

**“A Gallant Mail Clad Vessel”  
The Capture and Sinking of the USS *Queen City***

**David Sesser  
Curator of the Nevada County Depot Museum**

In the summer of 1864, Brig. Gen. Joseph O. Shelby and his brigade of cavalry were detached from Maj. Gen. Sterling Price’s Confederate army in Camden, Arkansas, purportedly to gather recruits for service in the northern part of the state and to disrupt traffic on the White River. Shelby would use this freedom from higher command to make several daring attacks on Union outposts in eastern Arkansas. One such attack occurred on the USS *Queen City*, a Federal gunboat, at Clarendon on the White River.

By attacking and destroying the *Queen City*, Shelby disrupted shipments on the river for a short period. Union boats in Arkansas were occasionally fired upon, but never had such a large force set upon and utterly destroyed a vessel, much less a gunboat. Shelby’s actions brought a massive response from the Union authorities in Arkansas, starting a battle that would last for five days. This battle not only tied down Union troops throughout Arkansas in the pursuit of Shelby, but also in the defense of other sites that could be possible targets of the Confederate cavalry. But while Shelby was successful in destroying the *Queen City*, he took a huge risk by engaging Union warships in open battle. Only by making several good command decisions and with a lot of luck did Shelby manage to win the fight.

In April and May, Shelby’s brigade participated in the Camden Expedition, which repelled Maj. Gen. Fredrick Steele’s foray into southern Arkansas. After completely destroying a Federal column en route to Pine Bluff at the Battle of Marks Mills, Shelby returned to Camden and went into camp. With his command completely reunited after the pursuit of Steele back to Little Rock, Shelby set out for the White River area on May 9. His orders were to block the navigation and use of the White and the use of the railroad that linked DeVall’s Bluff and Little Rock. Control of DeVall’s Bluff and the railroad were extremely important to Union forces in Arkansas. Due to the unstable nature of the Arkansas River, supplies were shipped up the White River to DeVall’s Bluff and unloaded. Supplies were then transported by railroad to Huntersville, on the north shore of the Arkansas across from Little Rock. The supplies completed their journey by crossing the Arkansas and arriving in Little Rock. The railroad was also used to transport troops throughout the state and region.

Passing through Rockport, Shelby attacked and captured the garrison at Dardanelle, and then crossed the Arkansas River with his men and supplies. He continued on through northern Arkansas and crossed the White River on May 26 at O’Neil’s Ferry. Shelby then went into camp between Batesville and Jacksonport, remaining there until June 15. This long delay was caused by the worn-out condition of his command. Before leaving Camden, the brigade had seen constant service for at least fifty straight days. This lack of fresh troops caused a four-

day delay in the start of the campaign. Horses were unshod and supplies needed to be gathered before any more large scale movements could be made.

This delay gave Shelby time to send recruiters out into the countryside, however. Thousands of able bodied men roamed the countryside and bands of renegades attacked civilians on a regular basis. Shelby set out to break up these groups and arrest any outlaws that had “caused depredations upon the citizens of Arkansas,” ordering them to be shot. On May 27, Shelby was given command of all Confederate Forces north of the Arkansas River.

With this new area of responsibility, Shelby began organizing existing units that now fell under his command. Any unattached commands that were operating in Northwest Arkansas were ordered to join the brigade, and every man between the ages of 16 and 50 was conscripted. On May 31, Shelby reported that he had already received 300 men and expected to organize a total of 3,000. After his men and animals had received enough rest and forage, the brigade set out for Clarendon on June 15, 1864.

At the same time, Shelby was conducting his operations, the USS *Queen City* was operating on the White River. She was a side-wheel steamer and was attached to the Mississippi Squadron after being commissioned. The *Queen City* was purchased in Cincinnati, Ohio in February, 1863 for \$16,000. She was originally armed with two 30-pound Parrott rifles, as well as two 32-pound guns, and four 24-pound howitzers. On October 7, 1863, she received an additional 12 pound gun to complete her armament.

