THE CONFEDERATE STATES MARINES AT WILMINGTON, 1864 - 1865

by David M. Sullivan

Wilmington's importance to the war effort of the Confederate States of America can never be overestimated. It was truly the jugular of the supply system that brought millions of dollars worth of military and civilian supplies from Europe and that the port remained open for so long remains something of a mystery to students of the War Between the States. When the Federal Government finally brought its military might to bear on the Cape Fear area and seized Fort Fisher, the guardian of Wilmington, and then the city itself, the fate of the Confederacy was sealed. As Raphael Semmes later commented on the importance of Wilmington from his viewpoint as the South's most famous naval hero, the loss of the last open port to the deadly clutches of the Union Anaconda choked the life out of the Confederacy.

Wilmington owed its success as a haven for blockade runners to the hundreds of miles of sea lanes, inlets, reefs and channels that made it virtually impossible for the Union navy to patrol and secure. By the same token, these very routes could be used by Federal raiders to sweep up the Cape Fear River and attack the vast storage and dock facilities, rendering a serious, perhaps fatal injury to the maritime lifeline of the South. This possibility did not go unnoticed by Confederate authorities. To protect against a seaborne assault, numerous forts and batteries were erected along the shoreline of the Cape Fear River and, as a further deterrent, a force of heavily armed and armored vessels was planned and construction initiated.

When the armored plated rams CSS RALEIGH and NORTH CAROLINA were nearing completion at Wilmington, a call was made upon the Commandant of the Confederate States Marine Corps, Col. Lloyd J. Beall, for the services of a number of his men to form guards for these men-of-war. Accordingly, on January 18, 1864, 1stLt Richard H. Henderson, CSMC, and thirty well-trained, disciplined enlisted men were ordered from the Marine base camp at Drewry's Bluff, Virginia to the Naval Station at Wilmington. This detachment of C.S. Marines proved to be the nucleus for what was to become a sizeable contingent of that service. They would play an integral part in Confederate Wilmington's last year under the Stars and Bars.

THE CORPS, 1861-1863

The Confederate States Marine Corps came into existence on March 16, 1861, as part of "An Act to Organize the Navy" passed on that date. Initially destined to form a six-company battalion, subsequent legislation increased the authorized strength of the Corps to regimental proportions. The officers, with few exceptions, were men with military backgrounds. Several had seen years of

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Last May at our glorious 30th Anniversary celebration, the Clarendon Award was presented to David Stick for his book entitled: "Bald Head: A History of Smith Island and Cape Fear."

Our new award, the Society Cup, was awarded for the first time to Henry Bacon McKoy for his unique and considerable contribution to the interpretation and appreciation of Wilmington throughout his life of more than 91 years. The Junior League of Wilmington received the Society Cup for its research and documentation of the material necessary to produce the book: "Wilmington, N.C. An Architectural and Historical Portrait." Another Society Cup was presented to Tony Wrenn who wrote the book mentioned above.

Since May several things have changed at the Latimer House. The most appreciated by our volunteers and visitors has been the addition of several air conditioners. During the long, hot summer it was a wonderful improvement.

The parking lot has been paved with bricks and adds to the charm of the garden. It is also a little easier to navigate than those oyster shells.

The Walk and Talk Tour on Wednesdays has continued throughout the summer and has been moderately successful. We will certainly be remiss if we don't take this opportunity to take a walkabout with Jo Anne Jarrett and get a close up view of the four block area near the Latimer House.

"For the Record," the newsletter for the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society, was mailed out in August. Bronwyn Morgan's first issue contained an update on many of the activities of the Society and several interesting articles by our Executive Director and our Archivists. Bronwyn will be sending out other issues throughout the year, so be sure to read them and let her know if you have suggestions.

Keep in mind that December will be here before you know it so mark the sixth and seventh on your calendar for the Candlelight Tour and December fifth for the Wassail Bowl. We need your support to make our only money raising event a success.

I look forward to seeing you at the October meeting.

Sincerely,

Jean Anne Sutton
GIFTS TO THE
IDA B. KELLAM MEMORIAL ARCHIVES

The Society gratefully acknowledges the following gifts:

Mr. John Page Elliott, Charlottesville, Va.
Scrapbooks of Katherine and Elliott McClelland, Wilmington newspaper columnist and wife of Mayor Royce S. McClelland.

