



**US Army Corps
of Engineers**®
Galveston District

News Release

2000 Fort Point Rd
Galveston, Texas 77550
(409) 766-3004
swgpao@usace.army.mil

Realse No. 120903
Dec. 7, 2009

Army Corps of Engineers pulls a piece of history from the Texas City Channel
by Courtney Brodbeck, Galveston District Public Affairs

Beneath the murky surface of the waters in the Texas City Channel, where sunlight can no longer permeate, lie the remains of the USS Westfield. Currently, the Army Corps of Engineers Galveston District is orchestrating an archaeological recovery of the artifacts from the Civil War-era shipwreck, which included the removal of a Dahlgren cannon Nov. 22.

This recovery is part of a larger effort to deepen the Texas City Ship Channel. The \$71 million project will deepen nearly seven miles of the channel from 40 feet to 45 feet. By adding 5 feet, it will allow larger vessels to navigate the channel to provide products to the various industries, Sharon Tirpak, U.S. Army Corps of Engineer project manager for the Texas City Channel, said.

“The deepening will help the industries be more efficient with bringing in more crude to refine into gasoline and other petrochemical products,” she said.

The scattered remnants of the USS Westfield were rediscovered in 2005 by archaeologists from PBS&J, a company with expertise in engineering, environmental science, architecture, planning, and construction, that is working for the Army Corps of Engineers. The process of recovering the rusted remains of an historical day began on Nov. 18 and is expected to continue through mid-December, according to Janelle Stokes, District regional environmental specialist.

The USS Westfield, an 822-ton side-wheel inshore gunboat, was built in 1861 in New York City as a civilian ferryboat. The boat was purchased by the Navy in November 1861 and placed in commission in January 1862. Sent to the Gulf of Mexico in February, Westfield took an active part in the April campaign to open the lower Mississippi River and capture New Orleans. During the following three months, the gunboat supported the mortar schooner flotilla in operations up the river toward Vicksburg.

Sent to join the blockading force off Texas later in the summer of 1862, Westfield participated in the capture of Galveston in early October. The Westfield thereafter operated in that area. On Jan. 1, 1863, while serving as flagship of the Union naval forces off Galveston, the USS Westfield ran aground and was threatened by a Confederate attack. To prevent capture, the ship’s captain, William Renshaw, ordered the powerfully armed ship destroyed. Renshaw poured turpentine over the deck and laid a fuse trail from the powder magazine, but when he lit the fuse, he and 13 of his crew were killed by a premature explosion. It would not be until 146 years later that the hidden treasures of the past would be discovered.

All of the artifacts from the site are the property of the Navy, which retains permanent ownership of all sunken naval ships and aircraft.



A 10,000-pound Dahlgren cannon was brought to the surface Nov. 22. from the Texas City Channel. The cannon is from the USS Westfield, a gunboat blown up by its crew during the Battle of Galveston in 1863.

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The Army Corps of Engineers is working with the Naval History and Heritage Command and the Texas Historical Commission to ensure that the recovery efforts meet all relevant archaeological regulations and standards.

The Army Corps of Engineers is funding the heavy lifting required for the project through an interagency agreement with the Navy Supervisor of Salvage. A civilian Navy subcontractor, Donjon Marine, is providing the equipment and personnel required to recover the artifacts from the seafloor.

All artifacts will be transported to the Center for Maritime Archaeology and Conservation at Texas A&M University in College Station for stabilization, assessment and conservation. The primary goals of the conservation project are to preserve the artifacts to the greatest degree possible. Concretions will be removed through electrolysis and manual cleaning. Metal and organic artifacts will go through a variety of chemical and electrolytic processes to stabilize and preserve the artifacts.

Conservation is expected to take 2-3 years. After conservation is complete these pieces of history will be shared with the public and be placed in museums under long-term loan agreements with the Navy.