According to Confederate accounts, she also had iron armor plating that measured one-and-a-quarter inch thick. Union accounts referred to her as a “tinclad,” but no Federal documents report on the actual thickness of her armor.

She served on the Tennessee River, but required repairs soon after arriving on station due to the inferior manner in which she was built. On June 19, 1863, the *Queen City* received a secondary name to more easily identify the vessel. By order of Acting Rear-Admiral Porter, all “light draft vessels of the Mississippi Squadron will have a number, 2 feet long, painted neatly in black on the forward part and sides of the pilot house.” The *Queen City* was assigned number 26 on the enclosed list and was from then on referred to both as the *U.S.S. Queen City* and Gunboat #26.

In July, 1863, the *Queen City* was dispatched to Brandenburg, Kentucky to help catch John Hunt Morgan on his great raid through Kentucky and Indiana. She did not take an active part in the defense of these states and was soon sent back to the Mississippi. On July 23, she fired on “11 desperados” after they opened up with muskets on the *J.D. Perry*, on the Mississippi River, near Helena, Arkansas. The next day she took her station between Island #64 and the mouth of the White River. She had been assigned to the Sixth District of the Mississippi Squadron which patrolled from the White River to Cairo, Illinois. On September 21, however, she was listed as being located on the White River itself. In December 1863, the

*Queen City* participated in an expedition up the White River to Des Arc, where she helped clear the river of all traffic and captured 200 barrels of salt. She also took five prisoners.

On February 15, 1864, the *Queen City* was listed as being present in Memphis, where she was undergoing repairs to her boilers and machinery. She was without a commanding officer at the time, but Acting Master Michael Hickey soon took command. She was back in action on the White by March 31, participating in actions to stop the flow of supplies to Confederate units in the field. In April, she accompanied the *Tyler* to Memphis when Gen. Nathan Bedford Forrest threatened to attack that city. They soon returned to the White after Forrest turned around without carrying out his expected attack.

On May 28, 1864, the *Queen City* and crew arrived at Clarendon and soon arrested two local men. Found in their possession were three mules and a horse, all marked with United States brands. An additional horse and two mules were also taken. The two men who were arrested, a Mr. Dial and a Mr. Carr, were in the company of Confederate pickets at the time of their capture and the *Queen City* exchanged fire with them. After the men and animals were loaded, the *Queen City* went to DeVall's Bluff where both men and beasts were turned over to the garrison stationed there.

DeVall's Bluff was an important Union outpost on the White during this time period. After Little Rock fell to the Federals on September 10, 1863, the railroad connecting DeVall's Bluff and the capital was vital in keeping the troops garrisoned there supplied. The railroad, the Memphis and Little Rock, was a novelty, being the only one presently operating in the state of Arkansas. Transports would come up the White to the railhead, and their cargo could then be sent on to Little Rock. With this lifeline in place, along with thousands of Union troops stationed in the very heart of Arkansas, an attack on the southern part of the state or northern Louisiana could be launched at any time.

The *Queen City* continued to operate on the White while Confederate activity in the area increased. On June 20, 1864, the *Queen City*, *Naumkeag*, *Tyler* and the *Fawn* were all stationed between St. Charles and Clarendon. The *Lexington* was at the mouth of the White. The *Tyler*, *Fawn* and *Naumkeag* departed on the evening of June 19 to escort nine transports to Little Rock and Fort Smith up the Arkansas. The *Lexington* stayed at the mouth of the White to provide protection to the small garrison stationed there. The *Queen City* replaced the *Tyler* at Clarendon.

Union commanders were aware that General Shelby was in the area and believed that he posed a direct threat to the security of the White from Clarendon downriver. According to his report, submitted in December, 1864, he left camp between Batesville and Jacksonport on June 15. He was supposed to be below Clarendon on June 20 and actively firing on transports, but according to Shelby himself, he did not arrive in Clarendon until June 23. Shelby blamed his slow progress on bad roads and the depth of the Cache and Bayou De View bottoms. He reached a location about two miles from Clarendon around 2:00 p.m. on the afternoon of

June 23. From his scouts he learned that there was a Union gunboat stationed at Clarendon, and he immediately set out to engage and destroy it.