Mrs. Ruth Savage Walker
Four maps including 2 photostats of 18th century manuscript maps of Wilmington area from William L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor, MI.

Mrs. E. M. Hardin
Selected 19th and 20th century international correspondences concerning Wilmington.

Mrs. Susan T. Gerdes
Reproduction of Matthew Brady photograph of Gen. William MacRae, copy of hand drawn map of Battle of Reams Station.

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service with the pre-war United States Marine Corps and nearly all of the junior officers had experienced life as a Confederate soldier. The enlisted men, for the most part, were products of the docks and river trade, hail- ing from all parts and ports of the deep south. By the time the orders for Wilmington were cut, the Corps had earned something of a reputation for itself. Events at this new duty station would further enhance that reputation.

Prior to the Wilmington experience, C.S. Marines had gained battle honors in several theaters of the war. They had fought in three engagements with Union forces during the Pensacola Campaign and had dueled the frigate USS MASSACHUSETTS from positions on Ship Island, Mississippi. A Marine Guard aboard USS McRae had battled the fleet led by Flag Officer David G. Farragut to the bitter end at the Battle of New Orleans. During the Battles of Hampton Roads, Marine Guards served aboard CSS VIRGINIA, JAMESTOWN and PATRICK HENRY when USS CONGRESS and CUMBERLAND were sent to the bottom and USS MONITOR was fought to a draw. C.S. Marine contributed significantly to the defeat of a Union flotilla that attempted to force its way to Richmond via the James River during the Peninsula Campaign of 1862. When Charleston, South Carolina was threatened in the spring of 1863, Marines were rushed to the city to be trained in extraordinary combat tactics designed to counter the offensive power of a fleet of Union ironclads. At sea, Marines had served aboard CSS SUMTER, the first commerce destroyer of the Confederacy. In fact, the exemplary performance of the Confederate States Marine Corps would earn no less than four votes of thanks from the Confederate Congress.

SETTLING IN AT WILMINGTON

When Lieutenant Henderson and his detachment arrived in Wilmington, arrangements were made to quarter them aboard CSS ARCTIC, the receiving ship of the station. The dust stirred up in setting up housekeeping had hardly settled when electrifying news was received.

Fellow Marines under the command of Capt. Thomas Smith Wilson, CSMC, had been part of an expedition that had captured the Federal gunboat USS UNDERWRITER at New Bern, North Carolina, on the night of February 2, 1864. If this was an indicator of things to come, the tour of duty at Wilmington would be stimulating, to say the least.

Hazardous duty aside, there were other concerns for Confederate naval authorities at the city. Of particular concern to Flag Officer William F. Lynch, CSN, commander of the Station, was an enormous quantity of cotton purchased by the navy and Marine Corps for shipment through the blockade to England. Upon its arrival on the other side of the Atlantic, the cotton was to be sold, the profit used to purchase military supplies for the Corps and the navy. An additional draft of Marines was requested for the purpose of guarding the yard where the cotton was stored. In mid-February, 1stLt Fergus MacRae, CSMC, was dispatched to Wilmington with fourteen more Marines. These men were taken in charge several days later by 2dLt Melville Doak, CSMC.

ABOARD THE IRONCLADS

When CSS RALEIGH was finally delivered from the hands of the navy yard mechanics, Lieutenant Doak was relieved at the cotton yard by 2dLt J. Campbell Murdoch, CSMC, and ordered to report to the command of the Marine Guard then being put aboard ship. Doak, his three noncommissioned officers and twenty privates were posted to the broadside guns of RALEIGH and immediately set themselves to the task of gun drill with the two splendid rifled cannon. Schooling was, by necessity, of short duration. Flag Officer Lynch, confident of RALEIGH’s prowess, was quite anxious to test her against the Union blockaders off Cape Fear and waited for the first possible opportunity to do so.

At dusk, May 6, 1864, CSS RALEIGH, accompanied by the blockade runner SS WILL-O-THE WISP, steamed past Fort Fisher and confronted the Federal sea sentinels. WILL-O-THE WISP slipped off to the safety of the high seas as her protector moved to engage USS BRITAN- NIA. Opening upon her opponent at extreme range, RALEIGH’s guns quickly intimidated the northern skipper who ordered his vessel into uncenemonious flight. Unsure of the situation, a number of other blockaders left their stations in confusion.

