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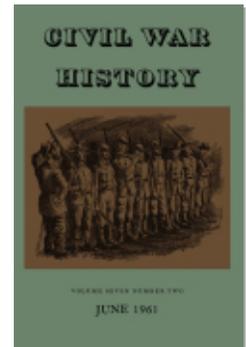
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DREWRY'S BLUFF: NAVAL DEFENSE OF RICHMOND, 1862

William M. Robinson, Jr.

IN THE history of the War of Secession two actions in Virginia are known as the battle of Drewry's Bluff. The first engagement, the subject of this article, occurred on May 15, 1862. It was waged between the Confederate James River Squadron, aided by army detachments ashore, and the U.S. James River Division of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron. The second action, primarily a land engagement, took place on May 16, 1864, between the forces of General P. G. T. Beauregard and Major General Benjamin F. Butler and took its name principally from the fact that the Confederate headquarters was located at Drewry's Bluff.

Both battles were Confederate victories; both are significant because they frustrated enemy efforts which—had either been successful—would probably have led to the immediate capture of Richmond.

To understand the circumstances and full significance of the first battle of Drewry's Bluff, a brief summary of the antecedent military events is helpful. The bluff itself, sometimes referred to in U.S. reports as Ward's Bluff and the fortifications on it as Fort Darling, is located at the midpoint of a great bend in the James River, eight miles below Richmond and a little more than three-quarters of a mile east of the old Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike. It was an ideal site for a river defense position. One can well imagine the elation of the Confederate reconnaissance party which was led to it in February, 1862, by the owner of the land, Augustus H. Drewry, then a volunteer captain of heavy artillery. Guns mounted on the bluff would be at an elevation of 80-110 feet above the river and would enjoy a direct, plunging fire upon vessels in the stream for something better than a mile in both directions.¹

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¹ The height of the bluff was given in U.S. reports as 200 feet. U.S. War Dept., comp., *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the*

The bluff on its river side is so steep as to be virtually unscalable. Its downstream shoulder lies between the river and a tributary creek, and presents to the enemy advancing upstream a right flank and rear almost as precipitous as its front. The ridge also dominates the low-lying bank on the opposite side of the James. Its only element of weakness is its vulnerability to attack from the interior at its upstream shoulder. Yet with friendly troops controlling the turnpike there was little to be feared from that quarter.

Soon after her secession and prior to her union with the Confederate States, Virginia organized an army and navy and took immediate steps to prepare defenses against imminent invasion. Naval preparations included the establishment of several shore batteries along the Potomac, Rappahannock, York, Elizabeth, and James rivers, as well as the conversion of eight coastal steamers into men-of-war or transports. Among these vessels were the passenger packets *Yorktown* and *Jamestown*, lately of the Richmond-New York run. They were armed and outfitted for high seas and renamed the *Patrick Henry* and *Thomas Jefferson*, respectively. Both were destined to play prominent parts in the action at Drewry's Bluff.

