

# The Search for the Jefferson Davis in the National Archives



Behind the scenes in the National Archives.

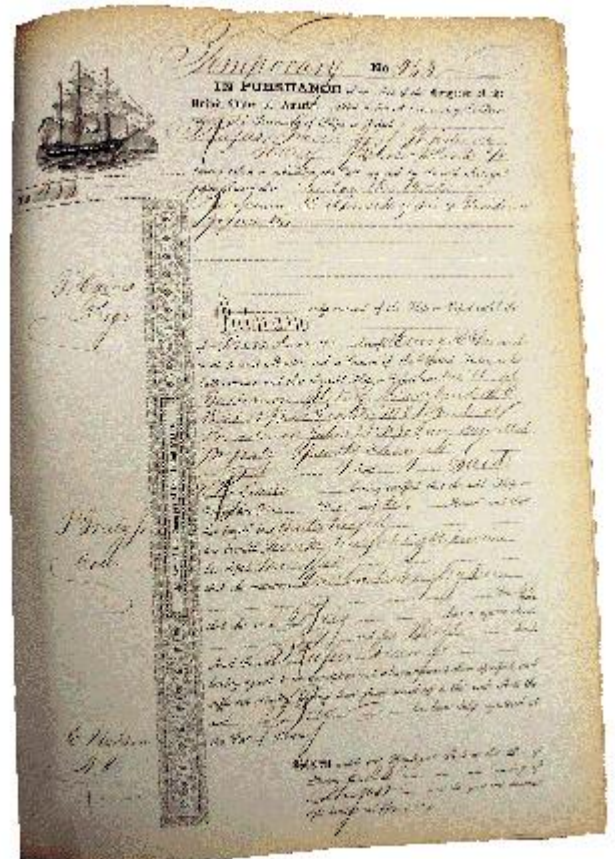
The search for the *Jefferson Davis* began in the National Archives in Washington, DC, with a research trip conducted by LAMP's Director of Archaeology Dr. Sam Turner in March 2006. The National Archives holds most records of the Union and Confederate Navies as well as Registries and Enrollment documents for American vessels from this time period. In addition, these archives contain the original deck logs of Union warships involved in the search for the *Jeff Davis* and the recapture and destruction of some of the prizes seized by this privateer. Some 42 naval documents, including letters and telegrams, have been found which contain a great

deal of information regarding the cruise of the *Jeff Davis* and the Union's efforts to track her down.

The history of this vessel prior to her becoming a privateer however, is considerably more difficult to ascertain. Dr. Turner's research into ship registries in the National Archives has shed considerable light on the early working life of the *Jeff Davis* and has permitted, to a degree, a retracing of her geographic whereabouts during her sixteen-year career.

The *Jefferson Davis*, christened *Putnam* at her launching in 1845 was built in Baltimore the same year Florida first became a state of the Union. The *Putnam* was a brig of 187 tons, ninety-two feet and two inches in length and twenty-two feet eight inches in breadth. She had a square stern with no galleries and a billet head and a ten-foot depth of hold. She was built for interests in Philadelphia and sailed under a Philadelphia shipmaster with a temporary registry on her very first voyage from Baltimore to Philadelphia in June 1845. Future research may reveal whether or not *Putnam* ever made Baltimore a regular port of call.

The *Putnam* operated from Philadelphia for five years from 1845 and thereafter was sold to new owners in Providence, Rhode Island in June 1850. Providence



The original 1845 register of the brig *Putnam*.

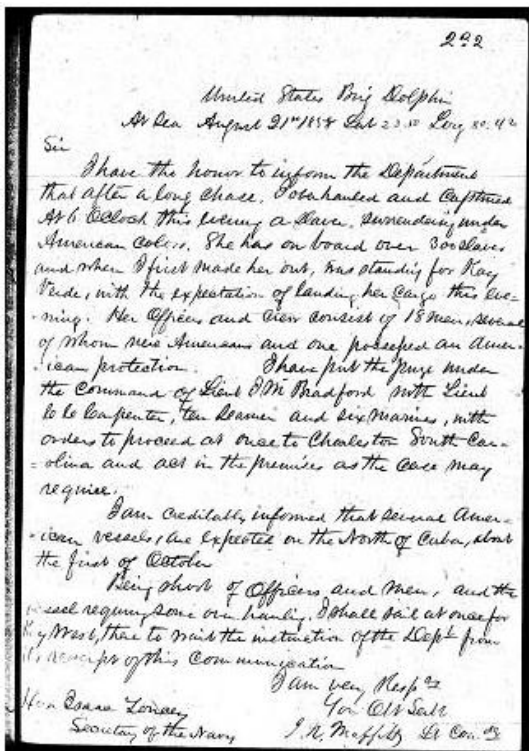
was not long to remain the homeport of *Putnam*. A little more than a year later, in August 1851, she was registered in Boston. Boston, like Providence, was only briefly her homeport for in December 1852, *Putnam* was registered in the port of New York.

New York was to be her homeport until October 1857. It was in the records of New York we first found mention of

the *Putnam* permitting the tracing of her documentation and ownership. On October 9 1857, the *Putnam* was registered in the port of New Orleans where she likely underwent yard work and was rigged in a New Orleans "French" style that was later to prove so confusing to crews of some of the *Jefferson Davis's* prizes.



