

WSB Radio Atlanta “The Last Hope: The Story of the Confederate Gunboat Muscogee”

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Broadcast Duration: (00:25:00)

-Confederate Gunboat *Muscogee* (CSS Jackson)

-Confederate Gunboat *Chattahoochee*

-Narrator: Craig Christmas

-Producer: Tommy Thompson

-Researcher and Public Affairs Director: Aubrey Morris

-Interviewees (In Order):

-Norman Shaven

-Editor of Atlanta Century

-James Woodruff Jr.

-Chairman of the Confederate Salvage Association (CSA)

-Mary Gregory Jewett

-Executive Secretary of the Georgia Historical Commission

-Edward Neal

-Primary Architect building the Confederate Naval Museum

-Jerry Mayer

-Curator of the Confederate Naval Museum in Columbus

-Benny Griggs

-Columbus Volunteer and descendant of slaves

-Paul Maddox

-Professor of Speech at Auburn University

-Dr. Bell I. Wiley

-Professor of History, Emory University

-Member of the Georgia Civil War Centennial Commission

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[Narrator: Craig Christmas]

The *Muscogee*, the massive ironclad, was built at Columbus, Georgia, during the War between the States, and it was launched there ninety-nine years ago today on December 22, 1864, when the confederacy, in its death throes. Four months after she was launched, the *Muscogee* was set ablaze by invading Federal troops and left adrift on the Chattahoochee to sink into a watery oblivion.

[Music Pause]

Nearly a century later, in 1960, the legend of the *Muscogee* was recalled by the people of Columbus, and they began the enthusiastic search for this historic treasure: The *CSS Muscogee*.

[Music Pause]

Scuba divers probed the red waters of the Chattahoochee at the spot where time-worn records said the sunken ironclad must lie. Finally, they were rewarded after months of searching when divers discovered and brought up pieces of the *Muscogee's* armour. A hundred years of history were spanned in a moment, and the dedicated group of Columbus citizens knew that they had found this fabled warship. An incredible monument to the determination of the South, and a tribute to those who founded her, and who today are dedicated to her preservation as a hallmark of history.

[Music Pause]

What was the war's situation during this critical time in the War Between the States? Norman Shaven, editor of the *Atlanta Century*, gives us a word picture of mid-December 1864.

[Norman Shaven]

This was the twilight of the Confederacy. In November of 1864, Atlanta had been burned, but not many think of the specific orders of General Sherman. The March to the Sea had already begun and was nearing its climax. In the wake of Sherman's legions lay devastation. The Confederacy, a nation of some 11 states, was in wreck, was in ruin. Behind Sherman, in the earlier days of 1864, had been fought the battles of the Wilderness and the crater at Petersburg. And now, on December the 21st, 1864, Sherman had entered Savannah, and the next day, he sent to President Lincoln a telegram presenting the chief executive with Savannah as a Christmas present. Including 150 guns, and plenty of ammunition, and about 25,000 bales of cotton. And Lincoln replied to Sherman, "'Many, many thanks for your Christmas gift: the capture of Savannah'" This was a time of despair in Georgia. A time when men hunted for hope and sought it in the *Muscogee*.

[Music Pause]

[Narrator: Craig Christmas]

WSB Radio's Public Affairs Director, Aubrey Morris, went to Columbus for firsthand reports on this dramatic story of the recovery of the sunken *Muscogee*. Among the many he talked with was James Woodruff, Jr., Chairman of the Confederate Salvage Association. How long had it taken to recover the *Muscogee*?

[James Woodruff Jr.]

Well, the initial effort was, uh, over a period of about seven months, I believe. Where they brought up about 110 feet of the *Muscogee* Gunboat. A great deal of that was done by volunteer organizations. The second effort was started in December of last year, December of '62, and the completion was in...April, when it was floated, then we finally brought it upstream, and I believed it was docked at the ramp of June 23rd of '63.

[Aubrey Morris]

Mr. Woodruff, you mentioned the backing of the citizens of Columbus, uh, just who all is involved in this, uh, reclamation project?