During the brief engagement, Lieutenant Doak was ordered to open fire at the next light by Flag Officer Lynch, meaning, of course, the enemy ships. By the time Doak received the order, the light he saw was the signal beacon at Fort Fisher. Unwittingly, Doak’s command to fire sent a shell hurtling into the fort causing an understandable measure of consternation among the occupants. Lynch, white with fury at Doak’s apparent inep- titude, ordered the Marine officer below under arrest. The timely intervention of Cdr. C. Pembroke Jones, CSN, who explained the misinterpretation of the order to Lynch, fortunately retrieved the situation. More fortunate was the fact that no damage had been done by the wayward missile.

Sunrise of the 7th revealed a reinforced Yankee flotilla.

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During the night, BRITANNIA had returned in company with USS NANSEMOND, KANSAS, HOWQUAH and MOUNT VERNON, slipping into position to challenge RALEIGH at first light. Despite a superiority in numbers and ordnance, the Union Navy won no glory that day. RALEIGH steamed back and forth, offering battle but to no avail. After firing a few shots at long range, the blockaders moved off, refusing to close with the Confederate ironclad. Finally, after firing a shot leeward, the sailor's expression of contempt. Lynch ordered RALEIGH back to port.

While re-crossing the bar, RALEIGH ran hard aground on the rip near Zeke's Island. In a matter of moments, the excited banter of the proud crew turned to the silence of grief and gloom. Efforts to move the ship proved fruitless and as the tide receded, the pressure of tons of armor plate bore down upon the wooden hull, ultimately breaking her back. The "Mistress of Cape Fear" was no more.

RALEIGH's sister, CSS NORTH CAROLINA, had a career that proved to be a lamentable example of naval engineering. Notoriously underpowered and unable to best the current of the Cape Fear River, NORTH CAROLINA remained tied to her dock at Smithville as a guardship. Here, her unprotected hull provided a haven for sea worms. These parasites made a meal of her bottom, causing NORTH CAROLINA to sink at her berth. The members of her Marine Guard would have to wait for other opportunities to prove their mettle.

CHANGE OF COMMAND

A few weeks after the triumph and tragedy of CSS RALEIGH, detachment commander Henderson, having succumbed to the charms of Miss Sarah Poer Williams of Society Hill, South Carolina, applied for leave of absence in order to tie the knot of matrimony. Furlough papers in hand, Lieutenant Henderson left Wilmington on June 10, 1864.

Shortly after Henderson's departure, Capt. Alfred C. Van Benthuyzen, CSMC, was offered command of the Wilmington Marines. Van Benthuyzen, recently restored to duty with the Corps after a lengthy suspension from rank and command, had previously been ordered to Mobile, Alabama, ostensibly to relieve the overburdened staff of Company D, CSMC. Upon arrival, however, most of the excess recruits were in the process of being transferred to Drewry's Bluff and Van Benthuyzen found himself without purpose. Marine Headquarters telegraphed the unemployed captain, offering him his choice of assignments: return to his former command of Company B, CSMC or the top spot at Wilmington. Not anxious to return to the scene of his prior difficulties, two court-martials and a series of very strained relationships, opting for Wilmington was an easy choice for Van Benthuyzen. "Bumped" from his post at Wilmington, Lieutenant Henderson was ordered back to Drewry's Bluff at the expiration of his leave.

THE POINT LOOKOUT EXPEDITION

During the late Spring of 1864, word came from a Confederate agent in Maryland that the prisoner-of-war camp at Point Lookout, situated on the very tip of the peninsula formed by the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay, was ripe for a daring attack to free thousands of rebels held within its confines. Apprised of the circumstances, General Robert E. Lee formulated a plan that, if successful would, at the very least, tip the balance of the war in Northern Virginia to his favor. On the opposite end of the spectrum of speculation, many believed the capture of Washington, D.C. would be the end result of the strategem and with it, Confederate victory and independence. In brief, the plan consisted of a land-sea assault upon the garrison at Point Lookout, organizing the liberated prisoners into military formations under arms and marching then to the point of optimum strategic advantage.

