

VELASCO RECLAMATION WORK - PARROTT SHELL

by James Smith

Shortly after the signal shot was fired from Fort Johnson, April 12, 1861, to begin the bombardment of Fort Sumter in Charleston Harbor, the decision to blockade the South was made. President Abraham Lincoln by proclamation April 19, 1861, ordered a blockade of the ports within the states of South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. The Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles issued instructions to Flag Officer William Mervin of the *U.S.S. Colorado* May 7, 1861, "...establish and enforce a blockade at each and all ports in the states enumerated south of Key West to the Rio Grande..."¹ By mid May, 17 vessels had been assigned to the Gulf Blockading Squadron.

July 2, 1861, the *U.S.S. South Carolina* commanded by James Alden, arrived on station off Galveston, Texas, and shortly thereafter, began to seize vessels, capturing 85 prisoners and 11 vessels between the 4th and 7th of July.² From September to December 1861, the U.S. schooner *Sam Houston* under the command of Lt. J.G. Mitchel patrolled the waters near San Luis Pass, the Brazos River, and San Bernard River. Several salt vessels were captured coming into the mouth of the Brazos River annoying Major C.G. Forshey, C.S. Army at Velasco.³

The U.S. bark *Midnight* under command of Lt. James Trathen arrived off Galveston on December 4, 1861, and cruised down the coast the next day: "I discovered in this route that there was a strong battery at the entrance of San Luis Pass, a large encampment and battery at Velasco, and a battery of four heavy guns near the light house at Pass Cavallo."⁴

The new year brought a change in strategy for the Union blockaders. Captain Henry Eagle of the U.S. frigate *Santee* off Galveston issued orders January 6, 1862, for the U.S. bark *Midnight* to attack Confederate batteries at Pass Cavallo and Velasco: "...At Velasco there is a battery, and you may make a demonstration upon it...I have no orders for you to fire upon a defenseless town, but I am anxious to have you destroy any barracks or encampments that you can...The schooner gunboat *Rachel Seaman* will accompany you..."⁵

¹Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, Series I, Vol. 16, p.519.

²Ibid., Vol. 16, p.575.

³Ibid., Vol. 16, p.842.

⁴Ibid., Vol. 17, p.6.

⁵Ibid., Vol. 17, p.37.

Upon his return off Galveston, January 24, 1862, Lt. Trathen reported "...On the 18th instant, the *Rachel Seaman* being still in company, we stood in toward the town of Velasco. At 10:30 a.m. we were in 2-1/2 fathoms water, the entrance of the river bearing N.N.W. Two batteries, about 1700 yards distant, opened fire on us with round shot, to which both vessels promptly replied with shell, several of which were seen to explode immediately over the batteries. The nearest of the enemy's shot, evidently from a rifled gun, fell about 6 yards from the *Rachel Seaman's* port quarter, throwing spray on board that vessel. The nearest shot aimed at the *Midnight* fell short about 20 yards. After about thirty minutes' practice we hauled offshore. One object had been gained in this instance, making the enemy expend his ammunition. The two 32-pounders of 57 cwt., loaned to this ship by your order from the U.S. ship *Santee*, and the 20-pounder Parrott rifled gun put on board off Fort Pickens by order of the flag officer, were the only guns I had that reached the enemy's batteries. The four 32-pounders of 42 cwt., put on board at New York, fell far short at the highest elevation. The enemy's works at Pass Cavallo, I think, is a sand battery of four long 32-pounders. The batteries at Velasco have heavy guns, with one or more rifled..."⁶

The Confederates had observed the arrival of the *Midnight* and *Rachel Seaman* off Velasco, January 14, 1862, Major C.G. Forshey reported "...Yesterday morning two vessels anchored off Velasco, some 5 miles out, and have continued at this anchorage since that time..."⁷

February 2, 1862, Major Forshey reported the attack on Velasco and Pass Cavallo "...the vessels I reported you at Velasco soon showed their object...She attacked or fired upon our pickets here, stationed at the old fort. One of her shots is a Parrott shell, not charged, which we picked up a day or two after the attempt..."⁸

May 1992, almost exactly 130 years later, Sandra Pollan, BAS member, excavating fill-dirt in the area above a brick cistern (BAS Feature 92-3), discovered a large rusty hunk of "what's it". After soaking in a five gallon bucket of water for several days, the "what's it" was identified by Bobby McKinney of Rosenberg and Gary Wiggins of Highlands, as a fired U.S. 20-pound Parrott shell with the fuse removed and no powder. McKinney has cleaned and preserved the shell and made a film of the process for BAS. The following photographs record that process. McKinney did such a good job that I can almost see U.S. gunboat *Midnight* stamped on the side. How about you guys?