[James Woodruff Jr.]

Well, that could go on for many, many minutes. We didn't find anybody that wasn't fully in accord with this objective in trying to accomplish this. The contributions to provide heavy equipment came from the equipment contractors themselves, as well as the contributions of city government, state government, and county government. Then, individuals who are classified as "Helpmates," or "Right-hand men," or sponsors of the Muscogee Salvage Crew, as well as business firms.

[Narrator: Craig Christmas]

What spurred Woodruff and others on in this gigantic undertaking: the reclaiming of the ironclad gunboat *Muscogee*?

[James Woodruff Jr.]

Well, I'll often ask myself that question. Actually, I can't take any credit for my initiation on this. This came from many others, two and a half years ago. Anticipating the celebration of the centennial, not a celebration, but a commemoration of the centennial, between the War between the States, this gunboat was known to be downriver about 25 miles, and it was discovered by some of the men who liked to get out on the river. And that was the initiation of the effort, a young man who is a bank executive here in Columbus. His enthusiasm and his volunteer group really started the enthusiasm ball rolling.

[Aubrey Morris]

Now, who was this?

[James Woodruff Jr.]

This was Joe Wilman, Jr., and there were attorneys, and there were others who were involved in that local group's efforts. I became interested when, because of my, um, general association through the years with the river development, realized that the reservoir back of Walter George Dam would reach its, uh, normal pool and put the remaining portion of the bow of the *Muscogee* gunboat under some 30 feet of water, which would make it more difficult to reclaim. And from that standpoint, we hit a time deadline, because the engineers had anticipated that a reservoir would be at its normal pool about January of 1963. And it was, but not by that choosing; it was there by flood conditions. But in the meanwhile, we had gotten the cofferdam around, and when near completion of our objective, when the floods came on January 20, so we had to redo this work again. Now, this was additional remaining section of the bow of the *Muscogee* gunboat, about 70 feet. The flood waters of March 6th actually floated this thing loose or broke it about 15 feet from the point of the ram.

[Music Pause]

[Narrator: Craig Christmas]

Thus, the *CSS Muscogee*, held prisoner by a riverbed for a century, was freed by roaring flood waters, an assist from Mother Nature. What was the cost of raising this unique fighting ship? Again, James Woodruff, Jr.

[James Woodruff Jr.]

Yeah, I don't know what the total cost is, because when you add it up in total volunteer hours, and the contributed equipment, without charge, the contribution of several, well, a hundred or more of the Junior Chamber of Commerce members, and helping reclaim some of the smaller artifacts. We just never really put a dollar figure on it.

[Aubrey Morris]

Mr. Woodruff, what's next for the life of the *Muscogee* now that you've got her out of the river?

[James Woodruff Jr.]

Well its now finally resting in the only Confederate Naval Museum in the world, and the artifacts are being put through a process of preservation by the Georgia Historical Commission. As far as we can tell, uh, a very effective display is being created at this site, which was given to the state by the city of Columbus. The Georgia Historical Commission now has the gunboat; it's theirs.

[Narrator: Craig Christmas]

Yes, the *Muscogee*, a hallmark of history, belongs to the Georgia Historical Commission. Their interest in it? We find out from Mrs. Mary Gregory Jewett, Executive Secretary of that organization.

[Mary Gregory Jewett]

Well, the one thing we are primarily interested in is the preservation of actual buildings, and furnishings, and the actual physical facts of the history of Georgia. It's the best way to teach our young people, and then, fortunately, at this time, tourists are extremely history-minded. In most of the states around Georgia, the principal tourist attraction is invariably a historic attraction. In Georgia, the trend up until now has been towards the natural attractions, primarily, but Georgia's history is as fine and more interesting than that of any other of the Southern states. Our aim is to interest and encourage people, to know more, and to see the physical things of history.

[Narrator: Craig Christmas]

A permanent home for the *Muscogee* must be built. Aubrey Morris, on the scene, talks with Columbus architects' Edward Neal, in charge of building the Confederate Naval Museum.

