his evolution from Union to Confederate Naval Constructor during 1860-1861. He also recounts the Confederate takeover of the Pensacola and Gosport Navy Yards. Besides describing in detail the reconstruction of the *VIRGINIA*, Porter assesses the battle damage she suffered and the repairs he made after her first encounters with the Union fleet and the *MONITOR*.

In *A Short History of Myself during the War of 1861 (27 May 1878)*, Porter reviews his wartime experiences as a Confederate naval constructor beginning with the presidential election of 1860 and the spread of the secession movement. He describes the seizure of the Pensacola Navy Yard by a "battalion" of five companies of Alabama volunteers and its surrender by Commodore Anderson. He goes on to discuss his transfer to the Washington Navy Yard, his post from November through mid-April 1861. He then discusses his transfer to the Gosport Navy Yard in Portsmouth, Virginia and his arrival (20 April 1861) in the midst of its destruction and evacuation by the U. S. Navy and its seizure by the State of Virginia. He discusses his subsequent role as naval constructor at the Gosport Navy Yard, including mounting defensive batteries, clearing the wreckage, and the raising and reconstruction of the *CSS VIRGINIA*. He also discusses his appointment by President Jefferson Davis to be a naval constructor for the Confederate States and the shipyards he established and his role in building and repairing ships for the Confederacy. He relates his promotion to Chief Naval Constructor for the Confederate Navy, and his subsequent travels throughout the Confederacy supervising the construction of warships. Especially noteworthy is Porter's account of his experiences from the fall of Fort Fisher, North Carolina in January 1865 to General Joseph E. Johnston's surrender at Greensboro, North Carolina in May 1865. Porter vividly recollects the death of the Confederacy and analyzes the reasons for its defeat.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ *True History of the Iron-Clad Steamer Merrimac 1861 & 2*, in: *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 164-179, John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858.

⁴⁷ *A Short History of Myself During the War of 1861 (1878)*, in: *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 205-234, John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858.

⁴⁸ *C.S.S. Virginia (Merrimack): Story of Her Construction, Battles &c*, by John L. Porter, pp. 1-16, Navy Collection, Misc. Box 2 / Porter, Eleanor Brockenbrough Library, The Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.

⁴⁹ *A Short History of Myself During the War of 1861 (27 May 1878)*, in: *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 205-234, John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858.

The copy of the letter from Porter to Thomas O. Selfridge, is dated Portsmouth, Virginia 21 December 1872. Selfridge was a retired naval officer who had commanded the Boston Navy Yard during the Civil War. His son, also a naval officer, had served aboard the *CUMBERLAND* during her battle with the *VIRGINIA*, and had later served aboard the *MONITOR*.⁵⁰ The letter includes material also discussed in the *True History of the Iron-Clad Steamer Merrimac 1861 & 2 (1874)* and *A Short History of Myself during the War of 1861 (27 May 1878)* but adds significant additional information, including two sketches showing details of the *VIRGINIA*'s ram and armor.

The Porter Notebook also includes a copy of an undated letter from Samuel Moore Pook, one of Porter's instructors as a naval constructor, in which Pook proves how "a small size ship of war will carry more cargo than a large one on the same draft of water."⁵¹

Further, Porter includes a list of all the ironclad ships⁵² he had designed and built over the years, the lyrics to a War of 1812-era popular song entitled *Hornet and Peacock*.⁵³

Digital Exhibit Project

Between 2001 and 2010, with the assistance of Special Collections Department staff, the editor has transcribed, edited and digitized the entire notebook including both the naval constructors' notebook and the autobiographical materials relating to Porter's Civil War experiences.

In transcribing the notebook the editor has attempted to reproduce accurately both Porter's style and substance. In the interest of readability, the editor has occasionally standardized and corrected Porter's spelling and punctuation. He has also attempted to render in electronic format Porter's mathematical equations. In addition, the editor has provided a glossary of naval, mathematical, nautical, and other terms used by Porter in the text. The editor has also provided directories of most persons, places and ships mentioned in the text, omitting only those too well

⁵⁰ *John Porter's Letter to Thomas Oliver Selfridge (21 December 1872)*, in: *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 195-204, John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858; Porter also reproduced the letter in *C.S.S. Virginia (Merrimack): Story of Her Construction, Battles &c.*, by John L. Porter, pp. 1-16, Navy Collection, Misc. Box 2 / Porter, Eleanor Brockenbrough Library, The Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, VA.

⁵¹ *Samuel Moore Pook's Letter to John L. Porter (undated)*, in: *John L. Porter Notebook*, pp. 180-182, John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858.

⁵² *Record of Iron Clads*, in: *John L. Porter Notebook*, p. 192, John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858

⁵³ *Hornet & Peacock*, p. 194, John L. Porter Collection #850, Special Collections Department, Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858; Lyrics & music for the "Hornet & Peacock" is available online at: <http://sniff.numachi.com/pages/tiHRNTPEAK;tiHRNTPEAK.html> ; & <http://back.numachi.com:8000/dtrad/midi/HRNTPEAK.midi>

known or of too little significance to require explanation. Where necessary, the editor has occasionally provided footnotes corroborating or explaining Porter's statements in the manuscript. Where online versions of these citations are available, the editor has included them as links for further reading.

In digitizing the notebook, the editor has also uncovered several, never before published, details. Among the most interesting of these details, now available online for the first time, are two sketches that Porter made, including a horizontal elevation of the *CSS VIRGINIA* dated 1862 and two detail drawings of her armor plating, showing how Porter strengthened her after her battle with the *MONITOR*.

Porter's notebook appears here in print and in its entirety for the first time. The *Hornet and Peacock* lyrics and the Selfridge letter have both appeared in print on numerous occasions although Porter's version is somewhat different from most others. The Civil War material from Porter's notebook has also appeared in print before although not in the same sequence. Alan B. Flanders' 141-page biography of Porter, entitled *John L. Porter: Naval Constructor of Destiny* (White Stone, VA: Brandylane Publishers, © 2000) includes transcriptions of Porter's Civil War material from the notebook although he does not cite a repository for the collection. Flanders also intersperses his own descriptions of events between passages drawn from the Porter notebook. The transcriptions of the text in the present publication are new and drawn directly from the original notebook, not from the Flanders book. Also entirely new are the, glossary of terms, list of ships and places mentioned in the text, the biographical notes, and the footnotes explicating the text.

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