SILAS WRIGHT TERRY

Trigg County's Forgotten Yankee Admiral

Ricky Dale Calhoun

Everyone who has driven west on old U.S. 68 toward Canton has seen the historical marker that commemorates Hazard Perry Baker, the Trigg County man who commanded Confederate President Jefferson Davis's escort when Davis fled Richmond at the end of the Civil War. Few people know that at the same time Baker was guarding Davis another Trigg County man, Silas Wright Terry, was in command of the U.S. Navy sailors who protected President Abraham Lincoln when Lincoln made his famous walk through newly-surrendered Richmond past Libby Prison to the mansion, that until a short time earlier, had been the residence of Jefferson Davis. People are equally familiar with the historical marker at the west Main Street – Princeton Road intersection that marks the home of Henry Cornelius Burnett and assume that Burnett owned the house that stood at that location. He did not. The house where Burnett lived was the residence of his widowed mother-in-law Eleanor Terry, the mother of Silas Wright Terry, and Silas' childhood home.

Silas Terry was born in Wallonia on Dec. 28, 1842, the sixth of seven children and the third of four sons of Abner R. Terry and his wife Eleanor Dyer Terry. Abner R. Terry, described as "a highly educated Virginia gentleman" moved to Trigg County in 1829. Abner Terry subsequently opened a general mercantile store in Cadiz and married Eleanor M. Dyer, the daughter of an "old and representative family of Henry County, Virginia." Her father, Benjamin Dyer, and several other members of the extended Dyer family arrived in Trigg County between 1830 and 1840. Though not among the county's

wealthiest residents, the Dyers achieved social prominence and were members of the local political elite. Eleanor Terry's two elder sons Benjamin and Felix were officers in the Confederate army during the Civil War. Silas, who was a cadet at the U.S. Naval Academy when the war began, chose to remain loyal to the Union.

None of the sources reveal why Silas chose to remain loyal to the Union in the Civil War when the rest of his family went with the Confederacy. His personal views about slavery were probably similar to those of other Trigg County men of his generation and class. He grew up in a slave-owning household. According to the 1860 census Eleanor Terry owned six slaves: two men, two women, and two children. In all probability the slaves provided the widow and her children with their livelihood. In Cadiz as in other towns in the upper South it was common for town-dwelling slave owners to hire out slaves to farmers and other employers such as tobacco stemmeries for wages.

The three years prior to Terry's departure for Annapolis in September 1858 were a time of financial distress, political turbulence, and fear in western Kentucky. Prices of farm commodities dropped drastically. Banks called in loans, which forced many farmers to liquidate assets to pay off their debts. Courts often ordered the seizure and sale of slaves to satisfy creditors. The British mills' insatiable demand for cotton remained strong, however. Cotton planters in the Deep South went on a slave-buying binge to obtain labor needed to grow even more cotton. Thousands of slaves were separated from their families and sold to traders who took them south. The family separations sparked unrest among the slaves. Runaways and acts of defiance among slaves became more common than in the past.

In 1855 an act of slave defiance or revenge struck close to the Terry family. A fire that began in a storehouse owned by Josiah Gardner and F. H. Ragon on Court Square in Cadiz burned the residence of J. H. Miller, M. A. Smith's grocery store, and all the other buildings on one side of the square. F. H. Ragon was a former employee in Abner R. Terry's mercantile store and bought the business shortly after Terry's death. It was subsequently discovered that the fire was deliberately set by George, a slave owned by Jane Miller, an eccentric 67-year old spinster who was the Terrys' next-door neighbor. George and his wife Minerva, a slave owned by Martha Mayes, a widowed school teacher who was the Terrys' next-door neighbor on the other side, were tried in Trigg

Circuit Court, convicted of arson, and sentenced to death. George committed suicide in jail while awaiting execution. Minerva was hanged on Saturday, Feb. 9, 1856. Many people in Cadiz reportedly did not think that Minerva's role as passive accomplice warranted the death penalty.