Charged with carrying out the difficult land aspect of the expedition was BrigGen Bradley T. Johnson, a Marylander commanding a cavalry brigade in LtGen Jubal A. Early's Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia. Johnson's troopers were to ride around the flank of the enemy, then opposing Early in the Maryland countryside west of Washington, skirt the Capital, pass around Baltimore and swoop down upon the hapless defenders of Point Lookout.

Coinciding with Johnson's attack, a force of sailors and Marines were to be landed from two blockade runners impressed by the Confederate States Government specifically for the mission. These naval troops would make their attack from the beach. The two-pronged attack was to be launched at the earliest possible opportunity in July. The port of departure for the naval force was Wilmington.

The expedition was quickly organized. The Marine Battalion commander at Drewry's Bluff, Capt. John D. Simms, CSMC, received his orders on July 2 and at 3:00 AM the following morning all the effective of the battalion, some ninety enlisted men and five officers under the charge of Capt. George Holmes, CSMC, moved out. Picking up an additional forty Marines, guards from the navy yards at Richmond, and about 150 sailors from the James River Squadron, the enlarged command boarded trains and headed south from Richmond. Wilmington was reached on July 6.

Over the next few days, the pace was fast and furious. Arms and ammunition intended for the soon to be released prisoners were secured from army ordnance supplies at Wilmington by Captain Holmes. The Marines and sailors were evenly separated into detachments and put aboard the FLORRIE and LET-HER-BE. By this time, the nature of the expedition found its way to the men and excitement rose. Even Lieutenant Henderson, eager to share in the adventure, cut short his honeymoon in order to join his comrades of the Corps. By evening, July 9, all was in readiness and the ships moved downriver from Wilmington to Smithville.

The 10th was spent in a state of tense anticipation. Finally, in the early evening, the order was given to weigh anchor and proceed to sea. Just as the ships passed Fort Fisher, a signal was received from shore ordering the expedition to halt. A telegram had been received from President Davis advising the cancellation of the mission. Consternation and shock spread throughout the command, fueled by a steady stream of rumors. Security leaks had alerted the enemy; the prisoners had
2d Lt. James Campbell Murdoch 1840-1889
Captured at Fort Fisher, 1865. (Museum of the Confederacy)
On August 18, the ship entered the harbor of Halifax, Nova Scotia, to replenish her depleted coal bunkers. While in harbor, the crew was paid and given shore leave. Following a centuries-old tradition, the men headed for the nearest taverns and got properly drunk. When time came for TALLAHASSEE to be underway and off to continue her mission, Lieutenant Crenshaw was placed in charge of rounding up the liberty men. Needless to say, he had quite a time of it. Even with the help of local police, over two dozen sailors and Marines were among the missing when the ship left port.33

Political pressure from the United States emissaries at Halifax prevented TALLAHASSEE from taking on board all the coal she would need to continue her marauding ways. A course was plotted for home. Despite being at sea for only nineteen days, thirty-one prizes had been taken; a record haul for such a short time span.

Lieutenant Crenshaw became seriously ill during TALLAHASSEE’s return to her lair at Wilmington. After running the blockade and safely docking at her home port, the ship bid farewell to the ailing Marine officer. In his place, 2dLt Henry M. Doak, CSMC, was ordered to duty aboard the raider.34

TALLAHASSEE was renamed CSS OLUSTEY and fitted out for another cruise. Freed from the boredom of commanding one of the shore detachments of Marines, Doak rather enjoyed his duties as boarding officer during this second and, again, successful operation against enemy shipping.35 Six more prizes were added to the bag of TALLAHASSEE/OLUSTEE between October 29 and November 7, 1864.

A second sea-raider, CSS CHICKAMAUGA, was also based at Wilmington, and she, too, had a Guard of Marines. 1stLt David Bradford, CSMC, was detailed to the ship with eleven enlisted men on August 29, 1864.36 CHICKAMAUGA ran through the blockade during the night of October 28-29 and prowled the sea lanes as far north as Montauk Point, Long Island, before heading for Bermuda. During an abbreviated cruise, cut short by the loss of a large portion of her crew at St. Georges, Bermuda, CHICKAMAUGA managed to capture eight enemy merchantmen.37

The success of Wilmington’s cruisers spawned a rash of protests from northern ship owners and insurers, all falling at the door of U.S. Naval Secretary Gideon Welles. It no doubt hastened the day of reckoning for the last operational port of the Confederacy.