In moving against the enemy vessel, Shelby decided against attacking the railroad first. While the capture of a Union vessel on the White would provide both a morale boost to the Confederates and hamper Federal efforts in the region, the defeat of a single ship would never force the Union army to quit Little Rock and fall back on Fort Smith or Missouri, but the lack of fresh supplies caused by the closure of the river to traffic could bring such a change of events. As his orders simply required him to block and disrupt the navigation of the White, Shelby was taking a huge risk by launching any attack, no matter how well planned and executed. But Shelby felt that the Union ship at Clarendon was an appropriate and easy target.

Shelby wanted to remain hidden from prying eyes, so by “placing pickets on every road, and arresting every man, woman, and child who came out and all that came in, I kept my proximity silent as the grave.” At midnight, Shelby moved his command into the town itself. To further preserve the element of surprise, he “moved the artillery to within a mile by horses, unlimbered and dragged the guns up to within 50 feet of the boat, covered all bridges with weeds, carried the ammunition by hand to the guns, dismounted my entire brigade, stationed them along the bank, and waiting for the coming daylight.” Shelby’s artillery consisted of only four light guns; two ten-pound Parrott rifles and two twelve-pound howitzers, which were to be pitted against the *Queen City*’s nine heavy pieces of artillery. Shelby’s dismounted cavalry prepared to fight as infantry in the upcoming battle and four hundred men were handpicked to act as the attacking force.

Shelby’s men knew the odds were against them as they approached Clarendon. After being informed of their mission shortly before entering the town, many of the men did not expect to survive the battle. Shelby’s men had faced gunboats before at the Battle of Helena, on July 4, 1863. The men let Shelby know their feelings as they moved into the town, saying “General, you can put us all in one grave.” However, while being outnumbered in artillery and only having lightly armed cavalry fighting as infantry, Shelby still had the element of surprise and unleashed hell onto the *Queen City* at four o’clock on the morning of June 24, 1864.

Shelby’s Assistant Adjutant-General, Maj. L.A. Maclean, later wrote about the buildup and climax of the ensuing battle. “It was a beautiful moonlit night. White, fleecy clouds hovered over the sleeping river, over the doomed craft with all her gala lights in bloom, and over the crouching lines of infantry and the yawning cannon. The silence was broken only by the measured tread of the sentinels and the deep striking of the time-bell. Just as the white hand of morning put away the sable clouds of night four pieces of artillery sent their terrible messengers crashing through the boat. Then the infantry opened with terrible effect, and in ten minutes the *Queen City* was a helpless wreck upon the water, her captain surrendering unconditionally.”

This eloquent and somewhat embellished account of the battle differs in several aspects with Shelby’s report immediately after the action ended. According to it, the Confederate

troops were 200 yards from the boat, instead of the fifty later reported. It is also mentioned that the battle took twenty, not ten minutes.

According to Union reports of the battle, the starboard engine was almost immediately disabled by enemy fire, and the port engine lost most of its effectiveness when its steam pipe was injured. The captain of the vessel, Acting Master Michael Hickey, gave his crew the choice of abandoning ship and trying to escape or surrendering to the Confederates. Roughly half of the crew was captured and the rest escaped by swimming to the opposite side of the river where they were picked up later in the day by the *Tyler*. One sailor was killed in the battle and two drowned as they tried to make their escape. Nine men were wounded in the action and most were captured.

During the course of the action, the *Queen City* floated downstream a short distance, but with its engines disabled it was unable to travel back upstream. Shelby was forced to help bring her back towards the battle site in order to gather her guns and other equipment. His men went aboard to remove as much military equipment as possible. It is unclear exactly how many guns were taken off the boat. In a report written the same day, Shelby says that he removed two of the nine guns, a "24 pounder" and a "12 pounder." In the report written in December, Shelby stated that he took two of the nine guns off of the ship and the rest remained. He then bemoaned the loss of six guns when the boat went down, instead of the arithmetically sound answer of seven guns. According to the post-war account of the action written by Shelby's adjutant, Maj. John Newman Edwards, two Parrott guns were removed and placed into position. But Edwards also points out that there were thirteen guns aboard the boat to begin with, not nine.

