



**A copy of the following original 10-page document was obtained from the Mississippi State Archives, Jackson, Mississippi.**

**Charles Read wrote, in his own handwriting, the heading on page 1: The Confederate Ram “Arkansas” by Charles Read. It is typed on 10 sheets of typing paper, with a blue-inked ribbon. It appears to have been typed on a manual, Royal typewriter.**

## *The Confederate Ram "Arkansas,"*

*By Charles Roade,*

Just before the evacuation of Fort Pillow the Confederates had launched at Memphis a very pretty little gun-boat called "Arkansas". She was about four hundred tons, double propeller, was to be iron-clad, and to mount ten guns. When the news reached Memphis that our people were evacuating Fort Pillow, the "Arkansas" and all of the river transports were run up the Yazoo river, where they were protected by batteries on shore and a raft across the stream. Pinkney's boats and the "Van Dorn" arrived at Liverpool landing too late to get above the raft. The two guns saved by Lieut. Stone were placed on shore, and several smaller guns were also mounted. The sailors and Mississippi troops manned the batteries. The crews of the gun-boats lived on board.

The unfinished "Arkansas" was towed up to Yazoo City. The officer in charge of her seemed indifferent as to the time of her completion. The leading citizens of the town telegraphed to Richmond and asked that an energetic officer be placed in command and the steamer be got ready without delay. Accordingly the Department detailed Lieut. I. M. Brown, of the navy, to superintend the work and to assume command. When Lieut. Brown arrived in Yazoo City he found the "Arkansas" without any iron on her, her ports not cut, and in fact quite a lot of work to be done by carpenters and machinists. The barge which had brought down the iron for the shield or covering for the casement had been carelessly sunk in the Yazoo river. Lieut. Brown was untiring in his efforts to complete the



his vessel. He took some stringent measures; imprisoned several people who were disposed to trifle with him; he allowed no one under his command to be idle; he issued orders to press all the blacksmiths and mechanics in the country for a hundred miles around; the barge of iron was raised; officers were dispatched with all haste to hurry forward guns, carriages, ammunition, etc., and all workmen were obliged to live on board a transport steamer alongside the "Arkansas"; work was continued day and night; the sound of the artisan's hammer did not cease until the ship was ready for battle.

A few days after Lieut. Brown took charge of the "Arkansas", I arrived in Yazoo City and reported to him for duty. He directed me to load a steamer with cotton and go down to Liverpool landing and protect the gun-boats "Polk" and "Livingston" with cotton bales, to moor their head down stream, to keep steam up, and be prepared to ram any boats of the enemy that might venture up. Lieut. Brown went down with me, but when we got there Commander Pinkney informed us that he had changed his mind, and would not leave until the arrival of Commodore Lynch, who was on his way to the command of all the naval forces of the West. Having placed the cotton as directed I returned with Capt. Brown to Yazoo City. A day or two afterwards Commodore Lynch arrived. Capt. Brown had orders to obey all orders from Gen. Van Dorn, and to make no move without the sanction of that officer. Commodore Lynch, having inspected the "Arkansas", ordered me to Jackson, Miss., to telegraph the Sec'y. of War, as follows: "The 'Arkansas' is very inferior to the 'Merrimac' in every particular; the iron with which she is covered

is worn and indifferent, taken from a rail-road track, and is poorly secured to the vessel; boiler-iron on stern and counter; her smoke-stack is sheet-iron." When I returned to Yazoo City the Arkansas was ready for service. Her battery consisted of ten guns--viz: two 8-inch columbiads in the two forward or bow ports, two 9-inch Dahlgren shell guns, two 6-inch rifles, and two 32-pounders smooth bores in broadside, and two 6-inch rifles astern. Her engines were new, having been built at Memphis, and on the trial trip worked well. As the ship had two propellers and separate engines, she could be worked or handled conveniently. The boilers were in the hold and below the water line. The speed was fair--say nine knots. We had a full complement of officers and about two hundred men. All were anxious for the time to come when we could show the enemy that we could not lay idly in our waters. We started down the river the day the work was finished. On our way down we received intelligence that a small steamer of the enemy was some mile below the rafts and batteries. So we hurried on down, firing a gun now and then to let Pinkney and the batteries know we were coming. On rounding the point above the obstructions or rafts, we could see the men at the guns on the bluffs, but as they had not fired we were satisfied that the enemy were not yet in range. Our attention was soon attracted to the gun-boats "Polk" and "Livingston" moored just below the obstructions. Smoke was seen issuing from their cabins and hatches. Capt. Brown promptly ordered all on small boats manned, and sent them to extinguish the fire; but they



