

Ceramics from CSS *Alabama*

By Frank Davenport

April 12, 2011 was the 150th anniversary of the start of the American Civil war. The shelling on that date and the ultimate surrender of Fort Sumter (SC) precipitated a Union navy blockade of Confederate ports. An appropriate response by the Confederate Navy was difficult because they lacked ocean going men-of-war. Hence an agent, Commander James Dunwoody Bulloch, was dispatched to Britain later in 1861 to acquire warships for the Confederate Navy. To circumvent the British neutrality law, these ships were to be unarmed and exclude objects that could be construed as instruments of war.* Upon arrival in Britain, Bulloch ordered the construction of four unarmed gunboats by companies in Liverpool (CSS *Florida*), and Birkenhead (CSS *Alabama* 290, Rams 294, 295). Of these ships, only two (the CSS *Florida* and the CSS *Alabama*) were commissioned by the Confederate Navy. The others were appropriated by the British Government and subsequently commissioned in the Royal Navy.**

The most well known or infamous of the Confederate raiders is the CSS *Alabama*, under the command of Raphael Semmes. In 22 months, the *Alabama* claimed at least 65 ships carrying Union cargo. The *Alabama*'s marauding ended off Cherbourg on the coast of France on June 19, 1864 following a brief battle with the USS *Kearsage*. The *Alabama* sank in about 190 feet of water and remained undisturbed until located by the French navy mine sweeper *Circe* in 1984.

Following international agreement, many difficult dives have taken place on the wreck site with almost two thousand artifacts recovered and conserved. The recovered ceramics¹ tantalizingly suggest differing ages and origins. Obviously, certain items were part of the ship's outfitting, e.g., mess crockery and toilets etc. Other ceramic items may represent personal effects of the crew, mess kits, etc. Yet other items may have been on board as appropriated property. And finally, the wreck site may also have somehow acquired intrusive items dating from a later time.***



Fig. 1. Officers' dinner plate.



Fig. 2. Covered vegetable dish.

* Whilst the construction of unarmed gunboats may have been within the letter of the neutrality act, the largely unimpeded worldwide use of British ports by Confederate gunboats was ultimately judged to be a breach of International law by a neutral nation (Britain). In September, 1872, an International Arbitration Commission found in favor of the United States and awarded damages of \$15.5 million dollars to be paid in gold by Britain. See Spring 2005 - The Bivouac Banner Volume IV, Issue 1, The Alabama Claims at <http://www.bivouacbooks.com/bbv4i1s2.htm>

** Following the loss of *Alabama* in 1864, the Confederate Navy purchased *Sea King*, a Clydeside built ship, which was armed and commissioned as CSS *Shenandoah*.

*** A sherd marked Mason's Patent Ironstone Hotel Ware is shown in Fig. 8 and is printed with a vermicelli style border pattern. The back side is printed as shown and includes the word England, which signifies a date after 1892. Based on a production date of 1892 or later, this fragment is not contemporary with *Alabama* and must have intruded into the wreck's debris field some time prior to artifact recovery.

Fortunately, contemporary accounts² record color differences between the tableware of the various messes. Crockery for the officer's wardroom was transfer printed in blue with central fouled anchor surrounded by a belt or garter. A printed blue twisted rope is printed on the rim. Fig. 1 shows a 10 3/8" officers dinner plate.

The Gunroom crockery for use by the Petty officers, engineers and stewards was printed in green with crossed anchors surrounded by the same garter. The rim has the same twisted rope but printed in green. In addition the glaze was tinted green as shown in the 10" covered vegetable dish of Fig. 2. The soup bowl shown in Fig. 3 is an example of the crew's tableware which is printed in brown with a single fouled anchor and brown twisted brown rope rim.

Although the contemporary accounts record different colors for different ranks, they provide no information regarding the body, decoration, or maker; fortunately, the artifacts fill



Fig. 3. Crew soup bowl.



Fig. 4A. Davenport bone china mark.