(To be concluded in February issue)

David Sullivan is a resident of Rutland, Massachusetts. His articles have been published in many outstanding historical and military journals. His grandfather served aboard the U.S.S. Colorado off the North Carolina coast on the blockade. His great-uncle died a prisoner of war at Andersonville.
FOOTNOTES

1Richard Henry Henderson (8/27/1831-5/3/1860) was the second son of Pvt BrigGen Archibald Henderson, USMC, long-time commandant of the United States Marine Corps. A lawyer at Washington, D.C., prior to the war, Henderson was commissioned a 1st Lieutenant directly from civilian life on 4/16/1861.

2S.O. 7, January 16, 1864, Headquarters, C.S. Marine Corps, File Designations of the Subject File of the Confederate States Navy, Subject File OV, National Archives Record Group 45. Hereinafter referred to as Subfile, followed by the letter designation.

3Previews of the Permanent Constitution of the Confederate States (Richmond, Va.; Tyler, Wise, Allegre and Smith, Printers, 1861) 104: Section 9, Number 70. “An Act to Provide for the Organization of the Navy. March 18, 1861.”


5Of the fifty-six gentlemen who held commissions as officers of Confederate States Marine Corps, nineteen were former United States Marine officers; two had served in the Confederate States Navy; one had been employed by the United States Navy; one was a graduate of West Point and long-time officer of the United States Army; one had been appointed from a civil life and the rest from the ranks of the Confederate States Army. See Ralph W. Donnelly, Biographical Sketches of the Commissioned Officers of the Confederate States Marine Corps (Washington, D.C., N.C., revised edition, 1874).

6U.S. Navy Department, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion (30 vols. and index; Washington, D.C., 1894-1922), Series II, vol. 3, 125, 131, 138, 167. Hereinafter referred to as OR, series and volume indicated by Roman and Arabic numerals, respectively.

7Thomas Scharf, History of the Confederate States Navy (New York, 1867), 399. Hereinafter referred to as Scharf.

8Receipt, Subfile OV.

Rec’d this day of Major A.S. Taylor, CSMC, for William H. Peters, C.S. Naval Agent, the sum of $40,000.00, to be expended in the purchase of cotton for the C.S. Marine Corps.

(Signed) P.L. Clayton
Agent, C.S.N. Dept.

This combined with the cotton purchased for the C.S. Navy was a tempting target for Union raiders. On April 26, 1864, a boats-crew from USS NIPHON managed to set fire to the yard destroying 15,000-20,000 bales of government cotton. See OR, Ser. I, vol. 9, 714.

9Fergus MacRae (4/26/1839-1/2/1883) came from a long line of American soldiers. His grandfather was a major during the Revolution and his father and uncle were graduates of West Point. MacRae had served as a Lieutenant of Artillery in the 1st Missouri Regiment prior to becoming a 2d Lieutenant of C.S. Marines on 10/8/1861. He was heir to much real estate at Wilmington and Smithville which was seized by the Freedmen’s Bureau after the war.

10Henry Melville Doak (8/3/1841-4/28/1928) served as Sergeant-Major of Company E, 19th Tennessee Volunteers before accepting a Confederate States Marine Corps commission to rank as 2d Lieutenant from 11/12/1862. A much travelled junior officer, Doak had served as Dreyer’s Bluff, Virginia; Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia before his transfer to Wilmington.

11James Campbell Murdoch (1840?/9-12/8/1899) was an unsuccessful prewar applicant for a commission as an officer of U.S. Marines. When war broke out, he enlisted as a private in Company M, 1st Virginia Cavalry. He was commissioned 2d Lieutenant, C.S. Marines to rank from 4/8/1863. Murdoch commanded the Marine Guard aboard CSS RICHMOND prior to being sent to Wilmington on 10/8/1861. He was heir to much real estate at Wilmington and Smithville which was seized by the Freedmen’s Bureau after the war.


13Ibid., 35.

14Ibid., 35.

15Ibid., 35-36.


17Personal Papers of Richard H. Henderson, “ZB” files, Operational Archives, Naval History Division, United States Navy. Hereinafter referred to as ZB.