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got alongside the boats too late, and Pinkney had done his cowardly work too well. We soon ascertained that a small stern-wheel, high-pressure, river steamboat, protected with hay, had approached nearly as far as Sartartia, or about five miles off the batteries, when perceiving our fortifications, had quickly retreated. The two gunboats fired and abandoned by Pinkney, being full of cotton, burned rapidly; and the lines by which they had been fastened to the banks being consumed, the boats drifted down the river. One of the getting foul of the iron-clad ram "Van Dorn" set her on fire, and she too was added to the loss of the "Polk" and "Livingston."

The following day I was sent with one of the pilots to sound the bar at Sartarsia. We found plenty of water for the "Arkansas," but the pilot stated that if the river continued to fall as it had been doing for the past several days, that in five more days there would not be enough water for the "Arkansas" to get down. The man who had placed the rafts said they could not be moved inside of a week. Capt. Brown instructed Lieutenants Grimball, Gift and myself to examine the obstructions and report if it was practicable to remove them, so as to allow the "Arkansas" to pass through; and if so; in what time the work could be done. We visited the rafts, and after a careful examination reported that they could be moved in less than half an hour.

A short time before this the large up-river fleet of the enemy (now under command of Commodore Davis, United States Navy), which had fought its way from Columbus, Ky., had arrived above Vicksburg, and had been joined by the victorious fleet of sea-going under the

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indomitable Farragut. The mortar fleets above and below Vicksburg were thundering away at that stronghold, and a large land force was ready to act in concert with the enemy's overwhelming armada.

Capt. Brown, the commander of the Arkansas, while being very anxious to comply with the unanimous wish of his officers and men to attack the enemy- was of the opinion that the ship should remain above the obstruction strictly on the defensive. He said that there were a large number of fine steamers in the Yazoo, and the valley of that river was capable of furnishing an immense amount of supplies to our armies, and that the river and valley could be held by the "Arkansas" and proper batteries; that if the "Arkansas" went down and attacked the combined fleets of the enemy, it would be impossible to destroy them or even to cripple them seriously. But if the Government or Gen. Van Dorn desired it, he (Capt. Brown) would willingly go down and do his best. Capt. Brown decided therefore to consult with Gen. Van Dorn without delay; so I was directed to go to Vicksburg and explain our position and Capt. Brown's views, and ask for instructions. About sunset, July 1862, I left Liverpool landing, and set out on my mission, riding all night -- some fifty miles. I was in Vicksburg about eight o'clock the next morning. On entering the town I was fortunate to come upon the head-quarters of Col. Withers, of the artillery, where I was hospitably received, had a good breakfast, and went out with the Colonel to call on Gen. Van Dorn. The General thoroughly appreciated the importance of holding the Yazoo river, but he thought as the "Arkansas" could only be used during the high water season, that she could not materially



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assist in defending the river. He thought that the "Arkansas" x could run by the gun-boats above Vicksburg and attack the "Brooklyn" and mortar-schooners below town, or run by everything about Vicksburg and destroy the small gun-boats scattered along the lower river in detail, pass out of the Mississippi river and go to Mobile. He therefore ordered Capt. Brown to move at once with his steamer, and act as his judgment should dictate.

After leaving Gen. Van Dorn's head-quarters I proceeded in company with one of Col. Wither's officers, up the bank of the river to reconnoiter. It was late in the afternoon before we got abreast with the fleets. The woods were so dense and entangled with vines and briars that we were obliged to dismount and grope our way through as best we could. I had a good field-glass and watched the vessels carefully some time. Farragut's fleet consisted of thirteen heavy sloops of war, mounting tremendous batteries, and were anchored in line near the east bank. I was satisfied that none of them had ~~any~~ steam up. The fleet of Commodore Davis numbered over thirty iron-clads and six or eight rams. They were moored to the west bank nearly opposite Farragut's fleet. Below Davis's fleet were about thirty mortar-boats. Davis's vessels appeared to have steam up. While we were making our observations a man-of-war cutter landed near us but the crew did not suspect our presence. About dark that night I left Vicksburg and rode until two o'clock next morning, when, feeling much fatigued, I stopped at a planter's house and rested until daylight. The following day I arrived at Liverpool landing.

