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A Vessel of History: The CSS Neuse



Most boats are manufactured with the primary purpose of transporting people or supplies across bodies of water. While the CSS Neuse was intended to transport ammunition, supplies, and personnel, the rich history it embodies far surpasses its original purpose, with roots tracing

back to the American Civil War. During this time, Confederate supply lines and trade routes were hampered by the Union prompting the design of the CSS Neuse. The Confederate Navy hoped this ship would strengthen its capabilities along the coastal waterways, especially the Neuse River, from whom the ship is named.

The story of this battleship begins with a contract between the Confederate Navy and Howard & Ellis, a shipbuilding firm, in October 1862. The terms of the contract set forth were to construct the hull of the ship, later to be called “Neuse,” and to have it ready for its engine, machinery, and iron plating by March 1, 1863 (“The Life of The CSS Neuse,” n.d.). Work on the ship began immediately at White Hall, North Carolina, now known as Seven Springs, as the tight deadline quickly approached. Fortunately, there were plenty of simple carpenters available to work under the direction of the Confederacy’s chief shipbuilding architect John L. Porter.

The diamond hull design was used to construct the Neuse. This design resembled a diamond shape when viewed from either end along with a flat hull, resembling a barge, that enabled it to navigate the shallow rivers and sounds of North Carolina (Atkinson, 2017). The bones of the boat were formed with lumber from pine trees. Oftentimes wood had to be brought in to construction sites, however, the White Hall area was rich in pine trees as compared to the construction site of its sister ship the Albemarle. Per design, the Neuse was to be approximately 150 feet long and 30 feet wide and was to consist of an upper and lower deck. The abundance of timber resources available at the site greatly reduced the effort and time needed in the construction of the ship. While production was running smoothly, many feared the construction site was vulnerable to an attack. In December of 1862, at what is known as the Engagement at White Hall, Union soldiers discovered the ironclad, seized and burned construction materials, leading to a confrontation with gun firing (Duppsstadt, n.d.). Wounded but stable, the Neuse's completion date was delayed but only by a few weeks. By mid-March of 1863, the Neuse was transported down the river where further production could commence. The "cat hole," as the mooring site in Kinston was often referred to because of its location against the steep riverbank, would allow machinery to be easily lowered into the hull of the ship (Atkinson, 2017). Today, the "cat hole" sits adjacent to the King Street bridge in Kinston, where I drive across weekly.

Once downstream, unfortunate circumstances and multiple commanders further delayed the completion of the ship. Securing enough iron to outfit this battleship was extremely challenging. Tennessee and Kentucky, which housed the iron ore fields, were under Union control ("CSS Neuse History," n.d.). Stephen Mallory, Secretary of the Navy for the Confederate States, set out to obtain the much needed iron. After many failures, Secretary Mallory wrote to the governor of North Carolina in a plea stating, "if you will let the Department have the rails

and facilitate its transportations to Richmond they will be immediately rolled into plates” (“CSS Neuse History,” n.d.). Slowly, iron began coming in to armor the Neuse, however, not nearly enough. This sluggishness drastically affected the available work for the builders, causing many to walk off the job, further delaying the completion. Nevertheless, they were successful in mounting two 6.4 inch Brooke rifled cannons, each weighing over 12,000 pounds, to the hull of the Neuse.

Finally, after months of delays and overcoming many difficulties, the Neuse was deemed operational. On April 22, 1864, it departed Kinston to try to retake the town of New Bern, North Carolina. Whilst the plan was for the Neuse to meet with the CSS Albemarle at New Bern, sometimes even the most carefully crafted plans do not unfold as intended. One-half mile down the river, the CSS Neuse, met its fate when it grounded upon a sandbar. Although grounded, the Union soldiers were fearful of the future threat if the CSS Neuse ever got freed. Union General Palmer stated “The ram is no myth, rest assured of that” (“The Life of the CSS Neuse,” n.d.). In May of 1864 once the waters of the Neuse River rose high enough, the CSS Neuse was finally freed. Instead of proceeding eastward to New Bern, however, it retreated to its Kinston mooring. One soldier considered what could have transpired if the Neuse had been completed on time; “It is a great misfortune that we have managed so badly without the boat at Kinston. Could it have been completed a month ago and carried down the river.. And if the Albemarle came up the river we would have had easy work taking New Bern and very probably save hundreds, perhaps thousands of valuable lives” (“The Life of the CSS Neuse,” n.d.).

Sadly, the Neuse would remain stationary for the rest of her life. After the battle of Wyse Fork in 1865, Confederate General Braxton Bragg commanded the evacuation of Kinston and issued orders to demolish the CSS Neuse to prevent it from being seized by Union forces

(Atkinson, 2017). On March 12, 1865, the Neuse was engulfed with flames, and a powerful explosion on her port side caused the ship to sink to the bottom of the shallow Neuse River. That is where the CSS Neuse remained for the next 100 years. In May of 1964, after being pulled from the river the summer prior, the CSS Neuse was transported to the Governor Richard Caswell Memorial State Historic Site where it remained until June of 2012 (Atkinson, 2017).

Today, remnants of the CSS Neuse can be found in the CSS Neuse Civil War Interpretive Center, preserving the history of Kinston and its role in the Civil War. A final resting place just two blocks from the “cat hole” where the CSS Neuse spent her early days full of hope at what was to come. The recovery and preservation of the CSS Neuse is thanks to the early contributions of Henry Casey, Lemuel Houston, and Thomas Carlyle who worked to recover the ship in the early 1960s from the Neuse river along with the CSS Neuse Gunboat Association who purchased and donated the site of the CSS Neuse Civil War Interpretive Center to the State of North Carolina (“CSS Neuse Recovery and Preservation,” n.d.). In addition, the only full scale Civil War ironclad replica in the world, called the CSS Neuse II, sits just around the corner from what remains of the CSS Neuse. While the CSS Neuse was designed to carry out many plans, it ultimately proved unsuccessful and failed to fulfill its purpose.

Through my research on the CSS Neuse, I’ve come to understand the significant role my small town played in the fight for our freedom. In fourth grade, I visited the CSS Neuse Civil War Interpretive Center during a class field trip where I learned about its history. However, it wasn’t until I wrote this paper that I truly appreciated the rich historical significance of my town. I feel grateful to live in a place so committed to preserving history and educating future generations. I believe it is imperative to understand history to avoid past mistakes and be able to navigate our future. This is why historical preservation is so important to me. Now, when I pass

by the replica of the CSS Neuse, I will see it in a whole new light thanks to my research. For that, I am truly thankful.



CSS Neuse II, Kinston North Carolina

Works Cited

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