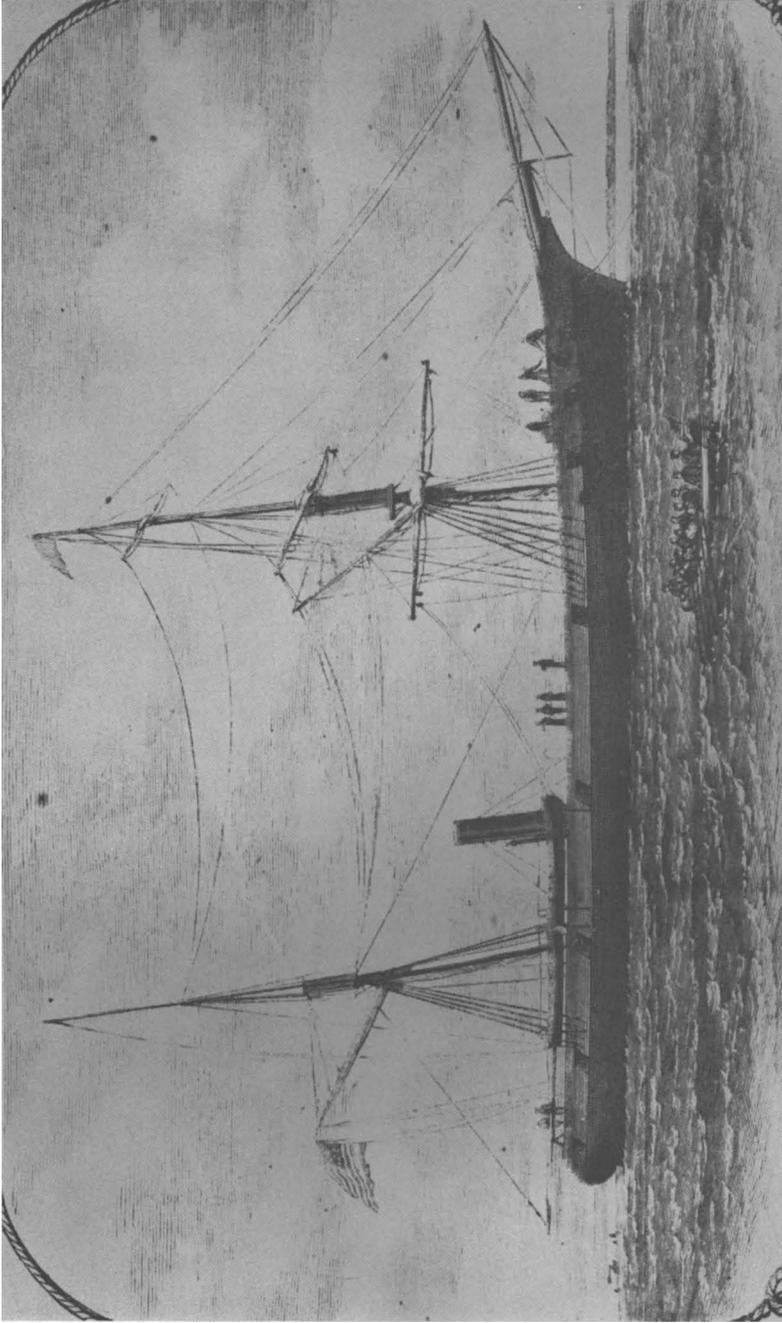
Virginia's prompt preparations were none too soon. Arlington Heights and Alexandria were easily taken by Federal land forces, but the naval shore batteries at Aquia Creek and Sewell's Point successfully resisted naval attacks. Then, on June 10, 1861, Confederate forces under John B. Magruder engaged a hostile force under Benjamin F. Butler at Big Bethel near Yorktown and so routed the bluecoats that Butler was shortly relieved in favor of Major General John E. Wool. The new commander was a veteran of over fifty years' military service. He set up a strong position on the Newport News-Hampton line from which he was never driven, and by March, 1862, he had assembled a command of about 11,000 effectives. Magruder's opposing force numbered 16,000 men present for duty. However, less than 5,000 of them were available to hold the Warwick-Yorktown line in front of Wool; the remainder were scattered in garrisons up and down the James and the York, on Gloucester, and in Mathews County.

Rebellion (Washington, 1894-1922), Ser. I, VII, 366-67; *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. I, XI, pt. 1, 636. Hereafter cited respectively as *Navy OR* and *OR*, with all references being to Series I. Capt. Drewry estimated the elevation at 90 feet. *Southern Historical Society Papers*, XXXIV (1906), 96. By courtesy of Mr. Elbert Cox, Regional Director, N.P.S., and Mr. Wallace T. Stephens, the Battlefield Superintendent, the writer visited the site in 1954. We found a well-developed system of earthworks crowning the bluff, complete with magazine, gorges, and outworks, all grown up in large trees and in good condition except for the under-cutting of the escarpment by wave action. From a U.S.G.S. map we estimated the crest of the bluff to be about 80 feet above sea level in the river below and the high points of the parapet to be about 110 feet.



Harper's Weekly

Sketched by the British journalist, Frank Vizetelly, this drawing of Fort Darling on Drewry's Bluff gives some idea of the strategic value of the bluff. The heights stood at a bend in the James, affording Confederate guns ample opportunity to sweep the river with canister and round shot.



Harper's Weekly

Constructed at Mystic, Connecticut, the *Galena* was a third-class screw-steamer weighing 738 tons. Her average speed was 6 knots. Although additional guns were added later in the war, at the engagement of Drewry's Bluff the ship carried four 9-inch Dahlgrens and six 100-pounder Parrotts.