Federal accounts are equally inconsistent. Acting Assistant Surgeon Lewis Westfall stated in a report written on the day of the battle that the Confederates were only able to get one gun off of the boat. Their work was interrupted by reinforcements coming down the river from DeVall's Bluff. In subsequent reports, the number of guns removed changed from one to three, and then back to one. Regardless of how many guns were taken from the *Queen City* by the Confederates, the Union navy had failed to protect the guns and now they were either in the hands of the enemy or at the bottom of the White River.

Along with the guns taken from the *Queen City*, ammunition, clothing and supplies were also gathered by Shelby's men. Shelby was fearful of the response that would undoubtedly be coming down the White from DeVall's Bluff. He stopped the plundering of the vessel and had it rigged for demolition. He related that "the magazine was opened, a train laid, and in ten seconds the unfortunate boat was blown into a thousand fragments, the splinters and pieces of iron and wood coming down for hours. I hated to see the...guns go down, but no time was left to tarry over an effort to secure them."

Shelby quickly placed the captured guns into positions on the levee and prepared for the counterattack that was sure to come. Shelby stated that he barely had time to place the new

guns in position and reform his men to prepare for battle, when he heard the whistle of the oncoming gunboats.

The *Tyler*, *Naumkeag*, and the *Fawn* were approaching Clarendon, not in response to the actions that had recently occurred there, but as an escort of nine transports traveling down the White to the Arkansas. About ten miles above Clarendon, the *Tyler* picked up some men from the *Queen City* on the west bank of the river. Upon hearing what had befallen the *Queen City*, the transports were sent back to DeVall's Bluff and the gunboats hurried to catch the Confederates before they fled. The Federals heard the *Queen City* explode as they approached the city and continued their approach with new fervor. They arrived on the scene at 9:45 on the morning of June 24 and the second battle at Clarendon began. The *Tyler* led the way, followed by the *Naumkeag*, and the *Fawn*. The Confederate artillery opened fire when the gunboats were abreast of the Cache River north of town. The Union sailors returned fire with their bow guns until they were parallel to the Confederate batteries. Confederate artilleryman Coleman Smith later said that the boats were within fifty yards of his position. The ships gave a broadside of canister as they passed, and then the *Tyler* and *Naumkeag* turned around for another run past the guns. The pilot of the *Fawn* was mortally wounded in the first run by the batteries and it did not participate further in the battle. The *Fawn* also stopped directly in front of the Confederate guns due to miscommunication between the commander and pilot. It took several minutes for the engines to be restarted and to find another pilot to lead the boat out of the fire. The battle continued for another hour and a half, according to Shelby, but only lasted forty-five minutes according to Lt. George Bache, commander of the *Tyler*. It ended when the Confederates abandoned their exposed positions next to the river and retreated to their camp two miles outside of Clarendon.

Shelby claimed that his guns hit the *Tyler* 13 times, completely disabled the *Fawn*, and that the *Naumkeag* sank on its way back to DeVall's Bluff. All of this was contradicted by Union reports. The *Tyler* was hit eleven times, the *Fawn* continued to operate under her own power, and the *Naumkeag* continued to serve as part of the Union navy well into the next year. In fact, the *Naumkeag* suffered more from rotted wooden casemates than from enemy fire.

The Union sailors reported that they recaptured a gun from the *Queen City* after the Confederates retreated. They also regained the ammunition, boats, and other objects taken from *Queen City* before it was destroyed. In addition, several wounded prisoners abandoned by the Confederates were rescued by the *Tyler*. Shelby mentions losing two guns from the *Queen City* at this point.

