

Women Banded Together For Gunboat Fund

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South Carolina's Story The making of a state



Less than a year after the first shots of the Civil War were exchanged at Fort Sumter, the Charleston Courier ran an article about women in New Orleans raising money to build a gunboat.

Sue Gelzer of Orangeburg immediately sent \$5, a sum she termed a "mite," along with a letter challenging other patriotic women to do the same. The Courier opened a subscription list and confidently offered a bottle of sparkling champagne to christen the ship.

The response was immediate and came from all over the South. Women who lacked money sent jewelry, paintings, silverware, china, household linens, and bales of cotton to be auctioned.

Each issue of the Courier listed new contributors. All over South Carolina, women's clubs banded together to put on raffles, theatricals, concerts, and other entertainments to collect money for the gunboat fund.

The lists from Yorkville and Unionville were long. The tiny town of St. Matthews had 84 contributors. The boys of Mount Zion Academy in Winnsboro added \$6.25 and soon the editor of the Charleston Courier, Col. Richard Yeadon, was offering the collection to Stephen Mallory, the Confederate secretary of the navy.

By Oct. 3, 1862, the Ladies' Gunboat Fund exceeded the necessary \$30,000. The gunboat was named the Palmetto State and was launched on Oct. 11.

At the launching ceremony, a large crowd watched Miss Gelzer, who had started it all, break the bottle of champagne against the side of the Palmetto State. Col. Yeadon then made a stirring speech to an overflow audience. As he spoke, the Chicora, a companion gunboat, steamed up with her colors flying to further excite the spectators.

At the conclusion of the ceremonies, the ladies were invited by Marsh and Son, the shipbuilders, to participate in a "collation."

The Palmetto State was plated with iron 4 inches thick. She was equipped with one 80-pound rifle gun forward, one 60-pound rifle gun aft and one 8-inch shell gun on each broadside. A trial run proved that the ship was speedy enough to pursue larger vessels.

Three months after the launching of the Palmetto State, she and the Chicora, with a thick haze to their advantage, went out into the main ship channel. Undetected by the federal squadron, the Palmetto State came up close to the U.S.S. Mercedita. The Mercedita had seven large guns and a crew of 185 men.

When the Mercedita lookout saw the Palmetto State, it was so close and lying so low in the water that the Mercedita could not bring her guns to bear.

The Palmetto State rammed the Mercedita, making a 3 foot tear. At the same time, a well-paced rifle shot pierced the Mercedita's boiler and exploded on the opposite side. The escaping steam scalded a number of the crew and immobilized the engine. The captain immediately surrendered.

An unidentified steamer began ringing her fire bell and making distress signals. The alert allowed several other federal ships to escape. Nevertheless, two of the schooners were spied and the Palmetto State gave chase for six or seven miles outside the harbor bar. The two Confederate gunboats had completely disorganized the Union blockade.

Charlestonians interpreted this as the end of the blockade and celebrated in a special ceremony at St. Philip's Church. However, the Union squadron was reinforced and returned to patrol the harbor until the end of the war.

When Sherman's army moved from Savannah, Ga., to Columbia, the Confederates decided to destroy valuable property rather than let it fall into Union hands. It was decided to explode the three gunboats in the harbor.

An observer later wrote, "the burning and blowing up of the iron-clads Palmetto State, Chicora, and the Charleston, was a magnificent spectacle. The Palmetto State was the first to explode . . ." Union officers arrived to take over Charleston just minutes after the explosion of the third gunboat.