Silas Terry's decision to side with the Union may have had as much or more to do with personal conflict with H. C. Burnett than it did with slavery or politics. Colleagues in Congress described Burnett as "a big, burly, loud-mouthed fellow" with an angry disposition and domineering personality. Burnett considered himself head of his mother-in-law's household, and arrogated parental authority over his wife's siblings. There are indications that Silas clashed with Burnett, and that Burnett sent him to the Naval Academy as punishment for disobedience.

A few days after the South Carolina batteries fired on Fort Sumter, the Naval Academy's faculty and cadets, Midshipman Terry among them, boarded the frigate *Constitution* "Old Ironsides" and were taken in tow by a steamer to New York. Upon arrival at the New York Navy Yard, Terry received a letter from Burnett in which Burnett ordered him to return to Cadiz and enlist in the Confederate army. Terry angrily tore the letter to shreds, called Burnett a traitor, and vowed that he would remain loyal to his oath to "support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same."

Midshipman Terry was ordered aboard the U.S.S. *Dale,* a 14-gun sailing ship-sloop commissioned in 1839, in June 1861. His first combat was in April 1862, while he was aboard one of the *Dale*'s lifeboats making a reconnaissance into the South Edisto River in South Carolina. Confederate riflemen on the riverbank fired several shots at the boat. At least one man was wounded. The sailors returned fire with small arms and retreated down the river. Terry was promoted to ensign the following month and in September transferred to the *Wabash.* He was soon reassigned to the staff of Rear Admiral Samuel P. Lee aboard the *Alabama.* He served as aide to Admiral Lee until July 1863, when he was transferred to the steam sloop *Dacotah* (named after an Indian tribe, thus the unusual spelling) on blockade duty off the Cape Fear River. During Terry's time aboard, the *Dacotah* fired upon and chased a blockade runner that came out of Wilmington under cover of darkness, but was unable to catch the fast steamer.

In September 1863, Terry received orders to report aboard the *Black Hawk*, a civilian steamboat that the Navy and converted into a floating headquarters. *Black Hawk* was flagship of the Mississippi Squadron, a flotilla of river ironclads and support vessels commanded by Admiral David Dixon Porter. When Terry reported for duty aboard the *Black Hawk* at New Orleans the Mississippi Squadron was preparing for the Red River Expedition, a combined Army-Navy thrust up the Red River aimed at Shreveport, Louisiana. The campaign failed.

Maj. Gen. Nathaniel Banks, the Union army commander, was a Massachusetts politician who had no previous military experience before being commissioned a major general. Banks was contemptuous of his Southern opponents and did not coordinate land operations with the Navy. Porter's ironclads steamed up the Red River toward Shreveport expecting to link up with Banks' troops advancing overland; but as events unfolded, skilful Confederate resistance, difficult terrain, and their own incompetence prevented the Union land forces from reaching their objectives.