⁶Ibid., Vol. 17, pp.79-80.

⁷Ibid., Vol. 17, p.158.

⁸Ibid., Vol. 17, p.166.

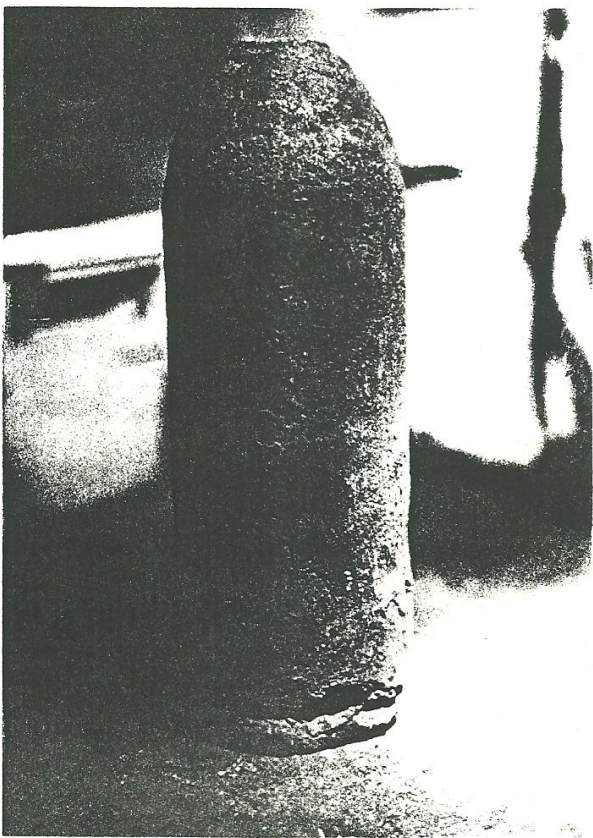
VELASCO - 20 POUND PARROTT SHELL



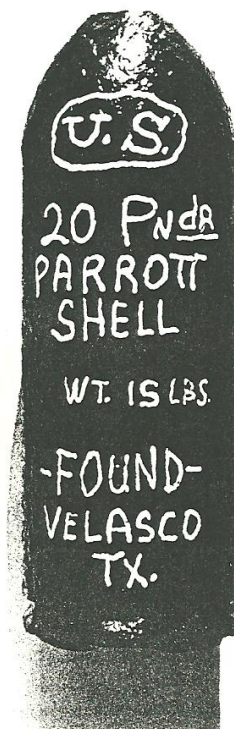
Initial Condition



Initial Electrolysis



Final Electrolysis



Final Preservation

PARROTT FIELD RIFLES, 10-POUNDER AND 20-POUNDER

The Parrott rifles were patented in 1861, by Robert P. Parrott and cast by him as superintendent of the West Point Foundry, Cold Spring, New York. While not the best rifles to be put into service, they were available, inexpensive, and accurate. The Confederates even went so far as to produce their own copies.

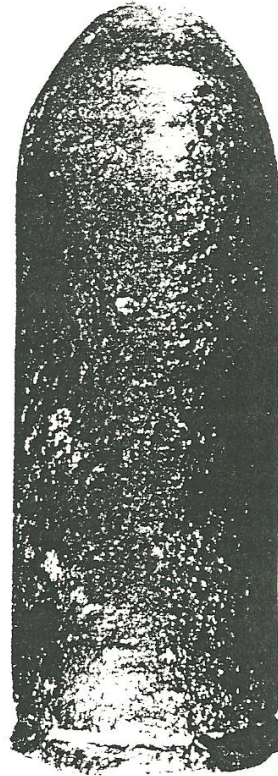
The Parrotts are easily identified by the wrought iron reinforcing band around the breech. Although not all banded cannons are Parrotts, the Parrotts are by far the most commonly encountered. Parrott's band was made by winding a bar of iron around a form or mandrel and then hammering it until welded solid. What Parrott claimed as new was his method of attaching the band. While hot, the band was forced onto the breech of the horizontally rotating tube that was being water-cooled on the inside. The band greatly increased the strength of the breech, but many Parrott rifles burst in front of this juncture.

Often a term of confusion, the "pounder" designation does not always accurately describe Parrott rifles. The 10-pounder, Model 1861, has a bore diameter of 2.9 inches while the 10-pounder, Model 1863, has a 3.0-inch bore. Ammunition specifically made for the latter model could not be used in the Model 1861; however, the reverse situation was possible. The two guns are readily identified by the lack of a muzzle swell on the Model 1863. Additionally, some larger Parrott rifles were known by totally different "pounder" designations in the Army and in the Navy.