The Federals soon started fires in Clarendon, although of the extent of damage that these fires caused is unclear. Lieutenant Bache reported that he burned a grist mill, a saw mill, and two timber trucks. The mills protected the Confederates during the battle and the timber trucks were destroyed so they could not be used to transport any heavy artillery the Confederates might possess. The other Federal commanders do not mention this event but Shelby reported it, saying "the enemy, with their usual spirit of vandalism, took revenge for the

loss of their boat by burning all of the private and public buildings which were not protected by my sharpshooters.”

Shelby reentered the city the next day, June 25, and began construction on several earthworks and rifle pits. The *Naumkeag* and the *Fawn*, after spending the night anchored above the mouth of the Cache River, proceeded back down to Clarendon. They immediately opened fire on the Confederates and soon drove them out of range. The earthworks were left incomplete.

The *Tyler*, accompanied by several transports carrying Union troops, departed DeVall's Bluff at 2:00 P.M. on June 25, and slowly approached Clarendon. The *Tyler* suffered an unspecified accident en route and the flotilla did not arrive in Clarendon until 9:00 a.m. the next day. Led by Brig. Gen. Eugene A. Carr, 3,000 infantry and cavalry, along with a battery of artillery, disembarked and set out after Shelby. After advancing through Clarendon and meeting only token resistance, Carr and his men ran into the enemy at Pikeville, a small hamlet 1½ miles from the town at the intersection of the Helena and Cotton Plant roads. Carr quickly took the settlement, and the Confederates retreated to the nearby woods. Carr's forces had only 750 cavalry and his infantry could not keep up with Shelby's brigade. Carr requested reinforcements and horses with which to mount his men. In the first few hours of fighting his command lost 12 wounded and at least one officer to sunstroke.

Continuing the pursuit of Shelby later in the day, Carr trailed the Confederates around eastern Arkansas for the next three days. Carr reported that his lack of cavalry would not allow him to catch the enemy and returned to Clarendon on June 29 for the return trip to DeVall's Bluff. He reported that his troops had inflicted sixty wounded, twelve dead, and captured two prisoners. He also reported capturing two guns, one of which formerly belonged to the navy. His losses were put at one dead and sixteen wounded.

Shelby reported that the campaign ended somewhat differently. After defending Clarendon from the enemy onslaught, Shelby began to retreat and reported that he fought the Union troops every 100 yards for 10 miles. Continuing to retreat, his brigade crossed Bayou De View and soon afterward charged their pursuers and forced them into a rout that carried them over 10 miles. With 30 casualties reported, Shelby ended his campaign against river traffic on the White. After the retreat across Eastern Arkansas, Shelby continued to operate in the area until autumn of 1864, when he proceeded to join Maj. Gen. Sterling Price's invasion of Missouri.

Acting Master Hickey, wounded and captured during the battle, was paroled and released to Federal soldiers at Helena on July 8, 1864. A court of enquiry was convened to investigate the loss of the ship on September 6, 1864. Hickey was relieved of any responsibility for the loss of the *Queen City*, but the other officers on board the ship were held accountable of its loss.

The life and death of the *Queen City* is unique in the history of the Union River steamers during the Civil War. While her actions are a great case study of the day to day activities of such a craft, her demise is unique, but though not the only example of a Union vessel's capture by Confederate troops during the Civil War. Even still, she is the only craft to be captured and sunk by Confederate forces in Arkansas during the Civil War. The response that her capture elicited from the Union forces at DeVall's Bluff shows how serious the actions at Clarendon were and that they would do anything to drive Shelby out of the White River Valley. Shelby's brigade posed a serious threat to the use of both the White River and the railroad linking DeVall's Bluff and Little Rock.

Clarendon was rebuilt after the war and continued to serve as a hub of commerce on the White River in eastern Arkansas. A historical marker detailing the events surrounding the sinking of the *Queen City* was placed in front of City Hall on Madison Street in 1998. The wreckage of the *Queen City* is located slightly downstream of Clarendon although the exact location of the boat has never been determined. In 1977, the University of Missouri-Columbia performed some preliminary research and found a sunken boat, but was unable to determine if it was the *Queen City*.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

David Sesser is a 2006 graduate of Henderson State University with a history degree. He is currently pursuing his MLA degree in Social Sciences with a history concentration.