

Running the Blockade

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Spy Rose O'Neal Greenhow (1817-1864) and her daughter. *Image from the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.*

It was late on the evening of September 30, 1864, when a fast ship named the *Condor* approached Fort Fisher, a Confederate stronghold just south of Wilmington. This vessel carried precious cargo for the Confederate Civil War effort. It also carried a very prominent person, who stood looking longingly at the earthen fortifications. The passenger, Rose O'Neal Greenhow, was carrying important information, as well as money, from England. She knew that if the Union navy caught her, she likely would be hanged for acts against the United States government. Rather than face capture after the *Condor* ran aground, Greenhow boarded a dingy, so sailors could row her toward the fort. The Confederate spy and her small crew proved no match for the storm and waves. Their boat capsized, and she drowned before making it to safety. Blockade-runners like the *Condor* played a big part in North Carolina's Civil War story.

What is one of the first lessons that a military force learns about defeating an enemy? Cut off their supplies. United States government leaders knew that the Confederacy needed food, clothing, and weapons to fight the Civil War. They hoped that blocking trade from the Northern states and Europe would bring a faster end to the conflict. In April 1861 President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a blockade of all Southern ports. The North Atlantic Blockading Squadron was a fleet of Union ships with orders to stop ships trying to enter Virginia and North Carolina. Three additional squadrons were stationed along the Southern coastline: South Atlantic, East Gulf, and West Gulf. At the start of the war, the blockading ships were few in number. It was almost impossible for the Union navy to stop vessels from going in and out of Confederate-held ports.

After Beaufort fell to Union forces in 1862, it became the headquarters for the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron. Rather than going to occupied ports in Virginia to get more coal for fuel or to repair a ship, the blockaders now had access to these services in North Carolina. As the war carried on, the number of vessels in the blockade grew. The Union shut down many other ports, making goods difficult to come by in the South. Southern states had to develop a way to receive supplies for the military and for the survival of the civilian population. Quick-minded businessmen began building new vessels in Europe. In the Confederacy, they refit ships that were sleek, fast, and quiet. These steam-powered ships came to be called blockade-runners. Usually painted gray to match the water, the vessels would make their "run" at night, loaded

down with supplies such as shoes, cloth, guns, and ammunition, and even less-critical goods like women's mirrors and bonnets. In return, the South sent cotton and other unfinished goods to Europe for trade.

The Bahamas and Bermuda, islands located off the East Coast, offered perfect places to dump cargo destined for England and to take on goods returning to the South. Unfortunately, finished goods were not the only items loaded onto blockade-runners from the temperate islands. Yellow fever, carried by infected mosquitoes, also came aboard ships. A blockade-runner might have carried this horrible disease, also known as "Yellow Jack," into Wilmington, the largest town in Civil War-era North Carolina. By winter of 1862, the fever had infected a third of the 5,000 people in Wilmington, killing many of these men, women, and children. So many died, town officials created a mass burial area in Oakdale Cemetery. "For over ten weeks it raged with terrible violence . . . medicines and provisions were both scarce and high in price . . . those of the frightened inhabitants that were able to do so, fled the town," James Sprunt wrote in *Chronicles of the Cape Fear*. "All business was abandoned, and the closed stores and silent streets gave the place an appearance of a deserted city." Fort Anderson became the quarantine station for ships after the epidemic of 1862. Major General William Henry Chase Whiting, Confederate commander of the Cape Fear District, issued orders that all blockade-runners had to stop there and earn a clean bill of health before steaming up the Cape Fear River to Wilmington.



John Newland Maffitt became a well-known commander of both blockade-runners as well as Confederate gunboats.
Image Courtesy of the State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History.

Blockade-running, while dangerous, could prove profitable. The Confederate government was heavily involved. It tried to regulate what was traded through the blockade and at what price the goods would be sold. The Confederate and state governments had their own steamers that ran the blockade. A certain percentage of cotton had to be shipped out on each trip of a private blockade-runner. Often, ship owners gave gifts to government officials in return for leniency when it came to the rules. Everything was sold through the blockade—from rifles and cannons to blankets and flag bunting. Home front goods such as cotton combing cards (a sort of brush used to prepare cotton fibers for spinning to make homemade cloth), sewing needles, irons, and cloth for dresses would fetch a hefty price from civilians who could afford them.

As more Southern ports closed, Wilmington became the premier blockade-running site. Ship captains could choose from two inlets (New and Old), both heavily guarded by Confederate fortifications. At New Inlet, Union naval officers of the blockading squadron knew they had to give up the chase once they were in range of Fort Fisher's guns. Heavy seacoast cannons guarded the inlet and protected blockade-runners. Military cargo was unloaded from ships and sent on the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad to Virginia to supply the Confederate army.

With the capture of Fort Fisher in January 1865—the result of the largest bombardment and land-sea operation in history to that point—the Confederacy's last port closed to the blockade-runners. After the fort's occupation by Union troops, the crucial supply line was broken. The city

of Wilmington fell in March 1865. Robert E. Lee, general of the Army of Northern Virginia, surrendered his troops in April. The war was over. Blockade-running was arguably the lifeline of the Confederate war effort. Without it, the South could not continue to fight.

As for the *Condor*, shortly after it ran aground, Confederate gunners at Fort Fisher (who usually shot at Union ships) used it for target practice. The ship's remains lie in about 15 feet of water off the fort in New Inlet at Kure Beach. More than a dozen other wrecks of blockade-runners dot the North Carolina coast, along with the wrecks of other Civil War-era ships. Learning about them helps us remember what happened in the Tar Heel State during the Civil War.

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