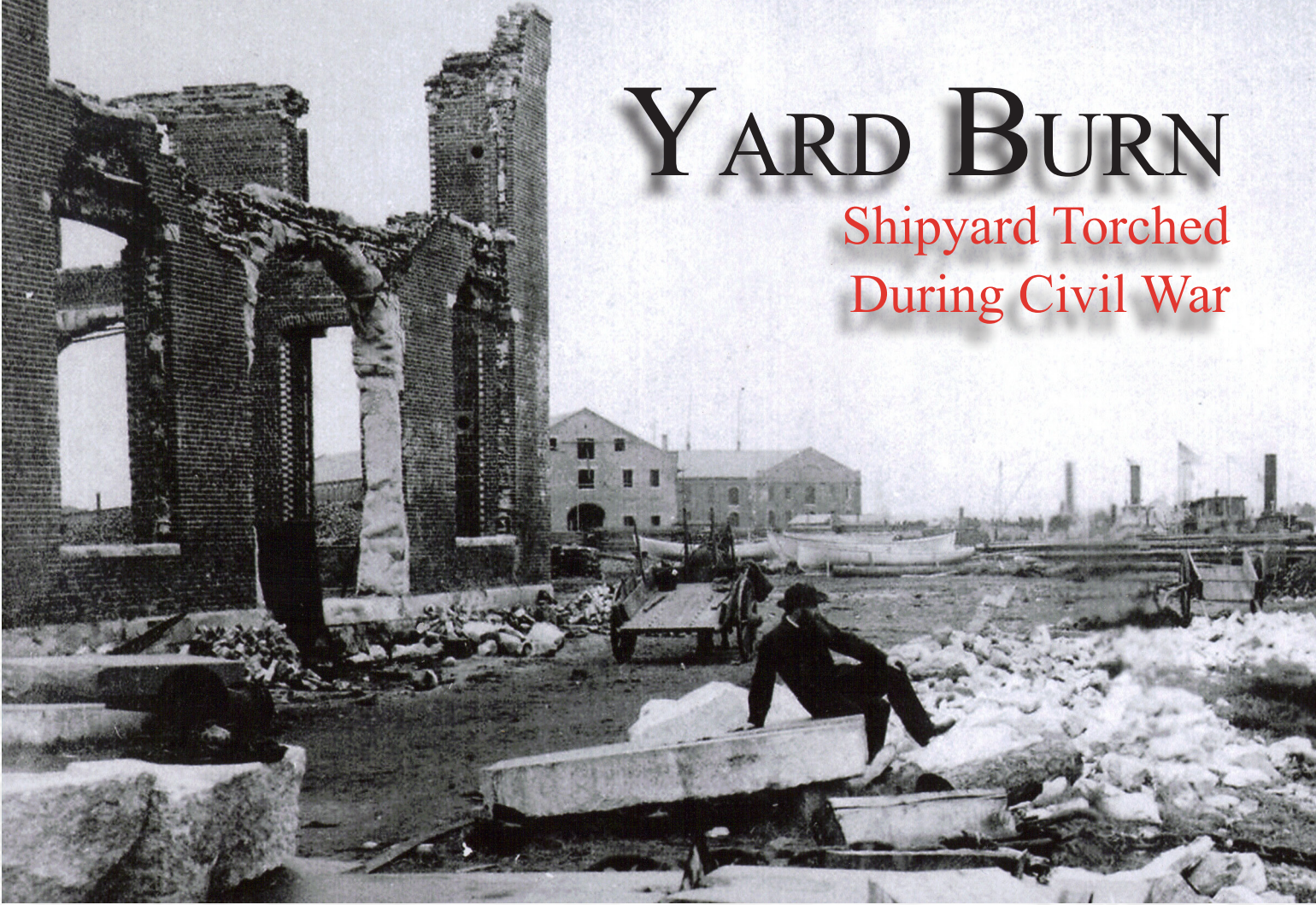


YARD BURN

Shipyards Torched
During Civil War



(Above) Looking from north of the drydock, ex-Building 18 in the view, circa 1864 photo.