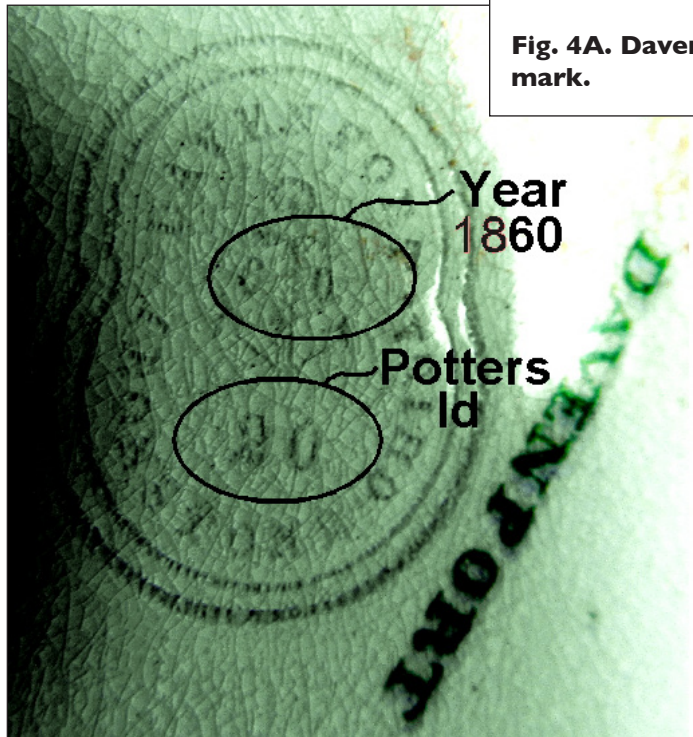


Fig. 4. Davenport impressed ironstone mark.

most of the details. Much of the tableware was transfer printed ironstone with differing center emblems depending on the users' rank. In addition most of the intact pieces are impressed with the maker's name and potting date, and when decorated, printed with the maker's name. Fig. 4 shows a Davenport Ironstone China impressed mark with the potting date straddling the anchor shaft. The number beneath the anchor is believed to be the potter's (plate maker's) identification. This number relates to the practice of "Good from Oven"³ where, in this instance, plate maker 20

was paid for pieces judged salable after the first firing.

Basically all the Davenport Ironstone China pieces are dated 1860 and remained as unfinished biscuit ware awaiting decoration for a purchaser. Clearly, crockery for the *Alabama* must have been ordered between August 1, 1861, the contract date of the CSS *Alabama* and July 28, 1862, when it sailed from Birkenhead. The twisted rope border design common to all three patterns is known from Davenport's

"Marine" and other patterns. However, these various anchor patterns were not known prior to the recovery of these artifacts, and these designs although simple, required engraved copper plates for printing.

The same contemporary accounts mention the Captain's tableware as being decorated in gold, but provide no further details. To date no examples of gilded tableware have been recovered. It is likely that there were only a few settings of the captain's tableware, hence a small probability of discovery when compared with the likely numbers of settings for the Officers and other crew.

Somewhat tantalizingly, several bone china artifacts have been recovered from the site. These are glazed and appear undecorated, but with magnification reveal vestiges of gilding. Is it possible that Captain Semmes preferred bone china to ironstone? Or were these blue marked Davenport bone china pieces acquired as spoils of war? The Davenport ribbon and anchor mark of Fig. 4A was printed

in blue after 1830, hence these artifacts are contemporary with the equipping of the *Alabama*.

Whether the Captain's tableware was bone china or ironstone, either body may have glazing applied over the glaze and fired at a low temperature. This process yields decoration which is easily damaged and it is quite possible that more than 130 years of immersion in sandy salt water may have effectively erased any vestige of gilded decoration regardless of the body type.

