The USS *Picket* was a small Union gunboat that fought during the Civil War in the sounds and rivers of North Carolina until September 1862, when it was sunk in the Tar River at Washington, N.C. 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 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, New Bern, and Fort Macon.

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 in the river, killing its captain, Sylvester D. Nicoll, along with 18 crewmen and leaving 6 others wounded.

**References:**


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