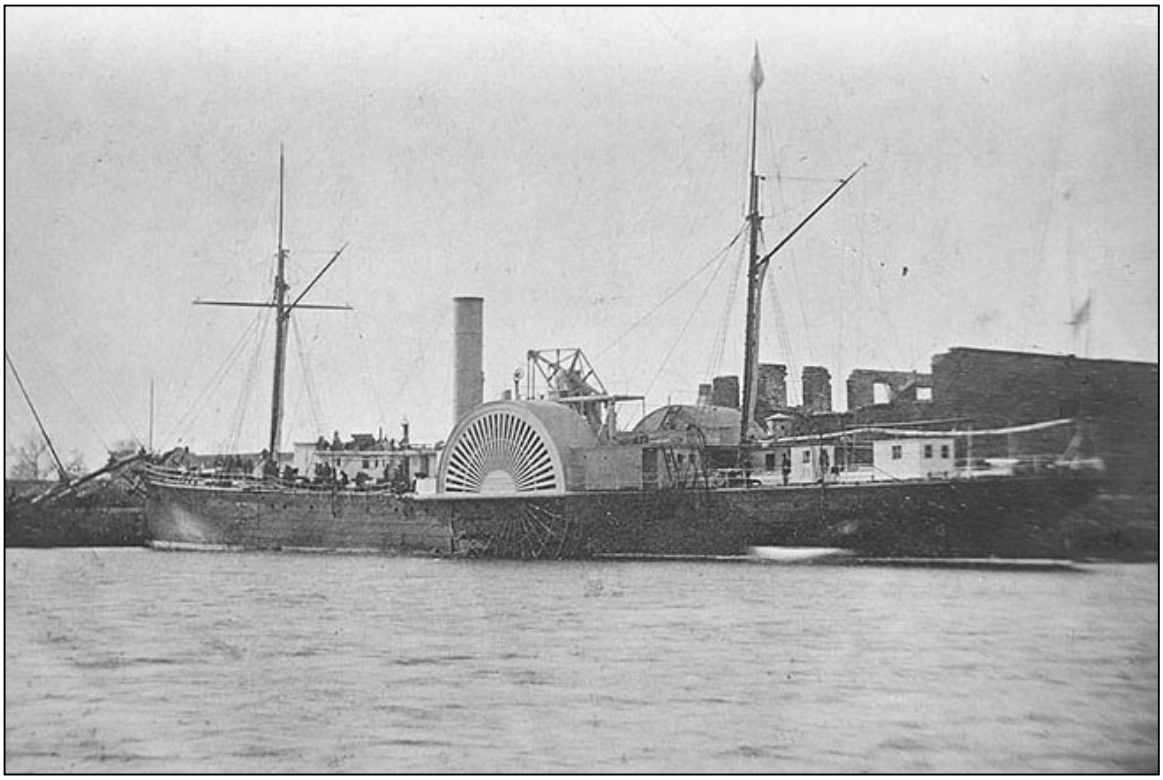
The result was a near-disaster for the Navy. Red River was shallow and obstructed by a 70-mile long mass of driftwood called "the Raft." Steamboats could not navigate it when the water was low. Porter's ironclads became stranded when the water level dropped too low for them to get back over the shallows at Alexandria, about 80 miles below Shreveport. Porter was in tenuous control of the river, but was trapped, unable to advance or retreat, and was vulnerable to constant harassment by the enemy.

This was the situation in April 1864 when Ensign Terry was placed in command of a contingent of 50 men, given two small howitzers, and ordered aboard the transport steamboat *Benefit* at Grand Encore, Louisiana, about half way between Alexandria and Shreveport. The *Benefit* was a typical civilian steamboat. She was built of wood and was without armor protection, though her boilers and internal machinery may have been shielded by cotton bales. Her mission was to transport supplies upstream to Porter and his fleet, then at Springfield Landing, about 30 miles below Shreveport.

As the *Benefit* rounded a bend in the river about 50 miles above Grand Encore the boat was suddenly fired upon by a four-gun battery of Confederate field artillery on the riverbank. A cannon ball smashed through the pilothouse and killed the steamboat's civilian captain, who was standing beside Terry. Ensign Terry assumed command,

ordered his howitzer crews to return fire, and steamed past the battery. The Confederate gunners riddled the steamboat's wooden superstructure with holes and killed three men, but failed to hole the *Benefit* below the waterline or disable her engines. Terry and his men fought their way past the riverbank ambush.

Admiral Porter subsequently wrote a glowing report of Terry's conduct during the action to Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles. Admiral Porter's commendation brought Terry to the attention of President Lincoln, who promoted him to lieutenant and advanced him five numbers on the seniority list within that grade. Lt. Terry became Admiral Porter's aid-de-camp and went with him when he was made commander of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron.