[Aubrey Morris]

Mr. Neal, what sort of permanent quarters are you building here for the *Muscogee*?

[Edward Neal]

At the present time, we've constructed reinforced concrete, a reinforced concrete frame, that will eventually be the roof of the future museum, which will be a future project. This is an observation platform, so that visitors can look into the boat. We have two ramps leading to this observation platform. We've tried to, in our design, incorporate perhaps the surroundings, the banks of the Chattahoochee, much as the boat was originally. We have field stone that we are veneering the walls with, and plan to incorporate many of the natural building materials into the museum itself.

[Music Pause]

[Narrator: Craig Christmas]

What sort of ship was she? This ironclad ship, which was for a century little noted? But now, WSB radio's Aubrey Morris finds out from Jerry Mayer, Curator of the Confederate Museum in Columbus.

[Jerry Mayer]

The vessel is constructed of heart of yellow pine, the framing timbers being one foot square. The vessel was approximately 180 feet long when it was originally completed. We have approximately 170 feet here in the museum. It's a flat vessel, with a 40-foot beam. The reason

it's flat is so it could get over sandbars in the river. She had a 6-foot draft, and was propelled by two steam engines. They had 36-inch cylinders with a 36-inch stroke.

[Aubrey Morris]

Any estimate of the weight?

[Jerry Mayer]

It's just pure speculation, we estimate the total weight is right at 300 tons.

[Aubrey Morris]

Mr. Mayer, what was the destination of the *Muscogee* at the time she met her fate at Union hands?

[Jerry Mayer]

I would assume that the boat be taken down to Appalachicola, to be used to open up that seaport. It would be used to break up the blockade. This boat was designed to be a steam driven ironclad ram, and nothing else. It's one of the prime examples of the tide vessels built by a confessor, to break up the blockade. The South realised they couldn't match the Union Navy wooden vessel per wooden vessel, because usually the victory of an encounter of this type was determined by the vessel, it sank last. Because usually of the extent of damage was so great, the ship had to put in for repairs. This confessor was just not set up to handle repairs of this magnitude.

[Aubrey Morris]

Now, describing this boat in more particular, from bow to stern, how is she built? How was she constructed?

[Jerry Mayer]

Well, by hand labor, she was joined, the timbers were joined together with iron spikes, some 3 feet in length, and wooden tree nails, as the builders turned the wooden pegs about an inch and a half in diameter.

[Aubrey Morris]

And the outer hull, running lengthwise in the inner hull?

[Jerry Mayer]

The Gunnels?

[Aubrey Morris]

Yes.

[Jerry Mayer]

Uh, they slope down about a forty-five degree angle, you can see the hand-hewn characteristics there, on the side of the boat. You can see where they canvased, which was used to shape the vessel. Actually, her stern is shaped like most people visualize a bow. This is because the vessel was designed to ram other vessels, and then back off, and this bow-shaped stern facilitated the cutting of the water.

[Aubrey Morris]

Now, what are the huge metal pins that are sunk into the bow area of the ship?

[Jerry Mayer]

Well, this is the stern...

[Aubrey Morris]

Into the stern area, then.

[Jerry Mayer]

These are the dry shafts. Those had twin screws, this is salvaged drive shafts, which went back to the screws. The volunteers in 1961 cut these off because the weight was so tremendous. They couldn't raise the vessel with those on there. They weigh 2,500 pounds apiece.

[Aubrey Morris]

Mr. Mayer, where were the living quarters aboard the *Muscogee*, and the guns, and the other armaments?

[Jerry Mayer]

Well, the armament, the actual armor itself, covered the entire vessel from a foot and a half below the waterline on up. She had two inches of armor. The armor was two inches thick, and usually in pieces eight inches wide. Uh, she had six guns. There was four, six-point-four Brooke rifles, and two seven-inch Brooke rifles. These were rifle cannons poured in Selma, Alabama, designed by an artillery officer named Brooke. For that time, these rifles were way ahead than anything else.

