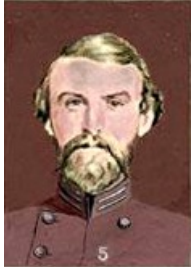


Elliott, Gilbert ^[1]

Elliott, Gilbert

by Robert G. Elliott, 1986

10 Dec. 1843–9 May 1895



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of History. ^[2]Gilbert Elliott, Confederate officer and builder of the Confederate ram, *Albemarle* ^[3], lawyer, and law directory publisher, was born in Elizabeth City, the third child of Gilbert Elliott (20 May 1813–20 May 1851), a businessman in Elizabeth City, and his wife, Sarah Ann Grice. She came from a family of shipbuilders ^[4] who had established Elizabeth City. Gilbert had two brothers, Charles Grice and Warren Grice, and two sisters, Mary Burgess who died in infancy and Susan Elizabeth. While a very young lad he was employed in the law office of Colonel William F. Martin of Elizabeth City, who owned a shipyard at Deep Creek, Va. Undoubtedly exposure to the shipyard activity, combined with his mother's shipbuilding ^[4] heritage, stimulated Gilbert's interest, which would later be recognized by Confederate naval authorities.

At seventeen Elliott joined the Seventeenth North Carolina Regiment as first lieutenant and adjutant. After a heroic defense of Fort Hatteras under Colonel Martin, the regiment surrendered on 27 Aug. 1861. Later Elliott was detached for special naval service, for which he was commended by the Confederate Naval Command. In the spring of 1863 he was assigned the task of building an ironclad ^[5] ram. Collaborating with a friend, Peter Evans Smith ^[6], the son of planter William Ruffin Smith ^[7] of Halifax County ^[8], he selected a construction site in a cornfield on the Smith farm at Edwards Ferry along the Roanoke River ^[9] just north of present-day Scotland Neck. Friends and neighbors in the immediate neighborhood donated tools, a sawmill, a blacksmith shop, and their full cooperation in the building of the ship. Plans and specifications had been prepared by John L. Porter, chief constructor of the Confederate Navy, using experience gained in converting the frigate *Merrimac* into the ironclad *Virginia* at the Gosport Navy Yard.

The *Albemarle* was 152 feet long between perpendiculars. Her extreme beam was 45 feet and her depth from gun deck to keel was 9 feet; when launched she drew 6 1/2 feet of water. After being fitted with iron plates and completed, her draught was about 8 feet. Over the 4-inch thick planking were fastened two courses of iron plating extending from the knuckle to 4 feet below the deck. The plates, 7 inches wide and 2 inches thick, were rolled at the Tredegar Iron Works in Richmond. Lieutenant Elliott had scavenged scrap iron and railroad rails to ensure the required quantity of plates. Two steam engines of 200 horsepower each with 20-inch cylinders drove two propeller shafts that were geared together. Armament consisted of two rifled Brooke guns mounted on pivot carriages, each gun firing through one of three portholes from within each end of the armored shield. The prow for ramming was built of oak, running 18 feet astern on center keelson, solidly bolted and covered on the outside with iron plating 2 inches thick. It tapered to a 4-inch wide edge at the bow.

Final fitting of the *Albemarle* was accomplished at Halifax, upriver from the building site. On 18 Apr. 1864, about one year after the keel had been laid, her skipper, Captain James W. Cooke ^[10], a seasoned seaman, floated her stern first down the Roanoke River toward Plymouth. Elliott was on board as a volunteer aide to Captain Cooke. When confronted with submerged torpedoes and sunken debris, Elliott and Pilot John Luck took soundings from a small boat and determined that the *Albemarle* could safely drift over the obstacles. The Union Navy had placed the charges in hopes of preventing the ram from entering the waters adjacent to Plymouth. Immediately she was engaged in battle with the Miami ^[11] and Southfield ^[12]. Captain Cooke dispatched the *Southfield* by ramming while the *Miami* escaped being sunk. These and succeeding engagements supported Confederate General R. F. Hoke ^[13]'s Division in the attack and recapture of Plymouth. During the night of 27 Oct. 1864, while moored to her wharf at recaptured Plymouth, the *Albemarle* was sunk by a charge placed by Lieutenant W. B. Cushing of the Union Navy.

On 13 Apr. 1865, Gilbert Elliott married Lucy Ann Hill, a great-granddaughter of Whitmel Hill ^[14] who served in the Continental Congress from 1778 to 1781. A son, Gilbert III, was born in Scotland Neck on 5 Jan. 1866. In 1867 Elliott and

his family moved to Norfolk, Va., where he joined his younger brother Warren in the practice of law. Three daughters were born in Norfolk: Nannie Hill, Elizabeth Grice, and Rebecca Norfleetin.

In 1878 Elliott moved to St. Louis where he tried to establish his law practice. Because of his wide knowledge of and acquaintance with lawyers throughout the United States, he began to publish a law directory which was favorably received. Later, after his son had completed his legal studies, he sent young Gilbert to New York City to open a law firm. Shortly thereafter, he joined his son in New York. He selected Staten Island for his residence but lived only a brief time, dying at age fifty-one. Both he and his wife were buried in Greenwood Cemetery, Brooklyn, N.Y.

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