

Moses Dallas: Confederate Naval Pilot / American Slave

“The best inland pilot on the coast.”

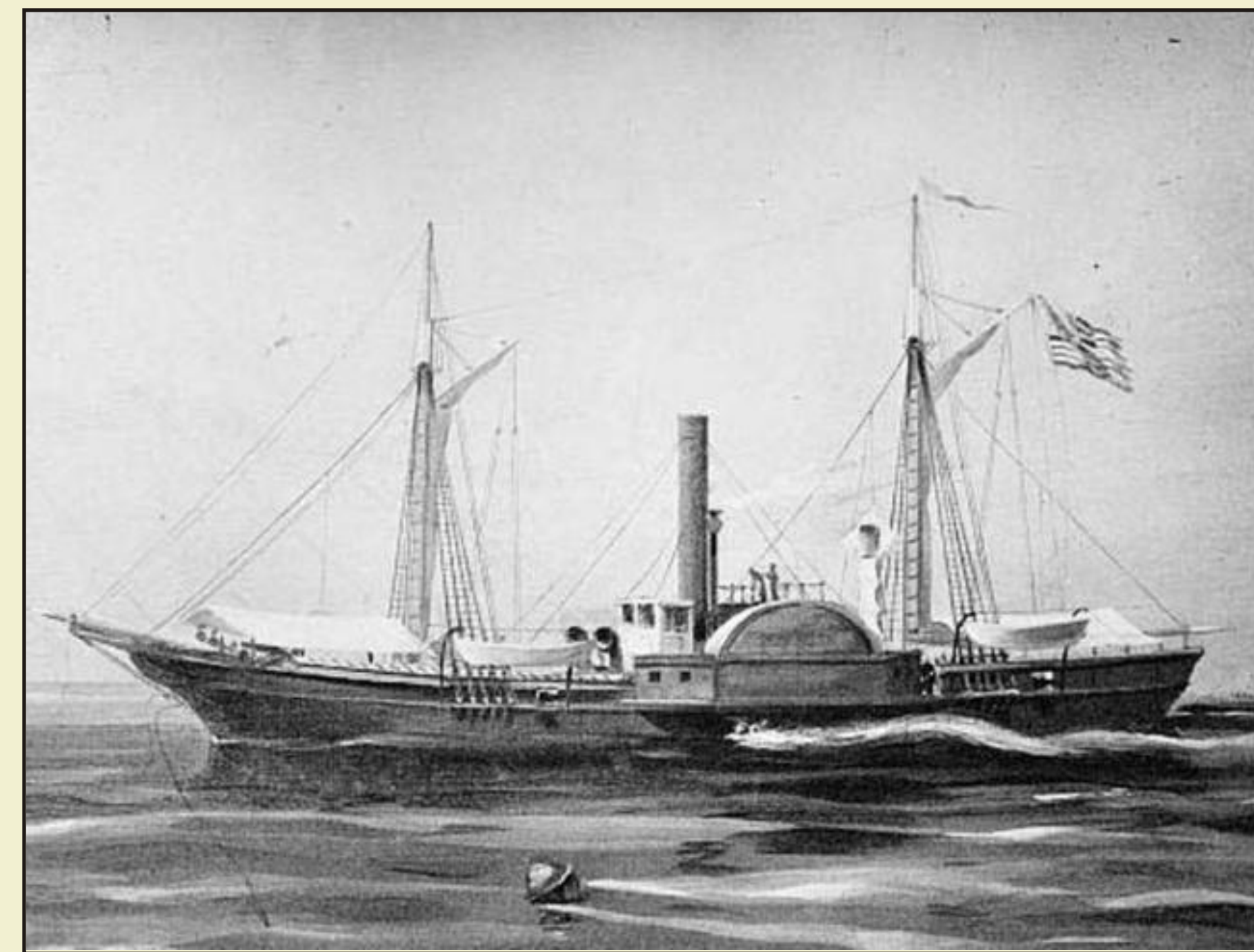
Moses Dallas was a lifelong slave whose final years were spent in an unconventional arrangement during America's most tragic period, whose strategic role in a daring raid resulted in his death. A native of Georgia, he was born in the early 1800s, one of at least seven children born to Robert and Grace Dallas of St. Mary's, Georgia, both of whom died about 1849. Virtually nothing about Moses' life is known until September 9, 1861 when he was hired for \$60 a month as full-time Pilot in the Confederate States Navy by Flag Officer Josiah Tattnall.