[Aubrey Morris]

What do you know of the battle, which took place, which led to the burning of the *Muscogee*?

[Jerry Mayer]

On April the 14th, 1865, a meeting was called by the Columbus City Commission, to prepare the city's defenses. There was very few services to use for the defense of the city, as far as manpower goes. The South at this time had been pretty well stripped of very able man power. There was the unit of the "Home Guard," which was mostly men too young and too old to fight in active combat. Plus, possibly, wounded veterans who were home recuperating from the war. The main battle took place across the river in Phenix City, there was entrenchments made there.

The Confederate forces withheld, withstood three charges. By this time, it was getting dark and you have to consider that the people fighting were not coordinated, they were not trained as a unit. They were just scrapped up from anywhere they could get them. Then, for some unknown reason the troops started to retreat. Possibly one person, pulled, came out of line, and the person, to his immediate right and left, saw him leave. And during the Civil War, commands were only given as far as the voice could go, and what you had to do was just watch what was going on and just try to stay with your outfit. So when, in the dark, if the man next to me pulled out and dropped back, I would assume that the company was driving back, so I would have followed. I suspect this is what happened. The Confederate forces retreated across the river. This all took place on a Sunday and Sunday night. On Monday morning, uh, the morning of the 17th, uh, the military installation in Columbus were fired, including the gunboat, *Muscogee*. The report by Wilson says that she was set a flame, and when the vessel started burning the cables apart, she was allowed to drift downriver.

[Aubrey Morris]

Mr. Mayer, how far from the Confederate Naval Museum here, was the Muscogee built?

[Jerry Mayer]

Directly adjacent to the museum here is the Oglethorpe Bridge, which has just been completed. The gunboat was built approximately 300 yards due north of that bridge.

[Aubrey Morris]

And how many workmen were involved? Do you have any idea or how long it took?

[Jerry Mayer]

Well, uh, actually, there's no exact records of, we have only one payroll muster. Slave labor was used extensively. I know that, with no mention of the number of slaves, just that there are slaves, so many whites and slave labor.

[Aubrey Morris]

I noticed, also, in the museum here at the Confederate Naval Museum, in Columbus, some of the Cannonballs.

[Jerry Mayer]

That's right. We have gotten three types of cannonballs. We've gotten the fused 6-inch shells, I mean, 6.4 shells, and a few 7-inch shells, and fused 9-inch shells. One problem is we've got into on this Muscogee, we got some 9-inch fused cannonballs out there, and there was no 9-inch gun on her- documents or found evidence of otherwise.

[Aubrey Morris]

Some Navy Officer may have been given the wrong type of ammunition.

[Jerry Mayer]

Uh, like a soldier at Fort Benning, the army has not changed much in the last 100 years.

[Music Pause]

[Narrator: Craig Christmas]

One of the workmen at the Muscogee Museum site is Benny Griggs, a descendant of slaves. Perhaps his ancestors had helped build the ship. How does he feel about it?

[Benny Griggs]

Well, it made me feel great and good to see it. They were able to get it up out of the river, to bring it up, and people come from different places to look at it. It's a great deal for a lot of people to come and see what they had in the old days, come and look at the old ship. It's wonderful to have such a thing like this in this community around here in Columbus, Georgia.

[Aubrey Morris]

How do you feel when you look at it?

[Benny Griggs]

I feel...I feel nice about it when I look at it, is a great deal of a thing to see what people doing in the old days, back there during the slavery time.

[Music Pause]

[Narrator: Craig Christmas]

What was the general reaction to the recovery of the Muscogee? Aubrey Morris talks with a visitor to the Muscogee Museum.

[Aubrey Morris]

And what is your name, sir?

[Paul Maddox]

Paul Maddox from Auburn University. I teach speech over there.

[Aubrey Morris]

I say, well, uh, what draws you to the Confederate Museum, the Naval Museum here in Columbus, sir?