The recovered bone china pieces include two muffin plates, an egg cup and a creamer. All are glazed, appear undecorated and are marked in blue (Fig. 4A). Were these bone china pieces part of the Captain's service or spoils of war? Clearly, undecorated bone china articles are less expensive to produce than decorated ones. Furthermore, undecorated bone china is possibly less esthetically appealing, therefore less salable and thus is questionable as Union cargo. In view of the superior durability and lower cost of undecorated white ironstone when compared with undecorated bone china, it would seem that white ironstone would be an obvious choice if decoration was unimportant. China painting was prominent in Europe and gaining in popularity in America. Could undecorated bone china items have been destined for decoration by genteel ladies in San Francisco or elsewhere?*****



Fig. 5. Chamber pot.

The chamber pot in Fig. 5 is displayed in the CSS *Alabama* exhibit at the National Museum of the United States Navy. It is not available for physical examination, but the thumb rest on the handle reveals a design feature identical to an extant example of a Davenport earthenware chamber pot shown in the small image. The decoration is believed to be printed with Davenport's "Carrara Marble" pattern. The chamber pot is thought to be original to the *Alabama*, but ownership can only be guessed, given Captain Semmes' frequent affliction with sea sickness.

Three molded jugs have been recovered, two with white bodies; the third shown in Fig. 6, is tan colored and on display in the museum. Visual examination of the tan jug suggests a smear glaze on the outside with a conventional glaze within. The jug's distinctive molding, known as the "John Barleycorn" pattern, provided identification⁴ as a Ridgway and Abington product with the molded design registered in 1856. In addition, a white ironstone molded gravy boat (not illustrated) was also recovered and was readily identified as the Ceres registered design (1859) manufactured by Elsmore & Forster. The registration dates suggest that the jugs and gravy boat could have been part of the officers' or Petty officers' wardroom tableware, but the true origin will likely remain a mystery.



Fig. 6. "John Barleycorn" Jug.

***** Interestingly Semmes recounts the capture of the ship *Anna F Schmidt* from Boston bound for San Francisco. The *Alabama* Claims values the *Anna F Schmidt* and cargo at \$350,000 and this is possibly the reason for Semmes' somewhat uncharacteristic detailing of the cargo and in particular his distinction between crockery and china ware. Furthermore this attractive cargo is probably why Semmes notes that it took nearly a whole day to transfer the booty. The *Alabama* Claims lists several Boston merchants with cargo on the *Anna F Schmidt*; however, none are known to be importers or agents for Davenport. Thus it is only speculation that the *Anna F Schmidt* was the source of *Alabama*'s Davenport bone china or any of the more decorative ceramic artifacts. See *Memoirs of service afloat*, by Admiral Raphael Semmes, Kelly Piet & Co. 1869, p. 631.



Chinoiserie artifact Extant example

Fig. 7. Wedgwood & Co “Chusan” pattern.

A dark blue Chinoiserie printed sherd is shown in Fig. 7. It was probably from an 8” plate and although unmarked is virtually identical to an extant polychrome version of the “Chusan” pattern manufactured by Wedgwood & Co., with production dating from 1860. Although this plate is contemporary with the *Alabama*, the decorative style seems an unlikely choice for either the Confederate Navy or the jack tars on board. Thus it is assumed that this plate was appropriated as spoils of war.

Several white ironstone plates and a concreted jug by Anthony Shaw are also part of this exhibit at the Navy Museum. These artifacts were manufactured by a range of Staffordshire potters⁵ that either predate or are contemporary with the *Alabama*. Whilst these ironstone pieces could have been part of a crew mess kit, they are thought more likely to be from the *Alabama*’s original galley equipment.