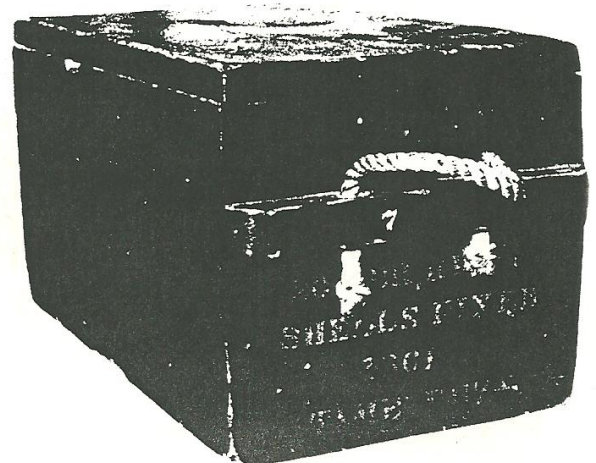
A solid iron bolt was produced to be fired by Parrott field rifles; however, the most common ammunition used was shell and case. Canister was always to be found in the chests, but when fired from the rifles it was not as effective as when fired from a howitzer or Napoleon. The rifled barrel tended to throw the canister balls into an erratic, spiralled pattern.

	10-pdr.	20-pdr.
Bore Diameter, M61, 2.9"; M63, 3.0"	.....	3.67"
Tube Material	..... Iron	..... Iron
Length of Tube	..... 78"	..... 89"
Weight of Tube	..... 890 lbs.	..... 1,750 lbs.
Powder Charge	..... 1 lb.	..... 2 lbs.
Range at 5° Elevation	... 2,000 yards	... 2,100 yards

Reference: Cannons, Dean S. Thomas,
Thomas Publications, 1985.



20-pounder Parrott shell, U.S., long variety
Weight — 17 lbs.
Diameter — 3.63"
Length — 10.375"



Federal ammunition shipping crate for ten 20-pounder shells.

TABLE OF FIRE

20-PDR. PARROTT GUN

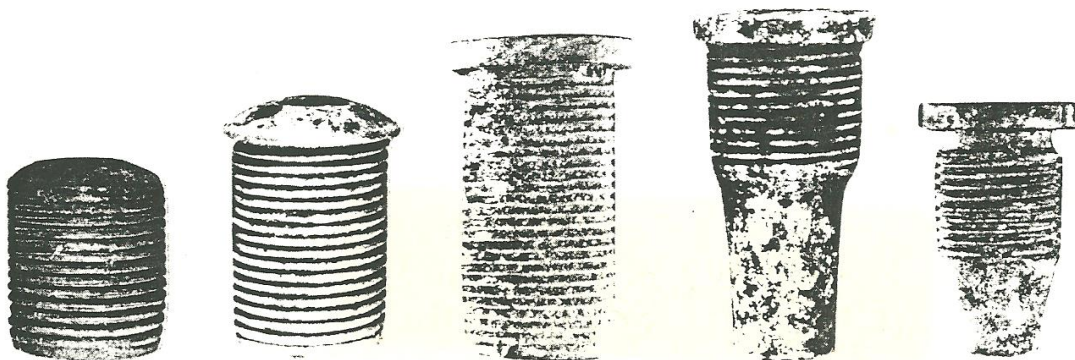
Charge, 2 lbs. of Mortar Powder

ELEVATION In Degrees	PROJECTILE	RANGE In Yards	TIME OF FLIGHT In Seconds
1	Case Shot, 19½ lbs.	620	1⅞
2	Case Shot, 19½ lbs.	950	3⅛
3⅝	Shell, 18¾ lbs.	1500	4¾
5	Shell, 18¾ lbs.	2100	6½
10	Shell, 18¾ lbs.	3350	11¼
15	Shell, 18¾ lbs.	4400	17¼

CARE OF AMMUNITION CHEST

1st. Keep everything out that does not belong in them, except a bunch of cord or wire for breakage; beware of loose tacks, nails, bolts, or scraps.
 2nd. Keep friction primers in their papers, tied up. The pouch containing those for instant service must be closed, and so placed as to be secure.
 Take every precaution that primers do not get loose; a single one may cause an explosion. Use plenty of tow in packing.

(This sheet is to be glued to the inside of Limber Chest Cover.)



Metallic fuse plugs for Parrott projectiles. The specimen at right is Confederate and made of copper. The other four are Federal and made of zinc.

Reference: Cannons, Dean S. Thomas, Thomas Publications, 1985.