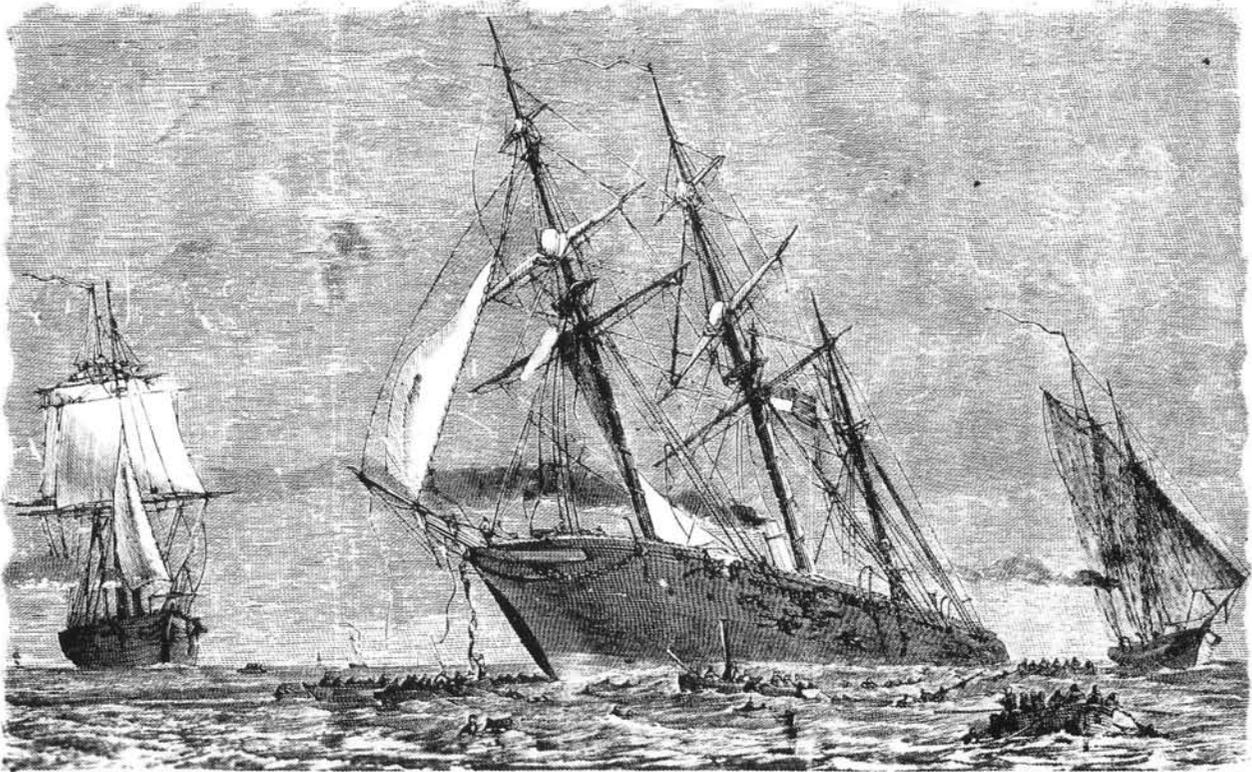


The Alabama Claim

by GENE HESSLER



(Kearsage)

The Kearsage sinking the Alabama.

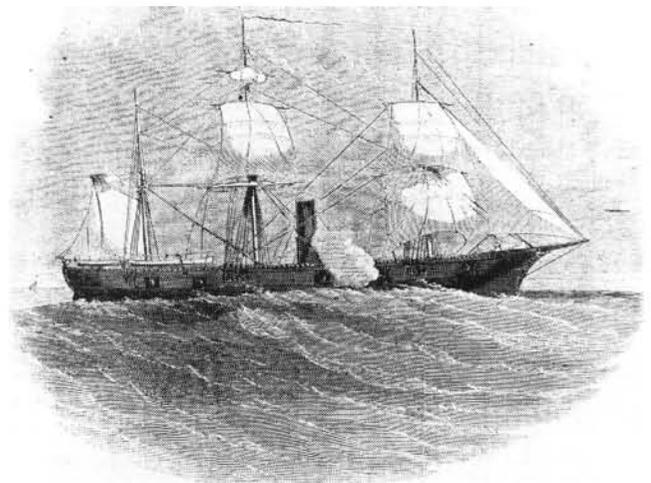
(Deerhound)