[Paul Maddox]

Well, like so many people, I have an active interest in the Civil War, such an important part of our heritage. When I heard that they were in the process of recovering the *Muscogee*, I felt I just really had to come over and see it since it was so close.

[Aubrey Morris]

What is there about this, that interest one? Besides just the natural desire to learn something of history?

[Paul Maddox]

There's something that's really, I guess, really beyond description, sort of, as you say, a feeling of awe when you see the remains of this old boat. If you have a little imagination, I guess you can sort of visualize what it must have looked like 100 years ago. Floating down the river under power, must really have been an impressive sight.

[Aubrey Morris]

Well, our forefathers may have been riding around in buggies and surreys at that time, but, uh, they obviously could build massive boats, couldn't they?

[Paul Maddox]

Yes, it's amazing when you see the boat up close. It's difficult, I think, to realize how big it is. Usually, we think 100 years ago, must have been some little thing, a little bit bigger than a rowboat. When you actually stand in the boat and look at it, why, it's really quite staggering, consider how large it is. One interesting thing about the Confederate Navy, of course, is that being much smaller than the Union Navy, and of course, the Confederacy actually starting out without any navy at all, they were forced to improvise, and they came up with some rather unique innovations. For example, the ironclad, like this vessel here, is an example of what they had to do. They had few ships, so the ones they built, they, uh, had them built especially strong and along with new ideas to try and offset the numerical superiority that the North had.

[Aubrey Morris]

The South never could've won with the navy either, could it?

[Paul Maddox]

No, it's doubtfully the industrial resources of the South were so limited during the war that actually from the time the war started till the end, the result was a foregone conclusion. It was just a matter of time, and even with a much larger navy, the only possible result could have been prolonging the war.

[Aubrey Morris]

But the gallantry of an effort such as building the *Muscogee*, showed the true patriotism of the people who pitched in and built this ship.

[Paul Maddox]

Yes, I think so, when you consider the meager resources they had, the lack of machinery, the lack of skilled technicians, mechanics, and so on. It's really quite a credit to their ingenuity. We hear a lot about Yankee ingenuity, of course, and that's true. I think here with the *Muscogee*, particularly, is a fine example of a Confederate.

[Music Pause]

[Narrator: Craig Christmas]

What have we learned from the *Muscogee*? Aubrey Morris talks with Dr. Bell I. Wiley, Professor of History, Emory University, and a member of the Georgia Civil War Centennial Commission.

[Dr. Bell I. Wiley]

We know, from examining this ship, for the first time exactly how it was built, how it was equipped, and what it looked like. Before I went down the second time, I had drafted a chapter in a book that I am writing on the Confederacy, and in that chapter, I had written that the *Muscogee* was a setter-wheel steamer, because I found that information in a 30 volume set; "The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion" series 2, volume 1. When I examined the remains, I discovered that this was driven by twin propellers and I had to make that correction. Now, just as the building of this ironclad ship late in the Confederacy, demonstrated the exceptional resourcefulness and persistence on the part of the people of that time. For trained mechanics were virtually non-existent then, and iron, engines, boilers, and screws, and nails were in very short supply. So, does the salvaging and reconstruction of this vessel demonstrate unusual enterprise and determination on the part of present-day Georgia. Recovering and restoration of the *Muscogee* is a remarkable community achievement. It shows what intelligent and persistent amateurs, working together as a team, and with very little help from the outside, can accomplish on their own towards enhancing their appreciation, and understanding, of their heritage.

[Music Pause]

[Narrator: Craig Christmas]

The Voice of the South has presented "The Last Hope: The Story of the Confederate Gunboat *Muscogee*." The *CSS Muscogee*: A hallmark of history. A treasure from the past that the people of Columbus, Georgia raised from the depths of the Chattahoochee.

[Music Pause]

[Narrator: Craig Christmas]

"The Last Hope: The Story of the Confederate Gunboat *Muscogee*" was researched by Aubrey Morris and produced by Tommy Thompson. Your narrator, Craig Christmas speaking for WSB Radio, The Voice of the South.