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# G R E Y L A D Y

## DIVERS RACE THE CLOCK TO SEE IF THE CONFEDERATE SHIP *CSS GEORGIA* CAN BE RAISED

IT'S A HOT, STICKY AFTERNOON in Savannah – but for underwater archeologist Matt Elliott, it's about to get a lot hotter and a whole lot wetter.

Weighted down by an air tank hanging on his back, Matt uses two gloved hands to lift a heavy diving helmet and set it down on his broad shoulders. Clamping the airtight seal snugly around his neck, Matt gazes at the crew of the Research Vessel *Nautilus* through a clear visor thick and strong enough to stop a bullet.

Then, giving a thumbs up and grasping the ladder hanging from the ship's stern, Matt steps off the deck and into the soupy, black waters of the Savannah River.

It's one small step for Matt – but a giant leap in the effort to study Savannah's most important shipwreck.

Savannah in the early 1860's was a city under the gun – literally. With enemy soldiers garrisoned just down the river at Fort Pulaski, and federal warships stationed just offshore, the city was cut off from the outside world.

Starved for money and resources, and robbed of the ability to market Georgia cotton and other products, Savannah needed a savior – and true to the panache and creativity that have defined Savannahians since the founding of their city, Savannah came up with its own solution: the *CSS Georgia*.

Ladies around the state raised thousands of dollars through fundraisers and donations, and gave the money to create a homemade warship – to be known as the "ladies' gunboat."

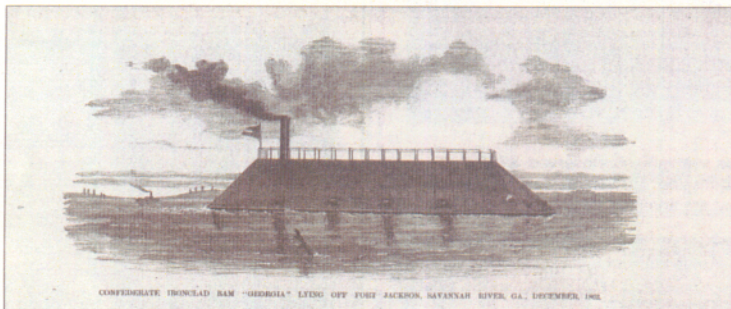
It was the only ship ever given to the Confederate Navy through private funding. Though many details of the ship's construction are lost, we do know the ship's sides were armored with hundreds of tons of heavy railroad iron – thick enough to protect against the heaviest shell the enemy could send its way.

In honor of the contributions made by women throughout Georgia, commanders named the ship *CSS Georgia*. As the cannon-armed ship steamed down the Savannah River, the beleaguered people of Savannah had high hopes she would steam out and smash through the federal blockade.

They quickly realized it was not to be. The *Georgia's* greatest strength was also its biggest weakness; the iron armor was too heavy.

The *Georgia's* over-worked steam engines were too weak to propel her against the fast-moving currents of the Savannah River.

Archeologist Erv Garrison, who spearheaded some of the first studies of the *Georgia's* wreck, describes the dilemma: "She had to have a little tug push her around. That's not



A period rendering of the *CSS Georgia* before the ironclad's ill-fated trip down the Savannah River

exactly the image of a combat ship: 'We're coming now – don't move!'

Disappointed, Savannah's Confederate naval commanders eventually anchored the *Georgia* near Fort Jackson, where she served as a floating battery to repel any Union attack from the sea.

Though the Confederates didn't know it at the time, historians now believe the *Georgia* may have helped keep Union skippers offshore from ever attacking Savannah from the sea.

But in 1864, as General Sherman's army burned Atlanta and continued its unstoppable march to the sea, the *Georgia* was no longer able to defend the city. The ship's crew sank her as they fled, and she dropped like a rock to the bottom of the Savannah River.

Time and tides eventually erased the memory of the unique ship – until in 1968, when a dredge scooping out the channel bottom crashed into the ship's thick iron sides, thrusting the *CSS Georgia* back into the limelight.

For the past quarter century, The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Savannah District has worked to study and preserve the *Georgia's* remains. In the years following the re-discovery of the ship, the Corps funded numerous dives to study the condition of the wreck.

In the 1980's, there was even talk of raising the *Georgia*, restoring her, and putting her on display for tourists at Old Fort Jackson. Unfortunately, the limited archeological tools of the day, combined with the multi-million dollar price tag associated with raising the wreck, put those plans on hold.

"She's still doing her job," Erv Garrison tells us. "She's still out there, and she's still causing us problems. Technologically, we can do almost anything we want with the shipwreck. The bottom line is, how much are you going to spend?"

Still, there's no question the *Georgia* holds countless secrets about how the Civil War was fought. Garrison says the vessel is a rare surviving example of the ironclad warships that emerged during the War Between the States.

"We don't have any of these vessels preserved in real good shape," he says. "We've got drawings, we've got testimonials, we've got records – but we don't have a real boat to look at and say, 'Okay, this is what they really looked like.'"

