

The *ALABAMA* and the *KEARSARGE*

Teaching Civil War Naval History through Historic Song

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researched, developed, and presented by

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An American of Sicilian ancestry, and a native of Brooklyn, New York, Stephen Sanfilippo teaches “Sailing on a Sea of Song”: Mariners’ Songs and the Maritime Experience, at Maine Maritime Academy. He has been researching and performing historic songs of the sea since the early 1970s, and has been teaching history since 1969, including at Moberly (Missouri) High School, Longwood High School, Middle Island, New York, Suffolk County (NY) Community College, and Maine Maritime Academy. He has presented at numerous maritime history and maritime music conferences and festivals, from Norfolk, Virginia, to Kirksville, Missouri to Prince Edward Island, to St. Vincent & the Grenadines, Eastern Caribbean, and widely throughout Long Island and New England. He is a mainstay at the annual Music of the Sea History Symposium, sponsored by Williams College-Mystic, the University of Connecticut at Avery Point, and the United States Coast Guard Academy, and at the annual Songs of the Sea Festival, held at Mystic Seaport Museum. Named four times to *Who’s Who in the World*, and numerous times to *Who’s Who in America*, he earned his Ph.D. in History at Stony Brook (NY) University, his dissertation being “Whalemen’s Song: Lyrics and Masculinity in the Sag Harbor Whalefishery, 1840-1850.” He is an honorably discharged Vietnam Era veteran of the United States Navy. With Susan, his wife of nearly 50 years, he divides time between coastal Downeast Maine and the North Fork of Long Island, New York.

Many Americans are familiar with major battles of the American Civil War: Bull Run; Antietam, Gettysburg. Few, however, think of naval battles. Long overlooked, the war at sea, as well as on rivers and in harbors, was crucial to the military, diplomatic and economic conduct of the Civil War, and is finally being recognized as contributing significantly, perhaps crucially, to the Union's victory over the Confederacy. Additionally, the war at sea was transformative in technology, tactics, and demographics, and had major and long lasting economic consequences.

Just as maritime action was important to the Civil War, so was music. Music was critical to each side's morale. The Union used music to enhance the desire to preserve the Union and build support for emancipation. The Confederacy used music to define a new nationality. This presentation offers a look at the values of naval sailors and of songwriters ashore who wrote on maritime themes for the Union and Confederacy, particularly as these relate to the production of masculinity-based notions of patriotism and naval service at a time when the concept of manhood included the manly public singing of manly songs by men who valued their ability as songsters. To understand this important aspect of history it is necessary to *listen* to the time when manhood, singing, patriotism and naval service intersected, most significantly under the embodiment of all of these in "the flag." This connection manifests itself, perhaps more than any song of any service, any nation, any war, in "The *Cumberland's* Crew," a song of a Union frigate sunk by C.S.S. *Virginia* in the battle of Hampton Roads.¹

The Confederacy, imagining its own national identity, drew upon the tradition of American patriotic songs, including many of the naval tradition, creating similar but

¹ "The *Cumberland's* Crew," traditional, 1862, in Paul Glass, compiler and editor, *Singing Soldiers: A History of the Civil War in Song* (New York: Da Capo, 1964), pp. 183-185.

uniquely Southern naval songs. Poignant among these is “The *Alabama*,” composed by Southerners E. King and F.W. Rosier, upon the entry into service in 1862 of that famous commerce raider.

Our country calls all hands to arms, we hear but to obey;
Nor shall home’s most endearing charms steal one weak thought away.
Our saucy craft shall roam the deep, we’ve sworn, lads to defend her;
Trim, taut and tight, we’ll brave the fight, our motto, “No Surrender!”²

The *Alabama*, under Captain Raphael Semmes, wrecked havoc upon American commercial shipping. It was also the only Confederate vessel to sink a vessel of the United States Navy at sea, its victim being the Union gunboat U.S.S. *Hatteras*, as described in song by Frank Townsend, himself an *Alabama* crewman.

Off Galveston the Yankee fleet secure at anchor lay
Preparing for a heavy fight they were to have next day.
Down came the *Alabama* like an eagle o’er the wave,
Soon the gunboat *Hatteras* had found a watery grave.³

The *Alabama*’s end came on June 19, 1864, when she was sunk in the English Channel, off Cherbourg, France, by the U.S.S. *Kearsarge*, Captain John A. Winslow commanding. The sinking of the *Alabama* was praised in many Union songs, most notably “The Fate of the Pirate *Alabama*,” composed by R. B. Nicol.

