

H-Net Reviews

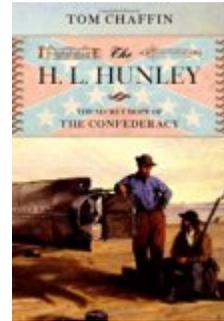
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tom Chaffin. *The H. L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of the Confederacy*. New York: Hill & Wang, 2008. 352 pp. \$26.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8090-9512-4.

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Published on H-CivWar (September, 2010)

Commissioned by Hugh F. Dubrulle



Rediscovering the Secrets beneath Charleston's Harbor

The discovery of the *H. L. Hunley* in 2000 has sparked a new wave of literature among historians and archaeologists as they examine the ship's remains. Tom Chaffin has combined evidence from both fields in his book, *The H. L. Hunley*. In this work, Chaffin has united New Orleans, Mobile, and Charleston while discussing the construction, testing, and fates of the vessels associated with the *H. L. Hunley*.

Chaffin begins by discussing the evidence he consulted, presumably so that others can assess his argument and investigate his sources. While such a means of proceeding is potentially useful, the cursory endnotes limit what readers can discover about sources concerning the *H. L. Hunley*.

Chaffin spends most of his book tracing the work of three figures—Baxter Watson, James McClintock, and Horace Hunley—all of whom contributed to the development of vessels that eventually culminated in the building of the *H. L. Hunley*. Working out of New Orleans and Mobile, they convinced investors to support the construction of the *CSS Planter*, the *American Diver*, and the *Fish Boat*. Chaffin also studies an array of lesser-known figures, such as Edgar Singer, A. A. “Gus” Whitney, and other members of the Singer Submarine Corps who assisted in the construction of torpedoes for the *Fish Boat*. Watson, McClintock, and Hunley found more success in building their craft than in their operation and deployment. Hunley, originally the captain of the blockade runner *Acela*, worked with McClintock and Watson, opera-

tors of a New Orleans machine shop, to manufacture the *CSS Planter*, which they wished to use as a privateer. The *CSS Planter*, the only submersible to receive a letter of marque and the official designation of “CSS,” sank in New Orleans before Commodore David Farragut and the West Gulf Blockading Squadron reached the city in April 1862. The experience gained from the *Planter* aided the men as they moved to Mobile and, with new partners, built two more submersibles. The *American Diver* sank nearly a year later while undergoing tests in Mobile Bay. Underterred, they launched their third endeavor, the *Fish Boat*, which capsized just weeks after its arrival in Charleston in August 1863.

After being raised in September, the vessel was rechristened *H. L. Hunley*. On October 15, 1863, it promptly sank again, claiming the lives of Hunley and his crew. Raised yet again, the *H. L. Hunley* fell under the command of Lieutenant George Dixon in November. Under Dixon, the *H. L. Hunley* left Charleston Harbor on February 17, 1864 and successfully attacked the *USS Housatonic*, sinking the blockader in roughly the same spot where the *CSS Chicora* and *CSS Palmetto State* had briefly broken the Federal blockade little more than a year before. The circumstances of *H. L. Hunley*'s disappearance after its celebrated sinking of the *Housatonic* has baffled individuals ever since.

The third section of Chaffin's book discusses the *H. L. Hunley*'s image since the close of hostilities, noting not only how those during the war remembered the ship,

but also how others have represented the vessel since. Chaffin's final two chapters cover the discovery of the *H. L. Hunley* in July 1995 by Clive Cussler, its raising in 2000, and what restoration by archaeologists has revealed about the vessel's final hours. These chapters provide useful information for those interested in Civil War memory and public history, as Chaffin discusses not only the ship's discovery but also what modern archaeology has revealed about the legends concerning the *H. L. Hunley* and her crew.