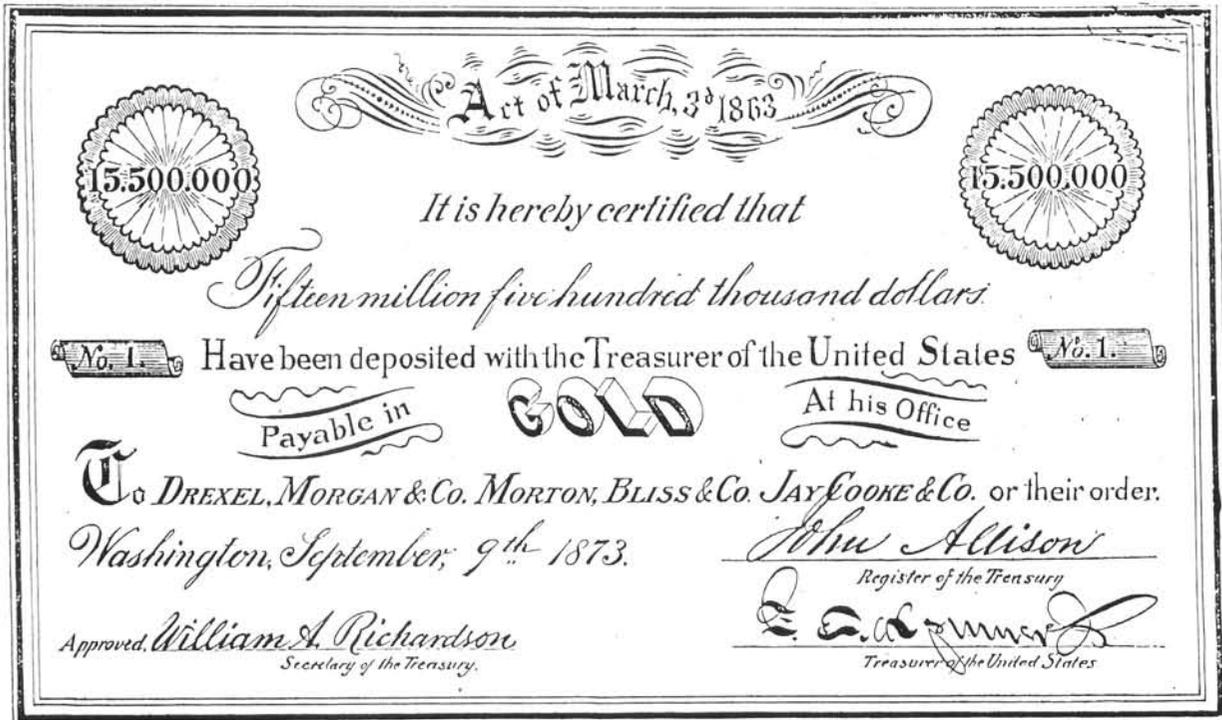
WHEN Alabama seceded from the Union on 15 February 1861, Raphael Semmes was secretary of the light-house board in Washington; he resigned and reported to Jefferson Davis. With no time to be wasted, the future President of the Confederacy sent Semmes to industrial New England to purchase war materiel. Semmes returned on 4 April and was rewarded with a commission to command the *Sumter*.

The ships of both the Union and the Confederate navies sailed waters far from the eastern coast of the United States in search of ships from countries sympathetic to the side considered as the enemy. In January 1862 the *Sumter* was caught in a blockade while in Cadiz for repairs. "Old Beeswax," as Semmes was called, and his crew were taken to England, and the *Sumter* was sold.