At this time the Confederate naval forces afloat consisted of the James River Squadron, commanded by Commodore Franklin Buchanan (first superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy), and divided into two divisions. The Norfolk Division was made up of his flagship, the ironclad ram *Virginia* (often and erroneously called the *Merrimack*—and, to compound the error, generally misspelled without the final “k”), and the small gunboats *Beaufort* and *Raleigh*. The *Virginia* had ten guns, the gunboats one each. In the Richmond Division were the cruisers *Patrick Henry* (12 guns) and *Thomas Jefferson* (2 guns), and the gunboat *Teaser* (1 gun), under the command of Commander John R. Tucker, another old salt with nearly eighteen years of sea service. Preponderantly, the Confederate armament consisted of 7-inch and 6.4-inch rifled cannon.

The opposing fleet at Hampton Roads was made up of two steam frigates, three sailing frigates, one sailing sloop-of-war, two barks-of-war, and seven steam gunboats—a total of fifteen men-of-war with an aggregate of 301 guns, all heavy smoothbores save for one 70-pounder rifle on the sloop-of-war. Any one of five ships in the fleet mounted more guns than the entire Confederate squadron. But on Saturday, March 8, 1862, the Southerners demonstrated to the satisfaction of the world that the age of sail, wood, and smoothbores had been replaced by a new era of steam, iron, and rifled artillery. The arrival of the *Monitor* about midnight and her duel with the *Virginia* on the following morning did not alter the situation; for the ensuing two months the *Virginia* remained the mistress of Hampton Roads—to the great discomfort of the U.S. fleet commander, Commodore Louis M. Goldsborough, and of Major General George B. McClellan, who had taken over the United States army ashore with the intention of invading the Peninsula and moving on to Richmond.

Notwithstanding the fact that had Magruder delivered a land assault simultaneously with the *Virginia's* sea attack—as he had been requested by Buchanan to do—McClellan's invasion might well have failed for want of an advantageous jump-off point, the *Virginia* continued to be a sore thorn in the Federal side. She and her consorts continued to affect adversely nearly every move of the Federals afloat and ashore. With the Peninsula thickly wooded and marshy, and possessing poor roads and no rail facilities, McClellan had logically wanted and had counted on a water route to advance his base of supplies as he moved on Richmond. But hostile ships and shore batteries shut off the James, and strong, well-placed Confederate fortifications on the York near Gloucester Point eliminated that river as an easy avenue of advance. Choosing the lesser of two evils, and even at the expense of a siege of Yorktown, McClellan decided on the York River approach. Delays normal in all military operations were in this case multiplied

by McClellan's natural cautiousness and by his fear that the *Virginia* on some dark night would run the gantlet of the guns at Fortress Monroe, pass the Federal fleet, and appear the next morning in the York River to destroy his transports and supply ships.

The Confederate high command was inclined to overestimate the tactical and navigational capabilities of the *Virginia* and to underestimate the strategic worth of simply having her as a mighty ship-of-war in being. As McClellan's ships gathered in the York River, officials in Richmond considered the military advisability of withdrawing General Benjamin Huger's forces from the Department of Norfolk in order to reinforce the Confederate lines in front of McClellan. In their eagerness to interpose more and more troops between the Federals and the capital, army authorities appear not to have attached sufficient weight to Norfolk as a naval base, or to the threat which the ships and heavy batteries in the Norfolk area could constantly pose to the enemy.

Late in April General Joseph E. Johnston transferred his army from the Potomac to the Peninsula and superseded Magruder as supreme commander of the area. Buchanan, wounded in action several weeks previously, had turned over his command to Lieutenant Gatesby ap R. Jones, who had been shortly relieved by Commodore Josiah Tattnall.² Johnston, who proved no better acquainted with naval capabilities and limitations than his predecessor, intimated to Tattnall on April 28, the possibilities of an early withdrawal of his forces from Norfolk. Three days later Tattnall was advised that the military evacuation of the south side of the James was imminent. The Navy Department issued orders for work on the vessels under construction and repairs at the Norfolk Navy Yard to be expedited, and for the removal of all transportable stores and equipment into the interior.