Admiral Porter chose the U.S.S. *Malvern* as his flagship. *Malvern* was a fast side paddlewheel steamship built in 1860 that before the war was used as a passenger packet between New York and New Orleans. Though *Malvern* was an ocean-going ship, the wooden hull had a flat bottom and only 10 feet draught to enable her to steam up the Mississippi River. The ship was at New Orleans when the war began, and was seized by the Confederates. The vessel had since then been impressed into service as a blockade runner, captured by a Union gunboat, and commissioned a U.S. Navy warship in 1864.

Terry was with Porter aboard the *Malvern* when on Jan. 13-15, 1865, Porter's fleet of 41 ships and an Army landing force attacked and seized Fort Fisher, a powerful coastal fortification that protected the port of Wilmington, North Carolina.

By March 1865 it was obvious that the fall of Richmond was imminent. Deserters from the Confederate army who crossed into Union lines revealed that "the evacuation of Richmond is openly spoken of as inevitable and necessary, since the destruction of the James River Canal. The wealthy were removing themselves and effects to such parts of the State as they thought would remain unmolested. With the canal gone, it was impossible to feed the citizens or the army. ... Enormous prices were demanded by those who had produce to sell. There was great suffering among the poorer classes, many of whom were actually starving."

Confederate authorities were conscripting "every man and boy capable of handling a musket" and placing them in the entrenchments in expectation of a massive assault by Grant's army. Henry Cornelius Burnett, never one to face personal danger, did not join them there. He, along with the rest of the Confederate Congress, fled on March 18.

On March 23, President Lincoln, accompanied by his 12-year old son Thomas "Tad" Lincoln, came to City Point (Hopewell), Virginia, aboard the steamboat *River Queen*. Terry was at City Point with Admiral Porter aboard the *Malvern.* Lincoln came aboard the flagship almost daily to confer with Porter, and whenever he did, Tad, called "Taddie" by the sailors, was given free run of the ship. One or another of the young officers on Porter's staff was entrusted with keeping watch over him.

On Wednesday, March 29, Gen. Grant commenced a massive attack upon Lee's fortifications at Petersburg. Over the weekend of April 1-2, it became obvious to Gen. Lee that his army could not hold its ground against the attacks. Around noon on Sunday he notified Jefferson Davis by telegram that the army was abandoning its entrenchments and retreating westward toward Burkesville.

A French newsman who was in Richmond described the hasty exodus that followed, "The gold and silver coin belonging to the Louisiana bankers and recently appropriated by the Confederate Congress was run down to the Danville train, also the specie of the Richmond banks. Then the programme for the departure of the officials was

arranged, and a number of trains were to leave during the evening. Still there was not room enough for all who thought it desirable to get away."

Jefferson Davis remained in Richmond until 8 o'clock Sunday evening, when he boarded the last train leaving the city. Minutes after Davis' train crossed the James River bridge enroute to Danville, soldiers of the Confederate rear guard set fire to it and to the other three bridges to prevent the Union army from using them. They then torched four large riverside tobacco warehouses that were being used to store munitions.

A British journalist who was in the city that night wrote, "Not less than one hundred thousand shells exploded in the course of three or four hours, scattering their fragments thickly over acres of the city. Many pieces weighing several pounds each fell in the Capitol square."

A *New York Times* reporter who entered Richmond with the first Union forces described what happened, "A fresh breeze was blowing from the south, and the fire swept over a great distance in an incredibly short space of time. By noon the flames had transformed into a desert waste that portion of the city bounded by Seventh and Fifteenth streets, from Main street to the river, comprising the main business portion. We can form no estimate at the moment of the number of houses destroyed, but, public and private, they will certainly number 600 or 800. ... A vast amount of suffering has been caused by the fire. The grounds around the Capitol are covered with the household effects of families burnt out."