Raphael Semmes





The No. 1, and only, certificate of deposit for \$15,500,000.

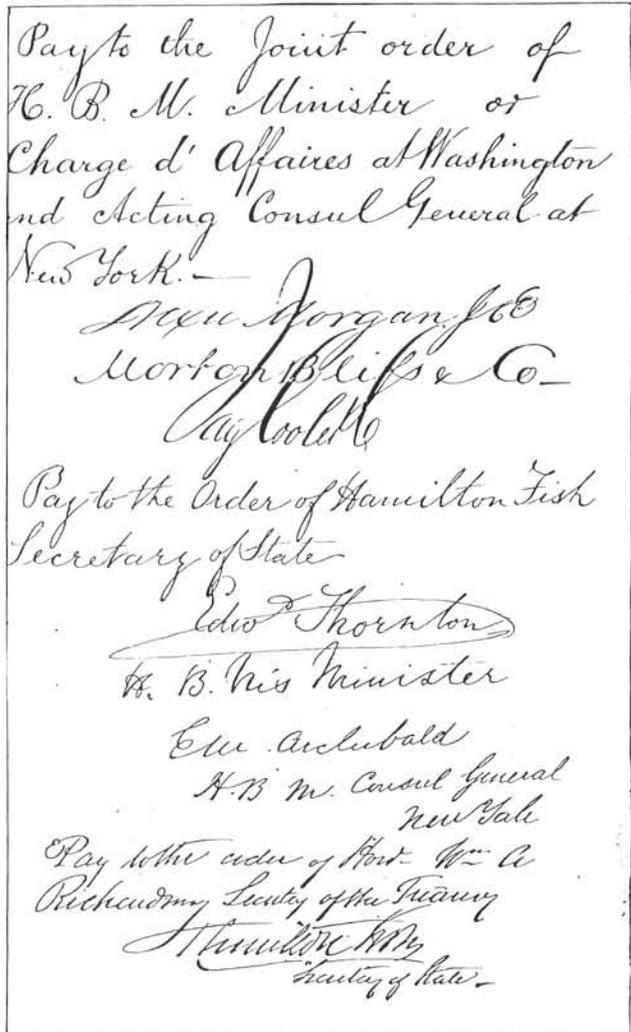
At this time James D. Bulloch, the Confederate naval agent in Great Britain was supervising the construction of the *Alabama*; British shipyards had already built the *Florida* for the Confederacy. "The agents of Charles Francis Adams, American Minister to Great Britain, had no difficulty in establishing that she [the *Alabama*] was being built for anything but peaceful purposes and the Crown law offices recommended her seizure."¹

Great Britain, in order to keep their mills occupied, needed cotton from the southern states. The English Government projected an appearance of neutrality; nevertheless, certain dispensations were granted to the Confederate Government.

The British Government took no action after the order to seize the *Alabama* was given. On 29 April 1862, under pretense of a trial run, the *Alabama* set sail for the Azores. Built for him and named after the state to which he remained loyal, Semmes was in command. After the rendezvous with a supply ship, the *Alabama* sailed into the North Atlantic. The 210-foot *Alabama* carried all national flags, but usually set the St. George Cross when approaching other vessels. During the next two months, twenty ships were either taken or destroyed by the *Alabama* on an extended trial run. Before she sailed around the Cape of Good Hope, with a Union cruiser in pursuit, she took eighteen more ships.

Badly in need of repairs, Semmes and his crew reached the French harbor of Cherbourg on 11 June 1864. The *Kearsage*, a Union sloop in Holland at the time, was alerted and sent to challenge the *Alabama*. With only partial repairs completed, the *Alabama* left the harbor. When the engagement took place, the *Kearsage* proved to be the superior ship—the *Alabama* was sunk and the crew taken to England.

Semmes was able to return to Mobile where he opened a law office. On 15 December 1865, under orders of Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, he was arrested. Amnesty was granted some months later and Semmes was released in May 1866.



