

# CIVIL WAR TREASURES: With the Navy in the Western Gulf: The John R. Hamilton Papers

Michael Taylor

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## Feature Essay

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**Taylor, Michael** *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: With the Navy in the Western Gulf: The John R. Hamilton Papers.*

On April 19, 1861, one week into the Civil War, President Lincoln announced his plan to blockade all southern ports from Virginia to Texas. The blockade's purpose was twofold. Southern products, particularly cotton and sugar, would be kept in and, by the same token, foreign manufactured goods would be kept out. A ruined economy, Lincoln and his advisers believed, would bring the South to its knees and the war to a speedy end.

Illicit trade, of course, continued. A collection of papers recently acquired by the LSU Libraries' Special Collections sheds new light on this trade. Dating from 1863 to 1865 and consisting chiefly of drafts of letters and official reports, the John R. Hamilton Papers document U.S. Navy operations in the Mississippi Sound, Lake Pontchartrain, and other waterways along the Gulf Coast near New Orleans, an area rife with smugglers, blockade runners, and Confederate guerrillas. The papers also contain information on escaped slaves ("contrabands"), refugees, and miscellaneous affairs of the West Gulf Blockading Squadron. Several reports give details on Union operations at Ship Island, Mississippi, the staging ground for the Federal advance on New Orleans in the spring of 1862. These reports include information on the USS *Vincennes*, an 18-gun sloop-of-war stationed at Ship Island to prevent its recapture by Confederates. (The *Vincennes*, the first American warship to circumnavigate the globe, is perhaps best known in history as the flagship of the Wilkes Expedition to Antarctica in 1838-42.)

A typical incident that the Hamilton papers record occurred in January 1864. Hamilton, a Pennsylvania native and commander of the USS *Commodore* and later the USS *Fort Gaines*, was escorting the steamer *Kate Dale* up the Tchefuncte River, a tributary of Lake Pontchartrain, to pick up a load of lumber and transport it across the lake to Union-occupied New Orleans. This part of Louisiana, known as the Northshore, was still Confederate territory and would

remain so until the war's end. To ensure the *Kate Dale* could safely pick up its cargo, Hamilton sent ahead a party of sharpshooters from the 12th Maine, who reported seeing twelve to fifteen guerrillas in the area. Hamilton's men then spent several days guarding a sawmill; while doing so, they picked up a number of refugees, including women and children, from Mobile, as well as seven contrabands. A detailed list of former slaves serving under Hamilton is available in the collection.

U.S. Navy vessels performed similar escorts on the Amite, Blind, Tickfaw, Tangipahoa, and Pascagoula Rivers, occasionally surprising small bands of Confederates. On one mission, for example, a crew lobbed "a shell from our 20-pound rifle at a squad of rebel cavalry who immediately fled into the woods and out of sight." Sometimes it must have seemed as if they were playing a game of cat and mouse with the enemy, the Confederates staying one step ahead, leaving still-warm campfires, burned houses, and a trail of terror in their wake. Especially vulnerable were planters and others who had taken the oath of loyalty to the Union, perhaps to be able to trade legally with New Orleans. Such men were seen as turncoats. "I was informed," Hamilton noted in one report, "that [the rebels] had shot a man named Watkins, who had lately taken the oath to the federal government, and taken one man prisoner."

The Hamilton collection also documents efforts to destroy factories and other sources of Confederate military supplies, as in the case of a tannery at Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. Owned by a Frenchman named Pierre Sirvant, it was burned by Hamilton of the USS *Commodore* and Francis H. Grove of the USS *Corypheus* in October 1863.

Not all of the actions reported in the Hamilton papers were against Confederates. One report, for example, gives details of the capture of a deserter from the U.S. 2nd Louisiana Regiment Infantry, John McCaul, who with three others had been committing robberies in St. Tammany Parish.

Other items of interest include printed letters intended to be read on deck of all vessels in the West Gulf Blockading Squadron. A letter from Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles offers his congratulations on the capture of Mobile, while two letters from Rear Admiral David G. Farragut reveal the severity of Navy discipline during the Civil War. One of the Farragut letters relates to the court martial of Dennis J. Maguire of the USS *Richmond*, sentenced to one year's hard labor for leaving his post before being regularly relieved. The other is on the trial

of William H. Miller, engineer of the ironclad *Manhattan*, for insubordination and use of disrespectful language.

“Most of the Civil War collections we have or that are offered to us relate to soldiers or the operations of the U.S. or Confederate armies, so I was excited to be able to acquire this group because it details naval operations, which are less well-documented in our holdings,” said Interim Head of Special Collections Tara Z. Laver. “These on-the-ground (or on-the-water, as the case may be) reports of blockade and guerilla activity illustrate the uncertain and dangerous conditions that existed in the space between occupied New Orleans and the still-Confederate Northshore.”