Throughout his book Chaffin dispels many misconceptions surrounding the *H. L. Hunley* and its builders. The relationship between Hunley, McClintock, and Watson with local military commanders emerges as one of Chaffin's key topics. According to Chaffin, Admiral Franklin Buchanan did not care for the *American Diver* and only praised the *Fish Boat* to accelerate its departure from his jurisdiction (pp. 113-114). Although General Pierre Beauregard thought the ship showed promise when it arrived in Charleston on August 13, 1863, he seized the vessel within two weeks of its arrival and placed a military crew on board. Chaffin's Charleston chapters discuss civil-military relations in the context of who should outfit and operate the vessel. Beauregard had enjoyed good relations with the civilian contractors building the *David* torpedo boats, but in the six months that the *H. L. Hunley* operated in Charleston, he installed four different commanders, including both military officers and civilians. Nonetheless, Chaffin believes that Beauregard held out hope for the vessel's potential; such hopes indicate a real interest in technology and its advancement. During his discussion of these issues, Chaffin misses an opportunity to compare the *Fish Boat/H. L. Hunley* with the *David*-type torpedo boats already built or contracted for in Charleston under Beauregard's command. He devotes little attention to the *David* and only briefly mentions its attack on the USS *New Ironsides* (pp. 162-166). He places the *H. L. Hunley* within Beauregard's overarching strategy towards the naval defense of Charleston, but does not adequately discuss it in relation to existing vessels or to those under construction. Chaffin could also do more to provide context for Charleston's defense before August 1863; he has little to say about the sortie of Confederate ironclad gunboats CSS *Chicora* and CSS *Palmetto State* in January 1863 and the attack on Charleston Harbor in April 1863 by Union monitors.

Utilizing the latest archaeological findings from the *H. L. Hunley* research team at the Warren Lasch Conservation Center in North Charleston, South Carolina, Chaffin wades into controversies surrounding the sub-

mersible and her encounter with the USS *Housatonic*. For instance, contemporary descriptions, specifically those made by men who had first-hand knowledge of the submersible, reported the ship's size as anywhere from thirty to forty feet in length (p. 230). This disagreement has been easily resolved since the discovery of the vessel has revealed its length as forty feet and its beam as forty-two inches. The discovery of Lieutenant George Dixon's twenty-dollar coin amongst the artifacts resolved different disputes. The coin had deflected a bullet at the Battle of Shiloh, saving Dixon's life. Archaeologist Maria Jacobsen found the coin in May 2001 with the tell-tale indentation and an engraving that Dixon had made commemorating his lucky escape. Examination of remains through the use of DNA positively identified the entire crew on board the *H. L. Hunley*, including Dixon, definitively establishing that he went down with the vessel. A computerized reconstruction of Dixon's face that was based on his remains refuted another story attached to the coin. Queenie Bennett, a Mobile woman reputed to be Dixon's sweetheart, was said to have given him the coin. However, this reconstruction did not match a photograph in the possession of the Bennett family that purportedly showed Dixon and Queenie Bennett together.

Less concrete and definitive claims are presented with regard to the blue light allegedly seen by *Housatonic* crewman Robert Fleming and debates over how the *H. L. Hunley* sank. Flemming, an African American crewman in the fore-rigging, claimed that as the *Housatonic* sank, he saw a blue light on the water near the sinking vessel. Some suspected that the light originated from the *Hunley's* battle lantern, but it did not have any blue coloring. After examining contemporary accounts, Chaffin follows Jacobsen's findings in suspecting that the light served as a guide for the *H. L. Hunley* to return to shore (although Jacobsen bases this opinion more on supposition than fact) (pp. 245-247). Chaffin also follows Jacobsen in hesitating to state how the crew perished and cautions against speculation. In addressing the issue of how the *H. L. Hunley* arrived east of the *Housatonic*, Chaffin employs Ockham's razor in claiming that the submersible sank soon after the Union blockader (pp. 249-251). As of publication, no definitive theory had emerged stating how or why the ship ended up east of the *Housatonic's* wreckage or how she sank, even though for years many suspected the *Hunley's* final resting spot would emerge closer to the coast. Although Chaffin discusses a number of possibilities, he settles on the account of Captain Martin Gray in April 1864, who believed the submersible sunk with the *Housatonic*.

Chaffin's examination of the *H. L. Hunley* has many implications for a number of Civil War topics. His research regarding the backgrounds of the *H. L. Hunley*'s final crew and those of the *Indian Chief* aids those interested in the composition of the Confederate Navy. The building of the *Planter*, *American Diver*, and the *Fish Boat/H. L. Hunley* reveals much information regarding naval construction and technology. The relationship between the builders and the Confederate military provides many insights into how the two interacted. Chaffin's fi-

nal chapters examining the raising and preservation of the *H. L. Hunley* have a great deal of material that public historians—as well as scholars interested in Civil War memory and death—would find interesting as well. Chaffin's bibliography contains a wealth of primary and secondary sources, but, as mentioned before, the endnotes do not allow the historian to fully trace his evidence. These problems aside, Chaffin's *H. L. Hunley* is a very valuable contribution to the growing naval literature of the Civil War.

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Citation: Charles Wexler. Review of Chaffin, Tom, *The H. L. Hunley: The Secret Hope of the Confederacy*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. September, 2010.

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