Ye jolly sons of the ocean blue, I have a song to sing for you
Of the *Kearsarge* and her gallant crew, and the pirate *Alabama*.⁴

The sinking of the *Alabama* greatly weakened the Confederacy’s ability to harass and disrupt American shipping. As stated in another Union naval song, “The *Alabama* and the *Kearsarge*”:

² E. King and F. W. Rosier, “The *Alabama*,” 1863, in Glass, *Singing*, pp. 186-188.

³ Frank Townsend, “The Fight of the *Hatteras* and the *Alabama*.” 1863, as sung by Jeff Davis, on audio CD, *Civil War Naval Songs*, track 1.

⁴ R. B. Nicol, “The Fate of the Pirate *Alabama*,” 1864, as sung by David Coffin, audio compact disc, *Civil War Naval Songs*, track 12.

The Alabama's gone, hurrah, to Davy Jones's locker far,
There's nothing left of her to mar our commerce on the sea!⁵

The loss of the *Alabama* dealt a severe blow to Confederate morale, while at the same time bringing about elation in the Union.

Before moving on to one last song, the widely known double-pull halyard chantey "Roll, *Alabama*, Roll," let us consider some questions intended to stimulate an exchange of information, ideas, and interpretations.

From "The *Alabama*":

1. How does the lyric combine masculinity and patriotism in a way that is uniquely maritime?
2. What is the song's political ideology? Despot? Tyrant? Knave? Liberty?
3. How do the lyrics relate to what actually happened when the *Alabama* sank?

From "The Fight of the *Hatteras* and the *Alabama*":

1. How did the *Alabama* lure the *Hatteras* to be so close and yet unaware?

From "The Fate of the Pirate *Alabama*":

1. Why does the song refer to the *Alabama* as a "pirate"? Are there reasons that are colloquial?; moral?; political?; legal?; constitutional?; international?; gender-conscious?
2. What role did the *Deerhound* play? For what reason?

We now conclude this study-through-song with "Roll, *Alabama*, Roll," a halyard chantey that came into being soon after the *Alabama*'s destruction.

When the Alabama's keel was laid,
Roll, *Alabama*, Roll,
It was laid in the yard of Jonathan Laird,
Roll, Roll, *Alabama*, Roll.

Down the Mersey River she sailed then,
To be Liverpool fitted with guns and men.

At first she was called the two ninety two,
For the merchants of the city of Liverpool.

⁵ Frank Wilder, "The *Alabama* and the *Kearsarge*," 1864, in Glass, *Singing*, p. 189-191.

And from Liverpool town she sailed forth
To destroy the commerce of the North.

To fight the North Semmes did employ
Any method to kill an' destroy.

And to Cherbourg port she went one day
To collect her due won prize money.

And many a sailor met his doom
When the *Kearsarge* she hove in view.

And a shot from the forward pivot [*Kearsarge* guns] that day
Shot the *Alabama*'s bow away.

Off the three mile limit in '64
The *Alabama* sank to rise no more.⁶

An examination of “Roll, *Alabama*, Roll,” verse by verse, raises many questions for discussion, perhaps best answered by students’ research. A few of these questions are: What is meant by “the yard of Jonathan Laird”? Why was the *Alabama* built there? Why Liverpool? Was it actually fitted with guns in Liverpool? What is meant “at first she was called the two ninety two? How did the actions described thus far create diplomatic issues? Why did Semmes’ take the *Alabama* to Cherbourg? How does Semmes’ action at Cherbourg demonstrate the complicated legal and international problems of Civil War naval warfare? Why does the song mention fighting “off the three mile limit”? Finally, how is the song emblematic of the Civil War, the Confederacy, and naval warfare?

The songs of the *Alabama* and the *Kearsarge* constitute only a part of the naval songs of the Civil War. Music and song can be used to examine many other aspects of the naval war, especially the Battle of Hampton Roads There is also a great body of romantic songs taken to sea or made up at sea by sailors. One can even find maritime songs of the

⁶ “Roll, *Alabama*, Roll,” traditional, in Hugill, *Shanties*, pp. 126-127. “The *Alabama*,” in Doerflinger, *Songs*, pp. 35-37.

North in opposition to the war, particularly to the change in war aims to include the emancipation of slaves.

Use Music! It is an excellent way to enliven lessons, get points across, arouse curiosity, link students' current tastes to older music, open avenues for research, and pose questions. Use music. Perform it yourself. No matter that "I can't sing well." Don't worry about "being good." It helps to make you authentic. Use Music! But make certain you do it correctly. Avoid going directly to the internet, as it's loaded with misinformation, falsehoods, and anti-historical performances. Don't hesitate to contact me with questions, for advice, or for information. I'm pretty good with maritime, colonial, the Early Republic, and the Antebellum. If I don't have the answer, and it's likely I won't, I'll admit it gladly, and try to lead you to someone who does. Use Music!

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