

Delta Sources and Resources

USS *Cairo* Museum & Gunboat
Vicksburg National Military Park
Vicksburg, MS
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Mound City, Illinois but was named for Cairo, Illinois. A full complement was comprised of 175 men: 158 Sailors and 17 Officers. Designed for river navigation, *Cairo* could float in as little as six feet of water. In naval terms, the City Class were “able to navigate heavy dew.”

Traveling with a flotilla of other vessels up



The USS *Cairo*

All photographs in this article are courtesy of the author.

“Abandon Ship!” rang out a few minutes before noon, December 12, 1862 and shortly thereafter, the USS *Cairo* was destined to become a time capsule. Built by James Buchanan Eads for use on the western rivers, *Cairo* was commissioned in January of 1862. She was one of seven vessels making up the “City Class,” a class of vessels named for cities along the Ohio and upper Mississippi Rivers. *Cairo* was built in

the Yazoo River, *Cairo* was on a mission to find and destroy torpedoes or underwater mines that had been planted in the river by Confederates. Hearing small arms fire and thinking that the flotilla was under attack, Lieutenant Commander, Thomas Oliver Selfridge commanded his vessel to proceed to the front of the flotilla. *Cairo*’s paddlewheel had turned just barely a dozen revolutions when she was struck by a torpedo or underwater mine on her starboard side;

shortly thereafter, *Cairo* was struck a second time, this time on her port bow, dislodging her Number One Gun and leaving a large gaping hole. At first, Selfridge thought that he might be able to save his vessel and he ordered that she be run aground, however, as *Cairo* began to take on more water, Selfridge realized that his efforts were futile. He then gave the dreaded command. No lives were lost on that cool, cloudy December day. *Cairo*'s youngest crewman, George Yost later wrote in his journal, "*Cairo* went down with her Colors flying." She was sunk in only twelve minutes, her crew unable to save many of their belongings as they jumped through the gun ports to escape the sinking vessel.

Entombed beneath the muddy waters of the Yazoo River for over one hundred years, divers discovered, upon entering *Cairo*, that she was in time capsule form. Her guns were still loaded and ready for firing and sailors' personal possessions, weaponry and cookware were just as they had been left behind in December of 1862. Divers brought up smaller objects from the vessel, including various types of bottles and leather book covers revealing that *Cairo* had carried two Holy Bibles and one French grammar book.

A private group of individuals calling themselves "Operation *Cairo*" donated time, equipment, and money with the sole purpose of raising and preserving the gunboat and its artifacts. Although the plan was to raise *Cairo* intact, the vessel was so heavy, that she broke in half, falling back into the river. A decision was then made to cut her into three sections, salvaging as much as possible. The raising was completed exactly 102 years to the date of her sinking on December 12, 1964. Warren County (of which Vicksburg is the county seat) had ownership of *Cairo* at this time, but because the county lacked funding to restore it, ownership was eventually transferred to the state of Mississippi. The ironclad was towed downstream, by barge to Pascagoula, Mississippi, to Ingalls Shipyard, where she remained for 13 years.

While at Ingalls, the ironclad was pieced back together. During this time, a system of hoses was run throughout the vessel to keep it wet in an effort to preserve the wood.

In 1973, the National Park Service gained title to *Cairo* and in 1977 the vessel was transported back to Vicksburg, Mississippi, again by barge. Once it arrived, she was trucked to her final resting place within Vicksburg National Military Park, below the US Navy Monument, about eight miles into the Vicksburg National Military Park tour route and just before entering Vicksburg National Cemetery.

Upon her arrival at Vicksburg National Military Park, *Cairo* was placed in a dry berth. A canopy was later constructed over the vessel for protection from the weather. Restoration was conducted by a division of the National Park Service, the Denver Service Center. Local experts in the fields of carpentry, welding, and painting were hired to work with the Denver Service Center to assist in *Cairo*'s restoration using a method called "Ghosting." This method utilized all useable original sections of the vessel. "Ghosting" framework was used for support of the original wooden fabric and also to fill in the missing pieces of the vessel so as to give a more complete picture of *Cairo*. Following landscaping and placement of wayside exhibits, *Cairo* opened for public access in 1985.

The USS *Cairo* Museum was constructed adjacent to the vessel and serves as a repository for the thousands of *Cairo* objects discovered aboard the vessel. Opened on October 24, 1980, the museum was dedicated on November 21, 1980. Since the gunboat's restoration was still in progress, visitors could come to the site, watch the restoration and take a tour through the museum.

Visitors entering the triangularly shaped museum, which symbolizes war and aggression, will see angled walls representing the vessel's slanting casemates, as well as triangular ceiling panels that also represent war and aggression. Artifact platforms depict the river banks where objects were brought from the vessel. There vis-

itors can view dominoes, watches, pipes, soap, tobacco, weapons, mess gear and cooking utensils and even candles—all revealing how these men of so long ago lived. We have learned many things from examining the artifacts. *Cairo* is important in telling that part of history that has not been told before.

Also displayed is the *Cairo*'s 400 pound brass bell cast in 1860 by the "G. W. COFFIN & CO BUCKEYE BELL FOUNDRY," of Cincinnati. As the bell was being brought up, a bubble of air, trapped beneath the bell since the vessel's sinking, bubbled to the surface.

Artifacts exhibited within the museum include some made by companies still in existence today, such as the hard rubber comb and the pea



coat buttons made by the Goodyear Rubber Company. A bottle of "LEA & PERRINS" Worcestershire Sauce, pencils with the faint lettering of "E FABER 133 WILLIAM STR. NY" (forerunner of the present day company, Faber-

Castell) and medicine bottles with "E. R. SQUIBB" (progenitor of present day company Bristol-Myers Squibb), some still containing original contents, were also discovered. Although very few textiles survived, the few that did can be viewed by visitors. A black silk neckerchief (still knotted from the last time it was worn) and a hatband also called a "tally" (still retaining, in gold letters, "CAIRO") are among them. All of these artifacts are just a few of the thousands displayed within the USS *Cairo* Museum that offer a never before glimpse of life aboard a Civil War gunboat.

Last year marked the 150th anniversary of *Cairo*'s sinking, commemorated through a series of special events in December. Special events are also planned throughout 2013 to commemorate the Sesquicentennial of the Vicksburg Campaign. Please see our website at: <www.nps.gov/vick> for a listing of dates and times of planned events.

The USS *Cairo* Museum and Gunboat are located within Vicksburg National Military Park in Vicksburg, MS. Hours of operation are as follows: October – March 8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m., April – September 9:30 a.m. – 6:00 p.m. Admission to Vicksburg NMP is \$8.00 per vehicle (valid 7 days), \$4.00 per individual (pedestrian, biker, motorcycle, jogger, etc.), and \$4.00 per person for buses/church vans. Vicksburg National Military Park is closed on New Year's Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas. ▲▼▲

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