Just as McClellan was surprised to find the Confederate works at Yorktown empty when he advanced on May 5, the Confederate navy people were aghast, on the morning of May 10, to find that Huger and his forces had hastily pulled out of Norfolk during the night—without making their plans known to their opposite numbers in the navy. Only the day before, the army officers had assured Tattnall and his aides that General Huger did not contemplate evacuating Norfolk for another week, which would allow time for the full removal of public property. The sudden change of plans resulted when a large, amphibious force made a hostile landing on the bay shore north of Norfolk in the vicinity of what is now Ocean View. As a result, the navy

² Tattnall commanded the U.S. East India Squadron in 1859 during the Second Opium War. He gained international renown when, disregarding American neutrality, he went to the aid of a British squadron sorely beset by Chinese forces at the mouth of the Pei-Ho River with the laconic explanation: "Blood is thicker than water." Charles C. Jones, Jr., *The Life and Services of Commodore Josiah Tattnall* (Savannah, 1878), pp. 94-110.

yard receiving ship, several vessels laid up in ordinary, three nearly completed vessels, and much irreplaceable naval material had to be destroyed.

All of the vessels in commission except the *Virginia* escaped up the James to Richmond. The *Virginia's* draft was too great for her to go more than about four miles above Newport News without removing her armament and stores. When Commodore Tattnall on May 10 learned of the surprise evacuation, he caused such of the guns, equipment, and stores as could be saved to be removed by rail to Richmond. He thus hoped to lighten the ironclad sufficiently to get her over the bar at Day's Neck. However, a change in the wind to downstream further reduced the depth of the water at the critical point; and without his armament and with his ship riding high above her belt of protective armor, Tattnall was unable to fight her. To save the *Virginia* from falling into enemy hands, he destroyed her about daylight on May 11.

This act removed the last obstacle which prevented the enemy from sending light-draft men-of-war up the James, hopefully to shell the Confederate capital into submission. Accordingly, an expeditionary force was dispatched for that purpose. An assault upon Richmond would likely have been successful save for the resistance which the ships unexpectedly encountered at Drewry's Bluff.

No point on the James River above Jamestown Island had been fortified under the program of shore defenses constructed by the Navy of Virginia in April-June, 1861. During the winter of 1861-62, the Confederate War Department turned its attention to remedying this omission. Among other projects, the Corps of Engineers began at Drewry's Bluff the placing of pile obstructions in the river to obstruct passage by any hostile vessels. Work was impeded by continual spring freshets, by lack of labor and essential materials, and *perhaps* by some want of rank or resourcefulness and vigor on the part of those in charge. About this time, President Davis ordered Robert E. Lee up from the Department of South Carolina, Georgia, and East Florida to Richmond to take charge of the conduct of military operations of all Confederate armies—a post comparable to that of Chief of Staff.

An inspection report on the Drewry's Bluff work, dated April 28, indicated that the position at the past rate of progress would not likely be in readiness to oppose the enemy for another three or four months. Army and navy authorities at Richmond frantically began to bestir themselves. A company of sappers and miners, a battalion of artillery, heavy guns, ammunition, stone ballast for the obstructions, wood sections faced with iron plating for the protection of the gun placements, etc., poured into the area. On May 8, Commander Ebenezer Farrand, an experienced officer with fifteen years of sea duty and

nine years of shore service in the Old Navy, was assigned to take command of Drewry's Bluff. At the same time, General Lee attached all army personnel present in the area to Farrand's command. Then came a marine corps battalion and a few units of an army brigade, but the brigadier and the bulk of his brigade did not arrive until the battle was over. On the twelfth, the remnant of the Confederate fleet, under Commodore Tucker, arrived. The same day, the crew of the late *Virginia* reached Richmond by rail from Suffolk. They, along with a detachment of casual officers and seamen, were dispatched at once to the bluff.

The barriers in the river were still incomplete; another freshet was raging. If the enemy were as successful in passing through the fire from the bluff as he had been in passing that of the batteries below, he would be able to break through the obstructions and go on to Richmond. Farrand had the gaps closed by sinking the sloop-of-war *Thomas Jefferson*, the steam transport *Northhampton*, and several other vessels commandeered at Richmond for that purpose. The *Patrick Henry* (now the Confederate flagship) and her smaller consorts prepared for action on the upstream side of the obstructions. A motley crew of artillerymen and engineers, seamen and marines, in bottomless mud and in constant rain—with no shelter and scant provisions—labored ceaselessly to complete the fortifications. They also began a second line of bombproof emplacements, a little below the army works, in which were placed the two 6.4-inch rifles removed from the *Thomas Jefferson* together with two similar guns and one 8-inch cannon borrowed from the *Patrick Henry*. These guns were mounted on naval carriages and were manned by seamen from the squadron under their own ship's officers. The army guns on the upper level were served by army artillerymen under the command of the same Captain Drewry who owned the bluff. The marine battalion under Captain John D. Simms occupied the right (south) bank as sharpshooters. Sailors from the *Virginia*, under Lieutenant John Taylor Wood of that ship, patrolled the north bank as far downriver as Chaffin's Bluff, which was temporarily occupied by two batteries of Confederate field artillery.