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War is like a chess match; tactical moves are made by both sides with the end game vision of capture and victory. Once again as the premier industrial ship building and repair facility of the south, Gosport and the Confederates are victims of a slow deliberate vice-like grip by the North, a hundred and fifty years ago.

Setting the match to a waterfront industrial facility is a very efficient way to cease its productive war capacity. The shipyard at Gosport along the shore of the Elizabeth River has suffered three separate fires; first by the British on May 15, 1779, then by the Union forces on April 21, 1861 and finally by the Confederate forces on May 10, 1862. In the weeks after the Battle of Hampton Roads during March 1862, the Confederate forces continued to make the Gosport Navy Yard the heart of their industrial war machine. There was a certain feeling of pride and victory in the streets of both Norfolk and Portsmouth. The craftsmen at Gosport worked upon CSS *Virginia* (formerly the USS *Merrimack*) in the drydock then re-floated it, stronger than ever. Several attempts of engagement were made over the next few weeks but the USS *Monitor* kept a respectful distance, always staying close under the protective guns of Fortress Monroe.

As late April 1862 turned into May, the Confederate command soon realized that Norfolk would not be able to be saved as the Army of the Potomac's U.S. Army Gen. General Ambrose Burnside approached from the southern Outer Banks and U.S. Army Gen. George McClellan occupied the

northern side of the harbor. Railroad and river routes were being squeezed that connected both Norfolk and Portsmouth. Gosport stood as the South's principal workshop for ship building and supporting the war effort because of its foundry and valuable machinery. The loss of such an industrial base would surely hamper the southern cause. In early May 1862, Secretary Stephen Mallory of the Confederate States Navy arrived in Portsmouth and informed Captain S.S. Lee, Commandant of the Navy Yard (March 24, 1862-May 20, 1862) and General Robert E. Lee's brother, that it was the intention of the Government to abandon the city.

Steps were taken to remove all rolling stock, munitions and other items of military value. Preparations were also made to evacuate and render useless the Navy Yard. Vessels were sent to Richmond under the cover of darkness on the following nights and what could not be towed was destroyed pierside. Options for saving the *Virginia* were weighed, including an unsuccessful effort to lighten her and get up the James River to protect Richmond. The doomed *Virginia* was destroyed off of Craney Island. Covered with tar, oil, fat and grease the crew was sent ashore before the ship was set afire, exploded then ceased to exist.

The morning of May 10, 1862, General John E. Wool; under the direction of President Lincoln, landed 6,000 troops at what today is known as Ocean View beach for a march upon Norfolk. Norfolk's Mayor William W. Lamb went to the outer northern limits of the city for what would become the peaceful surrender of Norfolk without a shot being fired. Mayor Lamb stalled for as long as he could while the Confederates set fire to the Gosport Navy Yard, for a third time in its history and the second time within 13 months. Destruction again was wrought upon the finest shipbuilding facility in the country, this time by the retreating Southern forces. The drydock was mined again but without total damage. Gosport's fine buildings were torched and the remaining ships and machinery were destroyed.

In the end, all of the Confederate defenses that were erected around the harbor

with much care and labor supporting heavy guns were abandoned without a struggle and in such haste that no effort was made to remove the guns. A firsthand account letter survives written by a Union soldier on May 15th 1862 from within the walls of Gosport and he states:

"I was saying that the Secesh [Confederate Soldiers] had not destroyed anything but I was mistaken for I never saw such destruction of property as there is here at the Navy Yard and all the machinery is burned. There were some of the largest and nicest brick buildings I ever saw. Uncle Sam's property is burnt. Most of the private property is saved; most all the folks are here yet. There is still some fire here yet."

At the Norfolk Naval Shipyard today some of these very buildings provide service to the Navy, continuing as a testament to the strength of which they were built some 175 years ago. If one knows where to look, the buildings still show the effects of both war and fire. Gosport has always been known as having facilities worth fighting for.



(Above) Rotten Row, off of the drydock showing burnt ruins of CSS Delaware and CSS Columbus. (Right) Horseshoe recovered from Civil War era stables beside south-western boundary wall.