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The next morning a passage was made in the obstruction. The "Arkansas" dropped through and below the barb at Sartarsia. Commodore Lynch now arrived at Yazoo City and proposed to go down with us. When he informed Capt. Brown of his intentions, Brown remarked, "Well Commodore, I will be glad if you go down with us, but as this vessel is too small for two captains, if you go, I will take charge of a gun and attend to that." Commodore Lynch replied, "Very well, Captain, you may go; I will stay. May God bless you!" The good old Commodore then called all the officers around him, and said he knew they would do their duty; and he hoped they would all go through the fight safely, and live to see our country free from her invaders. He then bade us all good-bye and returned to the city.

The next morning, July 14th, 1862, the "Arkansas" started down the river, and arrived at Hames' Bluff just after dark, where we anchored until 2 A.M. next day, when getting under way the ship was cleared for battle, and we steamed slowly down. Daylight found us seven or eight miles above the mouth of the river. The morning was warm and perfectly calm; the dense volume of black smoke which issued from our funnel, rose high above the trees, and we knew that the enemy would soon be on the lookout for us. Pretty soon we discovered smoke above the trees below winding along the course of the crooked Yazoo. The men of the "Arkansas" were all now at their stations, the guns were loaded and cast loose, their tackles in the hands of willing seamen ready to train; primers in the ventlocks thrown back and the lanyards in the hands of the gun captains, the decks sprinkled with sand and tourniquets and bandages at hand.



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tubs filled with fresh water were between the guns, and down in the berth deck were the surgeons with their bright instruments, stimulants and lint, while along the passage-ways stood rows of men to pass powder, shell and shot, and all was quiet save the dull thump, thump of the propellers. Steadily the little ship moved onward towards her enemies, but she had not gone far, when about a mile below, a large iron-clad mounting 13 heavy guns steamed slowly around the bend, and was not doubt terribly astonished to see the "Arkansas" making for him, for he turned around as quickly as he could and started down the river. Our two forward guns opened on him with solid shot. He replied with his three stern guns, his shot passing over us, or striking harmlessly on our shield-forward. Two wooden gun-boats soon came up, and passing their fleeing consort advanced boldly to meet us, but a few well directed shot made them turn tail and again pass their friend, who knew what a tartar they had caught! Slowly but surely we gained on the iron-clad, our shot raking him and making dreadful havoc on his crowded decks. The wooden vessels ahead of her kept up a brisk fire with their rifle guns. One of their shot striking our pilot house, drove in some fragments of iron, which mortally wounded both the Yazoo river pilots, and slightly wounded Capt. Brown in the head. As one of the pilots was being taken below, he said, "keep in the middle of the river." We had decreased our distance from the iron-clad rapidly, and were only a hundred yards astern, our shot still raking him, when he ceased firing and sheered into the bank; our engines were stopped, and ranging up alongside, with the muzzles of our guns

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touching him, we poured in a broadside of solid shot, when his colors came down. As we had no pilot, Capt. Brown considered it unsafe to stop. So on we pushed, driving the two fleeing boats ahead of us, our speed decreasing all the time, owing to the shot holes in our smoke-stack; but in a few minutes the "Arkansas" glided out into the broad Mississippi, right into the midst of the hostile fleet. The Yankee tars were soon at their guns, and shot and shell came thick and fast upon our single little ship. Enemies being on all sides of us, our guns were blazing destruction and defiance in every direction. Soon three large rams were seen rushing down the river towards us. The "Arkansas" turned and steamed up to meet them; the leading ram had got within a hundred yards of us, when a well aimed shot, fired by the cool and intrepid Lieut. Gift, from one of the bow guns, struck the ram's boiler and blew him up. The other two rams fearing a similar fate, turned and fled. Our steam was now so low that we could manoeuvre with difficulty. Turning head down stream we made for Farragut's fleet, and gave them the best we could at close quarters; they replied briskly and seldom missed us; two of their eleven inch solid shot crushed through our sides, doing fearful execution amongst our men. Slowly we went fighting our way right and left, until presently we had passed our enemies, and were received with loud hurrahs from the Confederate soldiers of the heights of Vicksburg. With much difficulty the "Arkansas" was rounded to and secured to the bank in front of the city. The iron on her port side, though pierced but twice, had been so often struck with heavy projectiles, that it was very much



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loosened. A few more shots would have caused nearly all of it to  
fall from the vessel. Our dead were sent on shore to be buried;  
the sick and wounded carried to the hospital, the decks were washed  
down, and the crew went to breakfast. We were visited by Generals  
Van Dorn and Breckinridge, who complimented us highly and offered  
us any assistance we required