In the meantime, with the abandonment of Norfolk and the self-destruction of the *Virginia*, the United States navy was free to maneuver. Owing to its apparent lethargy before the Confederate squadron, it had suffered much in public estimation. A great victory such as the taking of Richmond by the *Monitor* and her consorts would simultaneously please Washington and restore naval prestige. Commodore Goldsborough at once detached the *Monitor* and a smaller ironclad, the *Stevens Battery* (also known as the *Naugatuck*), from the fleet anchored in the roads, and ordered them to join the ironclad *Galena* and the wooden gunboats *Aroostock* and *Port Royal*, which had already

followed the Confederate gunboats up the James. The expedition, the cream of the U.S. navy, cautiously came to anchor off City Point on May 13. On the following day the column, led by the light-draft *Stevens Battery*, inched its way through a narrow and intricate channel for thirty miles in constant fear of torpedoes and fire ships which might be sent down upon them. The five ships came to anchor for the night off the mouth of Kingsland Creek, about three miles below Drewry's Bluff. They were within sight of Chaffin's Bluff, a mile and a half upstream, on which were concealed the two batteries of Confederate field artillery and a covering detachment of sailors. The Yankees had now been out of contact with Confederate vessels for three days. Victory seemed within their grasp, but opportunity now passed to the Confederate side.

Between 6:30 and 7:00 on Thursday morning, May 15, the Confederate gunners atop Drewry's Bluff saw the belated enemy standing up the river in line ahead, led by the *Galena*, flying the division flag of Commodore John Rogers. From entrenchments along the river banks, Confederate sharpshooters opened a harassing fire upon the advancing ships. The sailors could scarcely show themselves on deck without being picked off, but they returned the Confederate fire with shrapnel and canister. If the enemy had been overcautious in pursuing Tucker's flotilla, he was now to exhibit skill and bravery in coming into action.³

The Confederate batteries opened fire at 7:35 A.M., when the *Galena* came within 400 yards of the obstructions which were located about 300 yards below the bluff. Their first shot struck the *Galena* on her port bow, penetrating her armor plate and wounding two men. A second shot passed through the port bow, killing one seaman and wounding three others. Despite these hits, the *Galena* withheld her fire and gallantly came on another 100 yards, then dropped her starboard anchor. Her chains rattled out and her head swung inshore. She backed astern and let go her stream anchor from the starboard quarter, hove ahead athwart the channel, and brought her port broadside fully to bear upon the bluff before firing a gun. This fine display of seamanship and discipline under fire by the *Galena's* crew excited the admiration of their opponents. Meanwhile, the *Monitor* came up and took position in line abreast. Both ships opened a brisk fire about 7:45 A.M.

The *Stevens Battery* and the two wooden gunboats remained some

³ Commander Farrand's reports of his victory are very concise; no detailed reports by army, navy, or marine subordinates have been found. See *Navy OR*, VII, 369-70. Firsthand descriptions of the action may be found in J. Thomas Scharf, *History of the Confederate States Navy* (New York, 1887), pp. 713, 716-17, and in William H. Parker, *Recollections of a Naval Officer* (New York, 1883), pp. 279-80. For allusions to the battle, see *OR*, XI, pt. 3, 506, 521; *LI*, pt. 2, 555, 557.

half mile downstream and took positions so close under the bank that the batteries on the bluff were able to bring only four guns to bear upon them. Nevertheless, these three vessels were raked by musketry fire from shore, and a large part of the crews had to be diverted from working the great guns against the batteries in an effort to check the sharpshooters. After firing sixteen rounds, the big 100-pounder Parrott rifle on the *Stevens Battery* exploded. This ship thereafter confined her participation in the battle to working her light broadside guns against the shore entrenchments. Around 9 A.M. the *Monitor* advanced well under the batteries, hoping to make her fire more effective. But she found the height of her gun ports insufficient to permit the elevation necessary for reaching the high perch of the Confederate works. She retired to her former position. After the *Aroostock* had part of her planking ripped off near the water line, plus a shot through her starboard bow, she moved downstream a hundred yards to a more protected anchorage at 9:45 A.M. Fifteen minutes later the distant *Port Royal* received a shell in the port bow below the water line, causing her to make water fast. Soon another shot crashed into her amidships, also below the water line, forcing her to withdraw temporarily from action.

