



The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

The *RUNNER*

Newsletter of The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

Editor **Bob Cooke**

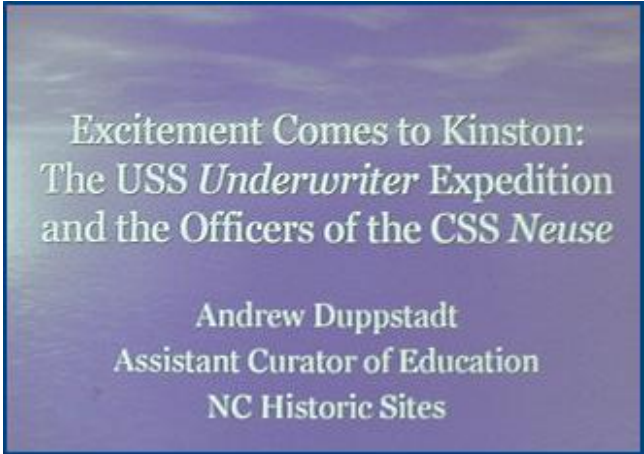
February 2008

Our next meeting will be on Thursday, **21 February 2008** at **St. Andrew's On-the-Sound** (Airlie Rd.). **Social hour- 6:30 p.m., meeting- 7:30 p.m.**



Our speaker for February will be **Jim Jordan**, who hails from South Carolina; actually, Jim is a native New Yorker who, upon retirement, moved South to Callawassie Island to relax and play golf! He has instead become an author, tour guide and public speaker. His first novel, *Savannah Grey, A Tale of Antebellum Georgia*, has been well received and will be available for purchase at our meeting. Jim's topic is titled: "**Knocking on the Gates of Hell: The South Ponders Civil War.**" Please join us on 21 February in welcoming Jim and his wife Kathleen to the Port City! Also please note that this meeting will be on the **THIRD THURSDAY** of the month.

Fittingly, at our January meeting, **Andrew Duppstadt** took us back to January 1864 when the C. S. Navy made plans to mount a secret mission to capture a U.S. ship, the **U.S.S. Underwriter**. It took time to gather men and equipment for the attack, which was to be made in conjunction with a planned attack on the Union enclave of New Bern. That town had been taken by the Federals in March 1862. The plan was to seize the vessel and utilize her to attack other Union ships around New Bern. Selected to lead the attack on the Underwriter was Lieutenant John Taylor Wood, a grandson of President Zachary Taylor and close confidant of President Jefferson Davis. While the North had William B. Cushing as its daring hero, the South



Excitement Comes to Kinston:
The USS *Underwriter* Expedition
and the Officers of the CSS *Neuse*

Andrew Duppstadt
Assistant Curator of Education
NC Historic Sites

had Wood! Wood, a veteran of the Mexican War was an instructor at the U.S. Naval Academy when Civil War came; he resigned his commission and served aboard the C.S.S. Virginia and later; (holding the rank of Colonel) commanded army troops in Virginia. He had already proven his ability to conduct a raid such as was planned; he had captured several Union vessels, including two men-of-war. Gathering together a mixed force of marines (from Richmond, Savannah, Charleston and Wilmington) and sailors over 250 men (thirty-three officers and 220 enlisted men) were to secretly rendezvous at Kinston. Secretly is a relative word however; the boats, with the sailors and marines seated in them, were loaded onto railroad flats and, "it was a novel sight to see a train like that- Jack sitting up on the seats of the boats and waving his hat to the astonished natives, who never saw such a circus before." (Clark, V:326) Several of the boats to be used in the attack were "impressed" (seized) from the few blockade-runners in port at the time by the military at Wilmington! It was early in February before Lieutenant Benjamin P. Loyall (second-in-command) and Captain (his naval rank) Wood started the men in two groups, on their 40-mile sojourn down the Neuse River. The surprise attack was to be at night; so all the men tacked pieces of white cotton cloth on their left arms for easier recognition. Hiding out close to the town, Wood awaited the arrival of the second group while the distinct sounds of battle could be heard. General George Pickett, in command of the attack on New Bern would fail in his attempt to retake the town, but Wood and his stalwart band would continue their water-borne attack.



Mr. Duppstatd described the target of that attack: a former New York "heavy ocean tugboat" commandeered by the **U.S. Navy** and armed with two 8" guns, one 3" rifle and a 12-pdr. howitzer; she was a 186' long side-wheel steamer, 325 tons with a 35' beam. Nominally manned by 12 officers and 72 sailors, her compliment that night was somewhat less; one Union report had only 40 men aboard. At 2:30 a.m. Wood's men headed for the ship. As they neared her, a voice rang out, "Boat ahoy!" Wood responded, "Give way, boys!" The battle was on. Rifle fire rained upon the men as they climbed aboard. The battle was savage and little quarter was given. Writing in 1901, Lieutenant Loyall said the "cracking of fire arms and the rattle of cutlasses made a deafening din." After a short but fierce fight, the ship was in Confederate hands. After determining that it would take too long to get the steamer's boilers up to pressure, Wood decided to set the ship

afire. Another compelling reason to move quickly was that nearby Fort Stevens had opened fire upon the *Underwriter*. Fires were set and the raiders once again manned their launches and rowed away from the scene. Wood, not seeing the vessel on fire, sent back Lieutenant Francis L. Hoge to ensure that they were set properly. Braving the fire once more, Hoge boarded the steamer and set even more fires, this time the blaze could clearly be seen and as the Confederates oared upstream, the sounds of explosions made sure the *Underwriter* would no longer be of any use to the U.S. Navy. The loss to the raiders was six killed, twenty-two wounded while the Federals lost nine, with 18 wounded. U.S. Admiral D.D. Porter, when writing of the attack, said, "This was rather a mortifying affair for the navy, however fearless on the part of the Confederates. This gallant expedition was led by Commander John Taylor Wood. It was to be expected that with so many clever officers, who left the Federal navy and cast their fortunes with the Confederates, such gallant action would often be attempted."

Raffle Winners!

Dale Lear - *Shower of Stars* , **Ed Gibson** - *Sandie Pendleton*, **Keith Ward** - *Gettysburg*, **Ed Hickman** - *Most Fearful Ordeal*, **Charles Watson** - *Testament*