18Alfred Crippen Van Benthuyzen (ca.1835-11/15/1871) was probably the most colorful of C.S. Marine officers. He had military experience of a most varied and unusual nature prior to taking up arms for the South. A true mercenary, Van Benthuyzen was reported to have served in China, Crimea, and, the Anglo-Chinese conflict of 1859, the Austro-Sardinian War in 1859 and served with the forces of Garibaldi in the campaign which ended in the triumphal entry into Rome in 1860. With such credits in his background, he was commissioned Captain of C.S. Marines on March 30, 1861. Van Benthuyzen recruited and commanded his own company of Marines at Pensacola, Florida and at the Battle of Derryw’s Bluff on May 15, 1862. His northern born family suffered the pain of divided loyalties. At least one of his brothers, George, fought for the Union.

19Telegram: Lloyd J. Beall, Col. C.cmdg. Marines to Capt. A. C. Van Benthuyzen, Richmond, June 15, 1864. Van Benthuyzen Papers, Special Collections Division, Tulane University. Hereinafter referred to as Van Benthuyzen.

20Ibid., Van Benthuyzen had twice been court-martialed while stationed at Derryw’s Bluff. In both cases, he was found guilty of the offenses and sentenced to be dismissed from the service. His family relationship to Jefferson Davis—his aunt had married the President’s older brother Joseph Davis—saved his career in both cases. Davis commuted the sentences to suspension from rank and pay.

21S.O. 54; para. 1, Headquarters Confederate States Marine Corps, Richmond, Va., June 16, 1864, ZB Van Benthuyzen file.


25The Century Company, Battles and Leaders of the Civil War (New York, 1887), vol. IV, “Early’s March to Washington in 1864,” by Jubel A. Early, Lieutenant-General, CSA. 494-499. Early’s troops were in the midst of a successful campaign in Maryland at this time and very early the gates of Washington, D.C. Hereinafter referred to as B&L.

Edward Crenshaw (8/29/1842-9/9/1911) had served as a combat officer of the 17th Alabama Volunteers, 9th Alabama Battalion and 59th Alabama Infantry, rising to the rank of captain and company commander. After being wounded in the face at the Battle of Chickamauga, Crenshaw resigned from the army to accept a commission as a 2d Lieutenant of C.S. Marines to date from 4/11/1864.

27Receipt, Subfile OV.

Turned over by Major B. Sloan, Chief of Ordnance, Wilmington, N.C., to Capt. George Holmes, C.S. Marine Corps. 16,000 musket caps 2,500 cartridge cases 3 boxes July 8, 1864.

Also; Invoice of ordnance stores turned over by Major B. Sloan, Chief of Ordnance, Wilmington, N.C., to Capt. George Holmes, CMS, July 8, 1864.

16,000 Enfield rifle cartridges.

Crenshaw, July 9, 1864.


29Crenshaw, July 11, 12, 1864.

30Ibid., July 18, 20, 1864.

31Subfile NA. Michael M. Van Benthuyzen, an Irishman by birth, enlisted in Captain Van Benthuyzen’s Company at New Orleans on May 3, 1861. Assigned to the Marine Guard of CSS McRAE. Private Boy was captured at the fall of New Orleans. Exchanged and restored to duty in
August of 1862, Bow saw service aboard CSS RICHMOND before being sent to Wilmington in 1864. During the second Battle of Fort Fisher, Bow was mortally wounded and died on January 17, 1865.

13Crenshaw, August 19, 1864.
15Doak, 36-37.
16S.O. 67, para. II; Headquarters, C.S. Marine Corps, Richmond, Va., August 29, 1864. ZB, David Bradford file. David Bradford (ca.1835-79/1903) was the son of Judge David Bradford, first Director of the United States Mint at New Orleans and nephew to Jefferson Davis. Bradford had served as a private in his cousin Joseph R. Davis’ Company I 10th Mississippi Infantry before accepting a commission as a 2d Lieutenant of C.S. Marines to rank from 11/22/1861. Promoted to 1st Lieutenant on 12/11/1862, Bradford had served as guard commander at the Manchester Navy Yard (opposite Rocketts, Richmond) and aboard the ironclad CSS FREDERICKSBURG prior to his transfer to Wilmington.