In the meantime the gunners on the bluff, able to bring but a few guns to bear on the distant group, and realizing the invulnerability of the *Monitor* at the existing range, concentrated their fire upon the lighter armored *Galena*. Their gunnery was excellent. Some fifty hits were registered on the enemy's flagship, practically half of which penetrated the armor. One 10-inch shot passed entirely through the ship and broke the armor on the opposite side. A few minutes past eleven, a shot from the *Patrick Henry's* 8-inch cannon tore its way into the unhappy *Galena*, whereupon she at once signalled a withdrawal from action, slipped her cables, and retired. With armor dented and broken, with interior and deck structures shattered, with boats, davits, binnacle, stanchions, railings shot away, with ensign and smokestack riddled, and with twelve men killed and fifteen wounded, the flagship that had so splendidly come into action three and a half hours earlier, was now in full retreat—to the accompaniment of three hearty cheers from the Confederates on the bluff.⁴

⁴ In his report to the fleet commander, Commander John Rogers concluded his account of the action with the simple statement: "At 11:05 the *Galena* had expended nearly all her ammunition and I made signal to discontinue the action." That the *Galena's* magazine was empty after only 3 hours and 20 minutes of firing suggests improvidence in ordnance supply. Moreover, the commander of the *Aroostock* asserted that many of his shells would not fit the guns for which they were made. See OR, XI, pt. 1, 636; *Navy OR*, VII, 356-68. The *Galena* was repaired in the fleet but the pounding she received at Drewry's Bluff eventually caused her to go into dry dock at Philadelphia, where she was condemned as an ironclad, stripped of her armor, and recommissioned a wooden ship-of-war in February, 1864.

The enemy fought valiantly, but the Confederates at all times had fire superiority. The losses of the latter were not quite half those of their opponents.

The sharpshooters followed the defeated ships several miles downriver, maintaining a harassing fire from both shores. At times where the channel was narrow enough for the voice to carry, the men in gray, with a characteristic sense of humor, taunted the retreating men in blue with good-natured raillery as to the direction of Richmond. As a result of the trouncing his men received from the navy and marine riflemen, Rodgers later recommended that all ships used on river duty be provided "good protection from sharpshooters, especially for the pilot and helmsman."

Thus the high ambition of Commodore Goldsborough to beat General McClellan to the Confederate capital came to naught. But neither did McClellan take Richmond. By the end of August U.S. forces afloat and ashore were forced back upon their starting point at Newport News; and the 1862 offensive against Richmond came to an inglorious end. The naval strong point at Drewry's Bluff was never successfully attacked; and Drewry's Bluff remained in the hands of the Confederate States navy until the evacuation of Richmond in April, 1865.

In closing, it should be mentioned that on May 15, 1862 the Navy Department at Richmond, apparently in ignorance of the battle in progress, issued orders for Captain Sydney Smith Lee, to assume command of the naval defenses of the James River.⁵ His orders directed him to relieve Commander Farrand, who was to remain as second in command. However, finding the battle in progress, Lee did not present his orders until the fighting was over. This forbearance allowed Farrand to receive full credit for the victory. At its next session, the Confederate Congress tendered its thanks to Commander Farrand and Captain Drewry, and to "the officers and men under their command, for the great and signal victory achieved over the naval forces of the United States." The resolution concluded by stating that their "gallantry, courage, and endurance . . . entitle all who contributed thereto to the gratitude of the country."⁶

⁵ Lee was the older brother of Robert E. Lee and the father of Fitzhugh Lee. He was a veteran of forty years of service in the U.S. navy.

⁶ First Cong., 2nd sess., Res. No. 2, September 16, 1862. Drewry was soon promoted to major (CSA) and Farrand to captain (CSN).