Law and order disappeared. The British newsman wrote, "All through the night crowds of men, women and children traversed the streets, rushing from one storehouse to another, loading themselves with all kinds of supplies... Men could be seen rolling hogsheads of tobacco, molasses, sugar, barrels of liquor, bushels of tea and coffee; others had wheelbarrows loaded with all manner of goods, while others had gone into the plundering business in a large way, and were operating with bags, furniture wagons, and drays. This work went fast and furious until after midnight, about which time large numbers of straggling Confederate soldiers made their appearance on the streets, and immediately set about robbing the principal stores on Main street. There was a general sack."

A Boston *Journal* reporter who was riding with the 4th Massachusetts Cavalry, the first Union regiment to enter the city on Monday morning, April 3, wrote, "Flames were leaping from house to house, and devouring block after block in the centre of the town. Capt. Percy went to see about the Arsenal, but found it on fire. It contained several thousand shells, which began to explode, scattering fire brands in every direction, filling the air with iron fragments, driving people from that section of the city. The poor people helped themselves to the commissary supplies, broke open stores, and made free with whatever they saw."

The glow in the dark night sky from the fires burning in Richmond was visible to President Lincoln and naval officers watching from atop the *Malvern*'s deckhouse 19 miles away at City Point. The exploding artillery shells sounded like a massive cannonade. Shortly before midnight they saw a sudden, bright orange-red flash and, a few moments later, heard the distance-delayed boom of the large gunpowder magazine at Drury's Bluff being blown up.

At 11 a.m. the next morning, German-born Gen. Gottfried "Godfrey" Weitzel, commanding the Union forces that occupied Richmond, sent a telegram addressed to President Lincoln at City Point, "We took Richmond at 8:15 this morning, capturing many guns. The enemy left in great haste. The city is on fire in one place, and we are making every effort to put it out."

Admiral Porter suggested to President Lincoln that he go to Richmond. William H. Crook, Lincoln's bodyguard, in a reminiscence published in *Harpers Monthly Magazine* in 1907, recalled, "At first the President did not want to go. He knew it was foolhardy. And he had no wish to see the spectacle of the Confederacy's humiliation. It has been generally believed that it was Mr. Lincoln's own idea, and he has been blamed for rashness about it... Mr. Lincoln knew perfectly well how dangerous the trip was... But he was convinced by Admiral Porter's arguments. Admiral Porter thought that the President ought to be in Richmond as soon after the surrender as possible. In that way he could gather up the reins of government most readily give an impression of confidence in the South that would be helpful in reorganization of the government. Mr. Lincoln immediately saw the wisdom of this position and went forward, calmly accepting the possibility of death."

Early on Tuesday morning, April 4, as the *Malvern* was preparing to start up the James River, Tad Lincoln insisted on going with his father. President Lincoln allowed him to come along. *Malvern* steamed slowly up the James River preceded by the smaller steamer *Bat.*

As related by Crook, "While some effort had been made to fish the torpedoes (i.e. explosive mines) and other obstructions out of the water, but little headway had been made. The river was full of wreckage of all sorts, and torpedoes were floating everywhere." Their progress was stopped at Drury's Bluff "where the naturally narrow and rapid channel was made impassable by a boat which had missed the channel and gone aground."

President Lincoln, Tad, Admiral Porter, Capt. T.N. Penrose, Crook, and Lt. Terry in command of twelve sailors to serve as guards climbed down a cargo net hung over the *Malvern*'s side into the steamer's launch, which was taken in tow by the *Bat.*

Crook described the trip, "We were kept at a safe distance from the tug by means of a long hawser, so that if she struck a torpedo and was blown up, the President and his party would be safe. Even with this precaution the trip was exciting enough. On either side dead horses, broken ordnance, wrecked boats, floated near our boat, and we passed so close to torpedoes that we could have put out our hands and touched them. We were dragged over one wreck which was so near the surface that it could be clearly seen." When it became impossible for the steamer to proceed further up the wreckage choked river "we went on with no other motive power than the oars in the arms of the twelve sailors."