The Baltimore waterfront where *Putnam* was originally launched in 1845. Her home port was Philadelphia between June 1845 and June 1850, Providence from June 1850 to August 1851, Boston from August 1851 to December 1852, New York from December 1852 to October 1857, and New Orleans from October 1857 until the time of her capture as an illegal slaver in August 1858.



Letter from Lt. Commander Maffitt of the USS *Dolphin* announcing the capture of the *Putnam* under its alias name *Echo*: "Sir, I have the honor to inform the Department that after a long chase, overhauled and captured at six o'clock this evening a slaver surrendering under American Colours. She has on board over 300 slaves..."

While based in New Orleans, the *Putnam* was given the alias *Echo* and fitted out for the illegal African slave trade. It is unknown at this point how many voyages to Africa *Echo* made but it could not have been many given the short period of time between her registration in New Orleans and her capture. This dark episode in her career ended on August 21 1858, when the USS *Dolphin* took *Echo* with 318 slaves off the coast of Cuba following a long chase. The *Dolphin*, a sloop of war, was under the command of Lt. John Newland Maffitt, a resident of Charleston, South Carolina who went on to earn fame and notoriety as the first and very successful commander of the CSS *Florida*, and later as a blockade runner.

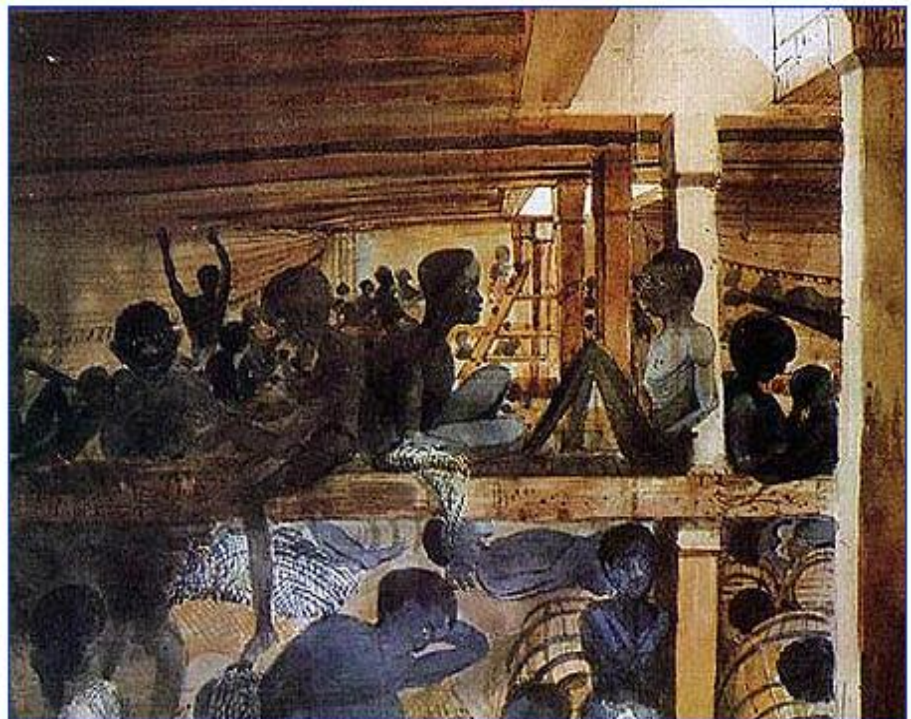
The *Echo* was condemned and sold in 1859 in the city of Charleston where she was registered and reverted to her original name. During the next two

years, *Putnam* engaged in international trade until the outbreak of the war in 1861 at which time she was commissioned a privateer operating against Union shipping on behalf of the Confederate government.

The career of the *Jefferson Davis* was short but quite successful. She took a total of nine prizes on a cruise into northern waters off New England in what has been described by the Naval Historical Center as "the last truly classic cruise in the history of private-armed sea power". The Union Navy expended considerable time and resources hunting the *Jefferson Davis* but succeeded only in the destruction of one of her prizes and the recapture of another.

Continuing research will focus on entrance and clearance records for the ports of Baltimore, Philadelphia, Providence, Boston, New York, and New Orleans for the years during which the *Putnam* was based in these ports. These records may contain information regarding the cargoes and merchants involved in shipping goods on the *Putnam* as well as the various ports and nations she visited abroad. This will help us more fully understand the economic role played by the *Putnam* and the nature of the global maritime economy in which she operated.

Further research will also examine the nature of the Atlantic slave trade in the mid-nineteenth century paying particular attention to African geography. Other issues under investigation include, British and American anti-slave trade naval squadrons, the repatriation to Africa of slaves taken on slave ships, and the Cuban involvement and economic dependency on the Atlantic slave trade. Archival research will be followed by marine remote sensing survey in the vicinity of St. Augustine's nineteenth-century shipping channel in an effort to locate the archaeological remains of this fascinating and historically important shipwreck.



**This 19th century watercolor by an British sailor depicts the hold of the illegal slaver *Albanez* captured by the Royal Navy ca. 1860. It is probably a realistic approximation of the horrible conditions faced by enslaved Africans on the *Putnam/Echo* at the time of her seizure. Painting by Francis Maynell, courtesy of the National Maritime Museum.**

Text by Sam Turner, 2007