



During the Civil War, Captain Thomas Mann Thompson piloted nine different blockade running steamers on 34 successful trips through the blockade at Cape Fear, braving fire from Union warships and the dangers of hidden shoals.

### **An Officer Who Knew No Fear**

Captain Thomas Mann Thompson was born in 1831. Like many local men, he turned to the sea to earn his living and became a Cape Fear Pilot. Pilots were vital in helping to navigate ships through the river's rough and dangerous shoals.

Early in the Civil War, President Lincoln declared a blockade of Southern ports. This extraordinary action – a nation had never before blockaded its own ports – was taken to isolate the rebel states from world commerce. As the war progressed, key Southern ports fell into Union hands and the blockade grew ever tighter.

By 1864, Wilmington had become the Confederacy's last seaport and the harbor at Smithville, as Southport was then known, was blockaded by dozens of Union warships. Because of this, the Confederacy depended more than ever on blockade runners for its supplies.

These steam-powered vessels were loaded with cotton, the South's primary cash crop. The pilot would take the blockade runner down the river to Smithville's harbor, where it would await nightfall. In the dark of night, the pilot would guide the stealthy vessel around the hidden shoals and try to slip between the blockading warships. He would remain aboard and later try to guide the inbound blockade runner – loaded with English arms, food, and other supplies – safely back into the harbor.

These daring ventures often ended in capture of the blockade runner, and many Cape Fear pilots ended up in Union prisons. But, not Captain Thompson! In 1864, Captain Thompson piloted nine different steamers on 34 trips through the blockade at Cape Fear.

When the blockaders discovered a runner's presence, cannon balls soon followed. In one instance, a Union cannon ball whistled between Captain Thompson and the blockade runner's captain, who were standing on the bridge barely an arm's length apart. Although staggered by the near miss, Captain Thompson remained at his post and continued to guide the ship. It is no wonder the captain of the ship called his pilot "***an officer who knew no fear.***"

A master of the shoals, Captain Thompson continued his career as a Cape Fear river pilot long after the war ended. With his earnings from running the blockade, he built a fine home on Southport's Bay Street that still stands today.