He adds there are also clues aboard the ship about how Confederate sailors lived and fought, saying the *Georgia's* crew "left with just their personal belongings and weapons, and they joined (Confederate General) Hardee's retreat out of Savannah. All of the other materials were left on board the ship – like foot lockers and personal effects, bottles in the galley, and stores, and all the weapons they couldn't carry – are still stored in that wreck."

Ironically, plans to deepen the Savannah River Channel where the *Georgia's* wreck lies – plans that would otherwise send dredges plowing right over the ship – may hold the key to the ship's salvation.

As one of the many required studies as part of its proposal to further deepen the Savannah Harbor, the Georgia Ports Authority has partnered with the Corps of Engineers to fund a new study of the wreck's condition, trying to determine if the *Georgia* can be moved, raised, or otherwise preserved – and what it will cost.

Imagine what it would be like to close your eyes, step into a wind tunnel, and complete an obstacle course in a limited amount of time. Throw in thousands of gallons of dark, turbid water—and you've got a rough idea of what divers are up against on the bottom of the Savannah River.

They call it blackwater diving – and it's an apt description. Divers claw their way around inch by inch in the mud on the river bottom, working against a strong saltwater tide.

Often, a diver must cling desperately to the dive line with one hand—and use the other to measure huge chunks of old iron wreckage sticking up out of the muck. All of this in water so murky it swallows up every bit of light, leaving a diver unable to see anything more than six inches past his visor.



The research ship *Nautilus*

# D O W N

Erv Garrison, who spearheaded efforts to study the wreck back in the 1980's, said, "when you're down there, you sometimes feel like you're a flag on a flagpole. It's that difficult to maintain your position. It's impossible to work on an outgoing tide." It's a job Garrison refers to as "archeology by braille."

But this time around, archeologists have high-tech tools that are giving sight to the otherwise blind divers on the bottom. Before the latest round of dives began, archeologists made repeated surveys of the wreck site with a Klein Systems 3000 side-scan sonar.

Motoring back and forth over the *Georgia* with a sonar "fish" in tow, the researchers used sound to take still pictures of wreckage on the river bottom—much like a doctor uses an ultrasound to show an expectant mom images of her unborn child.

Now, the team is using another type of sonar to take real-time images of divers on the bottom. A sonar tech on the research vessel *Nautilus* uses the sonar to guide a diver to a particular portion of the wreck.



Mike Krivor recording findings

The diver then uses an acoustic positioning device to send an electronic signal back to the ship, giving the crew an exact read on his position. Computers synthesize all this information into a detailed map of the wreck, inch-by-inch along the bottom.

Gordon Watts, one of two chief underwater archeologists tapped to lead the team, says, "Here, where you have no visibility and virtually no references, it's extremely important to be able to direct the diver to the things we want to identify. Under ideal conditions, the sonar gives an almost photographic image of what's on the bottom."

Surprisingly, there are some things you can do yourself that may mean more to the search than anything the divers accomplish on the river bottom.

Judy Wood, a Corps of Engineers archeologist who's personally shepherded the *Georgia* project since the 1980's, is sending out a call for people around the country to dig through their trunks, attics, and family records for anything that might shed light on the *Georgia*.

"What we're going to find on the *Georgia* is going to be in grandma's attic," Wood tells us. "It's going to be descendants of the

Ladies Gunboat Committee, descendants of the soldiers that built the vessel, descendants of the crew — and descendants of the people who lived in Savannah at the time. Those are the most likely people to have documents about the *CSS Georgia*."

One such document has already surfaced. Harold Johnson of Brunswick saw an article about the *Georgia* in a local newspaper, and remembered an old letter stashed away decades ago.

In it, federal harbor surveyor Charles Boutelle gives the following description of the *Georgia's* wreck in 1865: "This vessel was simply scuttled and sunk, and now lies with her armament and machinery and all her appointments precisely where she went down."

Believe it or not, that one simple sentence is a gold mine of information, because it tells archeologists more about how the *Georgia* sank. Conflicting stories had the *Georgia's* crew either burning or blowing up the ship to keep it out of enemy hands.

But Boutelle's letter — coming from a reliable source — will help

the divers understand the jumbled iron mess they're seeing in the mud.

"That's a very important little fact from a primary source by a trained professional, who was gathering info for a very specific reason," Wood explains.

It's also unclear exactly what the *Georgia* looked like, how big she was, or how many propellers she had. It's possible you might have a letter, a diary, or a photograph that can answer important questions and help archeologists unravel this underwater mystery.

If you think you do, call Judy Wood at the Corps of Engineers at 652-5794. ▀

Learn more about the *Georgia* by visiting [www.sas.usace.army.mil/CSS/index.htm](http://www.sas.usace.army.mil/CSS/index.htm) If you'd like to see the divers working over the wrecksite, visit Old Fort Jackson off President Street, and look for the research vessel *Nautilus* in the river. Archeologists will be diving weekly through August.

Michael Jordan is co-anchor of News 3 at 5, 6, and 11 on WSAV-TV 3, Savannah's NBC affiliate. Michael has been covering the *Georgia* for WSAV for more than two years. E-mail him at [mjordan@wsav.com](mailto:mjordan@wsav.com)