The back of the certificate with endorsements.

Harper's Weekly of 16 August 1862 listed the following chronology of events.

Habana was repaired and christened the *Sumter* (*Harper's Weekly* 3 June 1861). *Sumter* carries five guns: four 32s and one 68 on a pivot. Crew of 114 men under command of Captain Semmes.

- 13 June 1861 trial trip
- 24 June 1861 (Head of the Passes) Orders to be underway
- 25 June 1861 Union ships *Brooklyn* and *Powhatan* await *Sumter*
- 30 June 1861 Ran blockade into Gulf of Mexico at 4:30 p.m.
- 3 July 1861 Captured Union *Golden Rocket*; it was destroyed by fire after crew transferred to *Sumter*
- 4 July 1861 Captured *Cuba* and *Machias*
- 5 July 1861 Captured *Ben Dunning* and *Alibert Adams*; both brigs
- 6 July 1861 Captured *Louisa Kilham*, a bark and *West Wind*, a brig
- 25 July 1861 Captured *Abby Bradford*, a schooner
- 27 July 1861 Captured *Joseph Maxwell*, a bark
- 27 Sep. 1861 Captured *Joseph Park*
- 31 Oct. 1861 Captured *Troubridge*
- 25 Nov. 1861 Captured *Montmorenci*
- 3 Apr. 1862 It was reported that the commanders of the *Brooklyn* and *Keystone State* were court-martialed for allowing the *Sumter* to leave the Mississippi River

Seven years later, on 14 September 1872, the Geneva Conference found Great Britain responsible for all the damage caused by the *Alabama*—the most successful Confederate raider. The *Alabama* was constructed by the British for a belligerent southern government. For this claim, Great Britain was obligated to pay \$15,500,000 in gold to the United States.

This payment was received under the Act of 3 March 1863, Section 5: "And be it further enacted, That the Secretary of the Treasury is hereby authorized to receive deposits of gold coin and bullion with the Treasurer or any Assistant Treasurer of the United States, in sums of not less than twenty dollars . . ." The face of the certificate bears the signatures of William A. Richardson, Secretary of the Treasury, John Allison, Register of the Treasury and F.E. Spinner, Treasurer.

Each person who endorsed the certificate was presented with a facsimile; there could be others. An example was observed in the collection of The Chase Manhattan Bank Money Museum, now part of the Numismatic Collections at the Smithsonian.

When the British payment was made, it was probably the largest made at one time to the United States.

1. Fletcher Pratt, ed., *The Compact History of the United States Navy*, revised by Hartley E. Howe, Hawthorne Books, Inc., New York, 1962, p. 149.

Additional Sources

- Appletons' Cyclopaedia of American History*. D. Appleton and Company, Vol. V, New York, 1888.
- McQuade, Ruth. "The Alabama Arbitration Certificate of Deposit," *The Canadian Paper Money Journal*, Vol. XX, No. 3, July, 1984, p. 63.

Santa Claus (Continued from page 16)

these are hanging on the walls of local banks and therefore will probably never be available. All other Athens small-size notes that have been on the market recently are Type I \$10s, so this was definitely a nice find.

A DEALER'S REACTION

One of the people I told about my latest acquisition was well-known dealer and New York specialist Allen Mincho of Cedar Park, Texas. Allen, while happy for me, was a little concerned. After all, he said, if collectors started finding nationals in circulation, there wouldn't be a need for dealers. Besides, I thought, I never heard of a paper money dealer having double coupon days. Seriously, I don't think Allen has much to worry about. Santa Claus can't come that often, can he?

A FINAL THOUGHT

One question remains — how did a note like this end up in the cash drawer at the local supermarket in 1988? To quote the late Amon Carter, Jr.: "I wish you could look at a National Bank Note and — hocus, pocus — see everywhere it's been." Amen.

SOURCES

Hickman, John and Dean Oakes, *Standard Catalog of National Bank Notes*, Krause Publications, Iola, Wisconsin, 1982.

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