It is presumed Moses had served in this important nautical capacity in the years prior to the American Civil War, guiding passenger and cargo steamers through regional waterways and along the coast. During the war Moses served aboard the wooden steam-driven gunboats C.S.S. Savannah and C.S.S. Isondiga, and the ironclad C.S.S. Savannah, vessels belonging to the Savannah Squadron, a flotilla formed to protect Savannah, the Confederacy's second most important port, and the coasts of Georgia and South Carolina.

Though a slave, his position as a Pilot had considerable responsibility, controlling the movements of a vessel, and when and where it could go. Pilots, including those that were slaves, were considered officers in the Confederate Navy and routinely were listed as such in official reports, though the position carried no authority or included a commission. As Georgia prohibited Free Men of Color from the profession, its Black pilots were slaves often hired out by their owners. Moses's owner was Harriet Ann Jackson Elbert (1788-1865), of St. Mary's, widow of Lieutenant Samuel Elbert, U.S.N. (1779-1812), a son of former Georgia Governor Samuel Elbert (1740-1788). Not only did his owner allow Moses to keep all of his wages, he was free to represent himself in financial dealings with his war-time employer.

In May 1863, in order to retain the skilled navigator, the Confederate Navy increased Moses's monthly pay from \$80 to \$100 with the comments: "He is a colored pilot, and is considered the best inland pilot on the coast." Harriet Elbert also granted Moses and his wife - Harriet Dallas, and their six children, the ability to reside in Savannah, where a home on five acres was rented on Bryan Street, on the other side of the canal just outside the city limits. With his earnings, Moses was able to purchase the freedom of his wife and daughter in January 1864. Harriet earned income as well from her laundry business and the sale of farm-raised products. Records suggest Moses and Harriet owned Edward Walden, a young slave whom Moses had enlisted as a landsman in the Confederate Navy, with whom Moses had an unusual arrangement that Walden's services could be used by Harriet when she needed them.

Though isolated, the U.S.S. Water Witch maintained the Union blockade in Ossabaw Sound, and made for a tempting target by the Savannah Squadron. A daring plan was devised by Lieutenant Thomas P. Pelot, C.S.N., to raid and capture the side-wheeling gunboat, and utilize it as a decoy to capture other unsuspecting blockade vessels down the Georgia coast. Leading the bold expedition, Pelot had assembled a raiding party that included seven boats or barges and 115 men.



THE U.S.S. WATER WITCH

At Pelot's request, Moses was secured as he would pilot the Water Witch once it was seized. About 2 A.M. of June 3, 1864, on a dark, rainy night, as the boats approached the Water Witch, a watchman on board spotted Pelot's boat and hailed for its identification. "Contrabands!" was the response given by Moses. When the watch hailed a second time, Moses again declared "Contrabands!". At this point Pelot yelled, "We're Rebels, damn you!" The grappling hooks from Pelot's boat hooked into the boarding nets of the Water Witch, and the Confederate raiders began climbing up the side of the Union gunboat.

As Moses's face appeared at the gun port opening, Assistant Paymaster Luther Billings of the Water Witch fired the contents of his pistol into the Confederate Navy pilot, whose lifeless body was later found in the bottom of Lieut. Thomas Pelot's boat. Billings also reportedly killed Pelot in the ensuing melee. Five raiders were killed and 3 wounded in their successful

capture of the Water Witch. Of the casualties only Thomas Pelot and Moses Dallas were specifically mentioned by name in a telegram sent to Confederate Secretary of the Navy Stephen R. Mallory. Moses's death even received mention in the report filed by a Union physician captured aboard the Water Witch: "They also lost their pilot, a colored man, whom they considered the best of their pilots for the Savannah River and vicinity, as well as the Ogeechee.."

Once the corpse of Moses was prepared for burial, it was to be placed in a plain \$30 pine box customary for deceased Confederate sailors. However, in honor of his "distinguished and useful service", an imitation \$100 mahogany coffin was specially ordered, and the body was sent to naval headquarters, where a hearse was hired to carry the remains to Laurel Grove Cemetery for burial on June 4th. In 1870 Savannah's Ladies Memorial Association paid \$40 to erect a head and foot stone to mark Moses' grave. Harriet Dallas thanked the association for its efforts to memorialize her late husband.

Following Moses' death, the Widow Dallas continued her successful laundry business until December 21, 1864 when Sherman's troops occupied her rented Bryan Street property, establishing it as a headquarters for a Union officer. When Harriet informed the soldiers the house and property was hers, they did not believe her and prevented its use by the family for several weeks during the occupation. In 1872, testifying that she and her deceased husband were both sympathetic to the Union during the war and neither were connected to or employed by the Confederacy, Harriet filed a claim against the United States government for \$987.50 in losses, primarily for the army's confiscation of her livestock and produce raised on the five acres. Three years later the case was settled and Harriet was awarded \$192.



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