The boat arrived at Rocketts Landing, on the riverbank about 150 yards behind Libby Prison, around 2 o'clock in the afternoon. Lincoln and his party walked past the smoldering hulk of the nearly completed Confederate ironclad gunboat *Patrick Henry* that had been set afire to prevent its capture. Towering over the scene was the still-burning Haxall & Crenshaw flouring mills, described as "the largest and most extensive of any on this continent."

News that President Lincoln was coming arrived in Richmond before he did. A huge, joyous crowd of newly freed slaves were waiting to greet him. Crook continued, "We formed in line. Six sailors were in advance and six in the rear. They were armed

with short carbines. Mr. Lincoln was in the centre, with Admiral Porter and Captain Penrose on the right and I on the left, holding Taddie by the hand. I was armed with a revolver. ... Mr. Lincoln's face was set. It had a calm in it that comes over the face of a brave man when he is ready for whatever comes."

Sources differ as to the behavior of the city's white population. More than forty years later, Crook recalled that most remained indoors, and that only one person, a young girl not much older than Tad Lincoln, gave the President a friendly greeting. A *New York Times* reporter who was in the city wrote that evening, "A considerable number of the white population cheered the President very heartily, and but for the order of the Provost-Marshal, issued yesterday, ordering them to remain within their houses quietly for a few days, without doubt there would have been a large addition to the numbers present."

Admiral Porter recalled in a reminiscence published in 1885, "An immense throng soon surrounded the little party, all gazing at the homely face that loomed up above every head in the crowd. Our progress was slow; we did not move a mile an hour, and the crowd was still increasing. Many poor whites joined the number, and sent up their shouts with the rest. We were nearly half an hour getting from abreast of Libby Prison to the edge of the city. The President stopped a moment to look on the horrible Bastille, where so many Union soldiers had dragged out a dreadful life."

When Lincoln reached Gen. Weitzel's headquarters, Weitzel informed him that there was "much suffering and poverty among the (20,000 people) population. The rich as well as the poor are destitute of food." Union forces were preparing "to issue supplies to all who take the oath."

President Lincoln, Gen. Weitzel, Admiral Porter, Tad, and Lt. Terry, armed with a revolver, climbed into a mule-drawn military ambulance wagon driven by a black soldier and were taken on a tour of the devastated city. William Crook rode beside the ambulance on a borrowed cavalry horse. Lincoln had no other protection.

They immediately noticed a strong smell of whiskey. On Sunday night, the city council, fearing a drunken riot by the slaves when the Confederate soldiers withdrew, ordered all the liquor destroyed. A witness wrote, "Hundreds of barrels of liquor were rolled into the streets and the heads knocked in. The gutters ran with a liquor freshet, and the fumes filled and impregnated the air."

Crook described what they saw, “Everywhere were signs of war, hundreds of homes had been fired, in some places buildings were still burning. It was with difficulty that we could get along, the crowd was so great. We passed Libby Prison. The only place we entered was the Capitol.”

To reach it, Lincoln and his party had to walk through the hundreds of homeless, hungry people, mostly women and children, huddled round piles of meager possessions that they had managed to salvage from their homes before the flames consumed them.

Crook continued, “We were shown the room that had been occupied by Davis and his cabinet. The furniture was completely wrecked; the coverings of desks and chairs had been stripped off by relic-hunters, and the chairs were hacked to pieces.” President Lincoln was visibly shaken when he got back aboard the *Malvern* late that evening.

Silas Terry never recorded his own recollections of the experience. He remained in the Navy after the Civil War. Over the course of a career that ended with his retirement in 1904, he attained the rank of rear admiral, played a prominent role in transforming the U.S. Navy into a modern seagoing fighting force, and became a member of the inner circle of friends and advisors around President Theodore Roosevelt. Yet, despite all his accomplishments, Admiral Terry was forgotten in Trigg County. There is no historical marker to honor his memory.