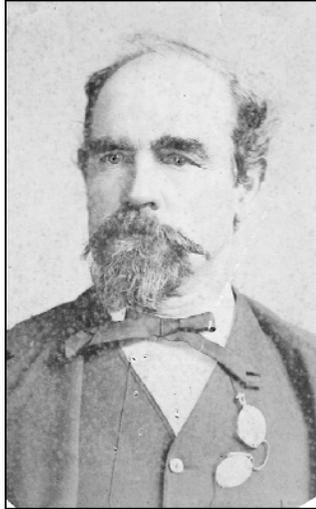


Daring Exploits of Capt. Charles W. Austin

by

Georgia Grafton Austin

One of the most daring and heroic men in the Confederate navy was Capt. Charles W. Austin ... He was, jointly with Capt. John A. Stevens, the designer and constructor of the first ironclad ever built, the Confederate ram Manassas, which he commanded. The Monitor and the Merrimac are generally referred to as the first successful efforts in ironclad architecture ... But for the Manassas, the Merrimac would probably never have been built.



The first ironclad, the Enoch Train, a towboat on the Mississippi, was purchased by Mr. Stevens before the Federals had been driven from the field of Bull Run. It was a powerful vessel, with twin screws and mammoth engines for a craft of its size. One hundred and eighty feet in length, it was registered at about 100 tons. Hauled upon the ways at New Orleans, builders swarmed over its hull, while all the city laughed at the plans laid down by the two captains. It was sheathed above the water line, under the direction of Commander Austin, with two thicknesses of railroad rails, and was fitted with a ram of iron pointing out beneath about five feet in length.

Before the vessel had been completed the blockade of the Mississippi was established. A commodore stationed at New Orleans refused to man the vessel, and shared the accepted belief that she was useless. Permission to call for volunteers was given however. With a crew of nineteen men, she steamed down the river to its mouth. There lay four sloops-of-war bearing a total armament of fifty-six guns.

Of all the twenty souls aboard, Capt. Austin alone stood upon the deck. Bearing down at full speed upon the blockading fleet, he aimed for the steam sloop-of-war Richmond, twenty-two guns. In the teeth of a hail of fire thundering from half a hundred cannon, the intrepid commander, standing



alone and in open sight from every vessel, commanded the engineer to pile on more coal under the boilers. Broadside after broadside came, crashing about him like the fury of hell. Plowing through the water with all the speed of which the vessel was capable, it was seen too late that a coal schooner lay between the ram and its victim. Without swerving, the Manassas

steamed on. Solid shot crashed and broke upon the iron sides, but still Capt. Austin stood unhurt. With an awful shock the ironclad cut through the sailing vessel and plunged her spur far into the wooden sides of the Richmond ...

The Manassas backed away unhurt, with its gallant captain still standing on the deck. ... The Richmond, however, was a wreck, while the coal schooner was already at the bottom of the sea. In hot haste the remainder of the Federal fleet were steaming away from the monster that had attacked them. The Confederate vessel was left alone and the blockade was temporarily broken. But in getting away from its victims the port engine of the ram had been broken. Pursuit was impossible. Slowly, the Manassas steamed back to New Orleans only to be later vitally injured. She was run upon a sand bank to save the crew and was there abandoned by force of circumstances, never to sail to sea again.

But the advantage of an ironclad vessel of war had been demonstrated. The Manassas had been unarmed. At the same time the power of a craft of her stamp, manned by a sufficient crew and mounted with guns of large bore, was recognized ...

While his parents resided in Ohio, Capt. Austin lived in the Lone Star State and commanded a vessel of the Harris-Morgan line, plying between New Orleans and Galveston. With the outbreak of the war his sympathies were with the South. ...

Four of his brothers were with the Union Army, while another was in the Confederate army. He was the only one who took to the sea. For four years his life was filled with daring exploit after exploit. Three times he was in prison, twice escaping After the Manassas had been abandoned he took to blockade running, and from that time one feat of daring crowded rapidly upon the other.

But it was in Galveston harbor that the last and most brilliant event in a Civil War career occurred under the eyes of the entire city. ... In broad daylight Capt. Austin ran the blockade of the port with his ship, the Susanna, and brought provisions and war supplies to a distressed land.

It was in the last year of the struggle, the result of which was already forgone. Almost all of the blockaded ports along the Atlantic and the Gulf had been captured, and the entire Southern squadron was blockading the harbor. ... The Susanna was built on the Clyde, and was a long, low steamer built for speed and concealment. Time after time she had run into Galveston harbor through the fleet collected outside, but always before at night. ...

Her last run was momentous. Leaving Havana with a cargo of gun-powder and provision, calculations had been made, as formerly, to arrive off the harbor under the cover of darkness, but a break in the machinery caused delay. Steaming along, Capt. Austin found himself one morning but a few miles off Galveston and in sight of the blockading fleet.

As yet he was unseen, owing to the low construction of his ship, and he decided to run out to sea; but inquiry below elicited the information that the supply of coal would not be sufficient for twelve hours more. The only alternative was to make for a place of concealment under the shore, and thitherward the prow was turned.

But the overhanging smoke had attracted the attention of the fleet, and a ship-of-war was fast bearing down upon the daring blockade runners. Without a moment's hesitancy Capt. Austin determined to run the gauntlet. The course was again changed and the Susanna headed directly for the bar. A dozen ships bared her way.

With great clouds of smoke pouring from her funnels, and all attempt at concealment thrown to the winds, the swift Susanna rushed on, seemingly to sure destruction. Soon she came within range and every vessel opened up on her from a long distance. The Seminole was in the lead and sent solid shot across the bow of the long, dark ship that fairly skimmed the water, foam splashed up over the deck, but the warning had no effect.

Cutting in, the warship decreased the distance between it and the Susanna until objects could be plainly seen from one deck to the other. Shot after shot went screaming through the air toward the blockade runner, but still she kept her course. The regular channel was blocked, but she went straight ahead. Raked fore and aft, the Susanna, quivering like a frightened animal, rushed on. All Galveston was on the wharves watching the engagement, hoping and praying for the safety of their vessel.

Suddenly the course of the Susanna was changed. Doubling around the Seminole, she made straight for shallow water and the bar. On board the sloop of war they believed her captain had decided to beach her, and the chase was taken up in the hope of capturing the crew and preventing the absolute destruction of the vessel.

But it was a part of the trick. Another turn, that sent the water swirling under the prow, and the course was again changed. Crossing at a dangerous and generally unknown place on the short bar, the Susanna entered the deeper channel of the bay. Her prow had been shot away and both smokestacks were wrecked, but, riddled with shot and shell as she was, she steamed slowly to the wharves and discharged her cargo. ...

On the next voyage the ship commanded by Capt. Austin was cornered and captured at sea by a federal sloop of war and he was taken to Philadelphia in his own vessel, there to be thrown into prison. A short time afterward the struggle was ended.

Returning to Galveston, the hero went back to the merchant marine and again took command of a Morgan liner. It was at this time that he met and married Miss Georgia Grafton, who resided in the Texas seaport. ... Sometime later the couple removed to Savannah, where Capt. Austin took charge of the construction of the jetties at the mouth of the river. There the family of two sons and one daughter grew up from childhood to maturity.

Charles W. Austin (1833-1889) and Georgia Grafton Austin (1844-1913) were great grandparents of Vincent Smith Jr., who provided the booklet from which these portions have been excerpted. Captain Austin, born in Connecticut, was a descendant of John Austin of New Haven and the nephew of Texas pioneers John Austin and William Tennant Austin (subject of an article in the February 2010 issue of the Newsletter).

Vincent Smith, Jr.