

Picket, USS ^[1]

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Picket, USS

by Paul Branch, 2006

The USS *Picket* was a small Union gunboat ^[2] that fought during the Civil War ^[3] in the sounds and rivers of North Carolina until September 1862, when it was sunk in the Tar River at Washington, N.C. ^[4] The Union had purchased this civilian vessel for use in an expedition along the coast of North Carolina led by Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside. The exact origin of the *Picket* was obscured by the existence of a larger, side-wheel steamer of the same name that also served during the war. The two vessels are sometimes confused in existing records.

The smaller *Picket* was one of seven armed propellers accompanying the Burnside expedition ^[5] when it sailed for North Carolina in January 1862. The ships were collected in haste and formed a motley fleet that inspired skepticism among Burnside's officers and men as to their seaworthiness. Therefore, to demonstrate his own confidence in the vessels, Burnside chose the *Picket* (the smallest ship in the fleet) as his flagship for the voyage. After the Burnside expedition began operations in North Carolina waters, the *Picket*, with its shallow draft, proved to be particularly valuable for covering the landing of Union troops at Roanoke Island ^[6], New Bern, and Fort Macon ^[7].

On the morning of 6 Sept. 1862, as the *Picket* lay with the navy gunboat *Louisiana* in the Tar River at Washington, N.C., a Confederate force made a surprise attack on the town. Both gunboats went into action to shell the advancing Confederates, but the *Picket* was able to fire only one gun before it exploded and sank ^[8] in the river, killing its captain, Sylvester D. Nicoll, along with 18 crewmen and leaving 6 others wounded.



Engraving labeled "The Burnside Expedition - Landing of the national troops on Roanoke Island, under cover of the Union gunboats Delaware and Picket." Image from [Archive.org](#). ^[9]

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"The Burnside Expedition - Landing of the national troops on Roanoke Island, under cover of the Union gunboats Delaware and Picket." *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. March 8, 1862. p. 245. <https://archive.org/stream/franklesliesilluv1314lesl#page/n239/mode/2up> ^[9] (accessed October 11, 2012).

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