The *Alabama* was equipped with two pairs of wooden hut-like structures each containing a flushable, blue transfer printed earthenware water closet (WC) – on-board outhouses, so to speak. These toilet structures were located under the bridge, 2 on either side of the ship. Three of the four toilets bowls have been recovered: one is displayed in the Navy Museum, a second

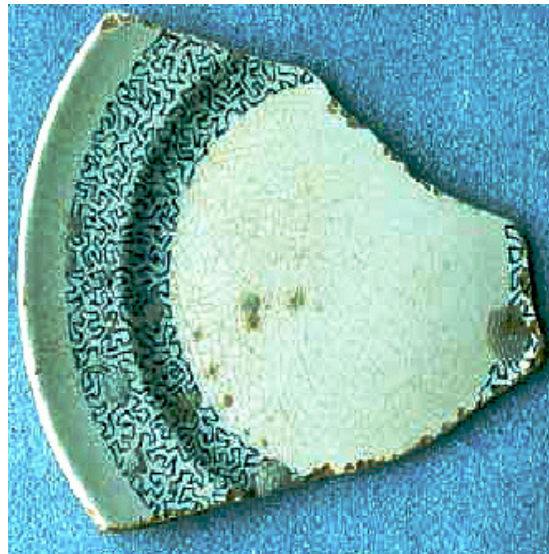


Fig. 8. Masons Hotel Ware.



in the Museum of Mobile, the third is in the Underwater Archaeology & Conservation Lab on the Washington Navy Yard. Fig. 9 is a profile view of the earthenware bowl with the remains of the mounting and flush mechanism. A top down view in Fig. 9A shows a printed romantic period pattern known as the “Rhine” scene with an interesting but incongruous printed floral rim. A detailed view of the pattern is shown in Fig. 9B. Certain image details may assist in identifying the maker. For example, the foreground boat is moving away from the viewer with people on board handling crab pots. Statuary is present on the bank to the right of the foreground boat and the view of the river beyond the boat is without a bridge, which is often present in other versions of the pattern. During conservation an impressed mark NB was found located under the water inlet on one bowl. This mark is thought to be a molder’s mark, required by the practice of “Good from Oven”, rather than the actual factory mark. Identification is complicated by the fact that more than 10 English factories operated contemporaneously with the *Alabama* and produced various types of wares printed with substantially similar “Rhine” patterns. The “Rhine” pattern was popular and in production from the 1850’s into the twentieth century.



Fig. 9. Toilet and mounting.

The toilets have attractive and tantalizingly familiar prints which currently evade identification.

Many of the artifacts described above may be viewed at the National Museum of the United States Navy located on the Washington Navy Yard in Washington, DC. Others of the pieces described may be accessed by appointment at the Underwater Archaeology and Conservation Laboratory also located on the Washington Navy Yard.

Thanks are due to Dr. Robert Neyland, Head, Naval History & Heritage Command Underwater Archaeology Branch, for allowing access to the artifacts and for permission to use images of the artifacts. Thanks to George Schwarz Archaeologist/Conservator for facilitating access and in particular to Kate Morrand, Assistant Conservator for identifying and finding many of the pieces described above. Thanks are also due to Charles Duckworth for images of an extant chamber pot in fig 6, to Dr. R. K. Henrywood for identifying the "John Barleycorn" jug shown in fig. 7 and to Janice Paull and Deb Skinner for assistance with the Masons sherd in fig. 9.



ABOVE: Fig. 9A. Toilet top view.



LEFT: Fig. 9B. "Rhine" pattern close-up.

Notes

¹ Many of CSS *Alabama*'s artifacts are on display in the National Museum of the United States Navy on the Washington Navy Yard, Washington DC

² Private communication with Dr Gordon P. Watts and page 138 "Here Comes the Alabama" second edition by, Edna and Frank Bradlow, published by Westby Nunn Publishers cc Western Cape South Africa.

³ http://www.stokemuseums.org.uk/collections/browse_collections/ceramics/research_resources/general/customs_practices

⁴ "Relief-Moulded Jugs 1820-1900 " p.77 By R. K. Henrywood
Antique Collectors' Club Ltd 1984

⁵ Recovered White Ironstone artifacts manufactured by:-

E. Challinor & Co	Fenton
James Edwards & Son	Burslem
J. W. Pankhurst	Hanley
Anthony Shaw	Burslem