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## Steam Coffin: Captain Moses Rogers and the Steamship Savannah Break the Barrier

John B. Hattendorf

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while they attempted to reach the U.S. beachhead with powerful surface forces approaching through the San Bernardino and Surigao Straits. The majority of power would be contained in Admiral Takeo Kurita's Central Force, which would force the San Bernardino Strait and approach the U.S. transports from the east. Two smaller but still potentially deadly forces, commanded by Admirals Shoji Nishimura and Kiyohide Shima, would attempt the Surigao Strait and attack the Americans from the south. Kurita's force came closer to victory, but, due in part to a gallant defense by inferior U.S. forces, and with the counsel of his own forces, Kurita turned back on the doorstep of success. In contrast, Nishimura never had a chance. Admiral Jesse B. Oldendorf turned the Surigao Strait into a killing sack. As Nishimura drove deeper into the strait, his forces were treated to wave after wave of attacks that ended in a crescendo of firepower, as Oldendorf's main battle line put an end to the Japanese southern attack.

Rather than write only about the big picture, Tully puts Surigao Strait under a microscope. Drawing extensively from little (or never) -accessed Japanese records, he painstakingly pulls together his account of the battle. Each Japanese ship is discussed in detail, each commanding officer is subjected to scrutiny, and communications are reviewed. The result is impressive: what emerges is a convincing and incredibly detailed account of this segment of the battle.

In re-creating the battle, Tully takes on several "mysteries" that have endured since 1944. The first is the fate of the Japanese battleship *Fuso*. It is known that the ship was destroyed, but the exact circumstances of its sinking have

been a matter of conjecture. The next mystery is the sinking of the Japanese destroyer *Michishiro*. In this instance there is uncertainty regarding the claim that USS *Hutchins* (DD 476) sank it. Finally, Tully seeks to discover the exact manner in which the Japanese destroyer *Yamashiro* was sunk. By Tully's own admission, these issues are military minutiae, but they are important to him. He obviously wants to know where U.S. torpedoes struck the doomed *Yamashiro* and what happened to *Fuso*.

Tully's writing style, for the most part, is pleasant, analytical, and temperate, although from time to time the neutral tone of the distant observer shifts to a more impassioned vernacular, particularly when Tully is arguing a position or describing some especially dramatic moment. However, the result is not problematic. It is Tully's personal passion for the subject that elevates this book above many naval histories, along with his eagerness to present the Japanese point of view. This is a perspective that with few exceptions is lacking in Western accounts.

RICHARD NORTON  
*Naval War College*



Busch, John Laurence. *Steam Coffin: Captain Moses Rogers and the Steamship Savannah Break the Barrier*. New Canaan, Conn.: Hodos Historia, 2010. 726pp. \$35

One of the great events in American, and indeed world, maritime history occurred in the summer of 1819, when the American steamship *Savannah*, commanded by Captain Moses Rogers, became the first steam-powered vessel to cross the Atlantic Ocean. Its pioneer

voyage from Savannah, Georgia, to Liverpool, England, in May and June 1819 is sometimes mentioned as an epoch-making event that marked the coming age of the steamship. While the ship was remembered 140 years later, when in 1959 its name was given to the first American nuclear-powered merchant vessel, the context and the details of the pioneer voyage were overlooked. The 1819 voyage was quickly dismissed as a commercial failure in which steam power was used for only a fraction of the time; the ship itself was forgotten as a short-lived phenomenon after its shipwreck on Long Island in 1821.

Certainly, *Savannah* was far ahead of its time, as it would take another twenty years for steamships to begin regular transatlantic passages and thirty years before there was another American steamship to carry the flag across the Atlantic. Despite all the innovation that the 1819 voyage of *Savannah* represents, however, there is remarkably little historical investigation of it. *Savannah's* captain, Moses Rogers, has been almost completely overlooked as an innovator. Up until the appearance of this fine work, Frank O. Braynard's 1963 study *S.S. Savannah the Elegant Steam Ship* was the only major work on the subject.

For the Connecticut-based independent historian John Laurence Busch, the tale of Captain Rogers and his steamship *Savannah* is clearly a passionate labor of love. With exemplary research, Busch followed an archival trail that led to twenty-two historical manuscript depositories in the United States, ranging from Portland, Maine, to Savannah, and which included ten massive record groups in the National Archives.

Moreover, following the wake of the ship, Busch's research carried him to archives in Denmark, Russia, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. Equally impressive is his productive research in nearly 150 contemporary newspapers that matches his archival range and extends beyond to India, Ireland, and Norway. All of this, Busch has marshaled into a beautifully written and engaging narrative that places his solidly based factual details within a broad context. It is a complex story, but one that is clearly presented.

The book opens with an evocative description of Moses Rogers's involvement in the introduction of the first steam passenger service between Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia. The author then traces back to the early rise of steam propulsion in the United States and Moses Rogers's story from his birth in New London, Connecticut, through his career as a pioneer steamboat captain on the Hudson River, then as steamship designer and founder of the Savannah Steamship Company. In detailing *Savannah's* pioneer transatlantic voyage, Busch effectively covers the entire range of issues from finances to the many different characters in the ship's company. Not stopping there, he explores the public reception and professional interest in the ship's further onward passages to Denmark, Sweden, and Russia, including its return home across the Atlantic. In conclusion, Busch reflects that while the achievements of Rogers and *Savannah* have sometimes been lost to collective memory, they broke a psychological barrier that had hindered such technological innovation up to that point.

Produced by a heretofore-unknown publisher, *Steam Coffin* is enhanced by more than a dozen well-drawn maps, as well as more than forty illustrations. Seventy-one pages of endnotes document Busch's prodigious research, but they are not easy to use, as they are

linked to the text by quoted phrases rather than numbered positions. Nevertheless, John Laurence Busch has made a major contribution to American maritime history with this fine book.

JOHN B. HATTENDORF  
*Naval War College*