

## The C.S.S. Florida

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Events this week showed again how far ranging the effects of the United States Civil War could be. A naval incident in Bahia, Brazil would put an end to the career of one of the Confederacy's most dangerous ships. The C.S.S. *Florida* was almost as successful as the more famous C.S.S. *Alabama* in number of prizes captured on the high seas. From her launch in March 1862 until October 1864 she made thirty seven captures.

She was the first Confederate raider built in England and left Liverpool christened as the *Oreto* on March 22, 1862 manned by a British crew and headed for Nassau, Bahamas. At this point she was unarmed but the guns she needed were shipped separately to Nassau on another vessel. Upon arrival in the Bahamas, the US Consul demanded that she be seized as she was intended for Confederate service. The debate went on from April until August, when the British Admiralty declared that the boat was legitimate British property and could not be seized.

On August 10, the *Oreto* sailed to Green Cay, 60 miles to the south of Nassau, where she was met by a schooner carrying her guns. At Green Cay, she was outfitted with two seven-inch and four six-inch Blakely rifled guns and rechristened the *C.S.S. Florida*.

Captained by J.N. Maffitt, she did not get off to an auspicious start. Heading for Cuba, his small crew was ravaged by yellow fever, killing six of the eighteen men aboard. Maffitt decided to head for Mobile and in a daring exploit, barreled through a barrage of fire from Union vessels blockading the bay. Making it safely to Fort Morgan, she was repaired and fully staffed with a healthy crew.

In January 1863, she got past the blockade in the other direction and made her way to sea. For the next six months she captured and burned US merchant ships along the coast of the Americas and in the West Indies. By late July, Maffitt decided to sail her to Brest, France to rest and regroup. She stayed there until February 1864. Maffitt's health had declined and he turned over the ship to Lieutenant Charles Morris, who sailed her first to Barbados, then back east to the Canary Islands and then to the coast of South America.

The *Florida* entered the harbor at Bahia, Brazil on October 4, 1864. After eight months of being pursued by US Navy vessels, the crew was exhausted and close to mutiny and Morris granted his men shore leave in the town. On the night of October 7 and in violation of international neutrality laws, the *Florida* was attacked while sitting in the harbor. The attack came from the *U.S.S. Wachusetts*, commanded by Napoleon Collins. To the consternation of Morris, who could only watch from shore, Collins seized the *Florida* and towed it out to sea.

Arriving back in the United States, Collins was court-martialed for violating international law, but Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles threw out the verdict. He declared Collins to be a hero and he eventually reached the rank of Rear Admiral after the war.

As for the *Florida*, the court order citing Collins also called for her to be returned to Bahia, Brazil. But on November 28, 1864, she sank under mysterious circumstances at Newport News, Virginia. This was likely resulting from orders by Admiral David Dixon Porter to prevent her return to Confederate hands.