



AFFAIR OF THE WATER WITCH

HOW A STEAM-POWERED GUNBOAT WOULD CAUSE A NEAR WAR WITH PARAGUAY
AND GO ON TO FIGHT FOR BOTH SIDES DURING AMERICA'S CIVIL WAR

BY ROBERT THOMPSON

The United States Navy's *Water Witch* was a sidewheel steam gunboat constructed at the Washington Navy Yard and commissioned in 1853 under the command of Lt. Thomas Jefferson Page. With a crew of about 64 officers and men, she was initially armed with one 32-pounder howitzer, but had two more fitted at a later date. *Water Witch* was fitted with an interesting experimental propulsion system called the "Morgan eccentric feathering paddle wheels" in which the paddles

rotated so as to always be perpendicular to the water surface to increase efficiency. The ship departed Norfolk on 8 February 1853 for an extended deployment to conduct surveys along the coasts and rivers of Argentina, Uruguay, and Paraguay, for which her shallow draft of just 7-feet 10-inches was ideally suited. In 1852, the dictator of Argentina had been overthrown and his successor opened the nation's rivers to commerce from all nations. The Navy decided this would be a good opportunity to conduct the first



Lieutenant Thomas Jefferson Page in 1859.

Ships of the Paraguay Squadron underway in what nearly turned into a disastrous mission for the US Navy. *Water Witch* is next to the flagship USS *Sabine*. This illustration was published in *Harper's Weekly* for 26 October 1858.