

General Putnam, 1865

A former name retained.

Tender History:

General Putnam began life as the *William G. Putnam*—a wooden-hulled tug built in 1857 at Brooklyn—was purchased by the Navy on 24 July 1861 at New York City and renamed *General Putnam* soon thereafter.

On 13 September 1861, with Acting Master William J. Hotchkiss in command, *General Putnam* departed New York, bound for Washington, D.C., and arrived at the navy yard there three days later. On the night of the 17th, she headed down river to join the Potomac Flotilla but the next day was ordered on down the Chesapeake Bay and joined the Atlantic Blockading Squadron at Old Point Comfort, Va., on 23 September. Within a few days, the tug was operating off the North Carolina coast where her initial duty was to reconnoiter Okracoke Inlet. She also patrolled off Hatteras Inlet and assisted in the sinking of three stone-laden schooners in an attempt to help to tighten the blockade by impeding navigation and obstructing the inlets in the area. On 29 October 1861, the day on which the Atlantic Squadron was divided into the North and South commands, *General Putnam* was allocated to the newly established North Atlantic Blockading Squadron; but she continued to operate primarily in the waters of North Carolina.

In February 1862, *General Putnam* took part in the expedition which captured Roanoke Island, N.C. On the 7th, at the beginning of the action, *Ceres* and *General Putnam* steamed a mile or so ahead of the main force to reconnoiter and discovered 15 steamers and 10 sailing vessels close inshore between Pork and Weir Points, above the marshes of Croatan Sound. Soon *General Putnam*, fired upon a Confederate shore battery in an engagement that lasted all afternoon. The next morning, she resumed firing in company with *Underwood* and other vessels as they started to pass a cluster of vessels which had been sunk as obstructions. *General Putnam* emerged unscathed from nearly continuous shelling by the enemy guns. Meanwhile, between 1500 and 2400 that day, some 10,000 troops landed on Roanoke Island.

On the 10th, after sister tug *Ceres* ran aground off Elizabeth City, *General Putnam* assisted her to pull free. In addition to helping *Ceres*, *General Putnam* attempted to put out a fire which was raging in a Confederate armed schooner nearby. The blaze proved to be beyond control, but the tug did manage to pick up one man from the water as he swam from the burning ship. In the operation, Union warships captured eight Confederate vessels; opened the obstructed passage to Albemarle Sound; and raised the stars and stripes over Pork Point battery.

Over the ensuing days, *General Putnam*—sometimes referred to in dispatches as simply *Putnam* and sometimes by her former name, *William G. Putnam*—conducted daily reconnaissance in Currituck Sound and missions in the Chesapeake Canal. For the next six months, *General Putnam* carried detachments of Army troops and equipment sent to search out and destroy rebel boats used to carry supplies. While stationed at Plymouth or New Berne, the ship operated in the Pasquotank and Chowan Rivers and the creeks of Dingaderry, Rochahock, and Seems.

In October, *Putnam*, needing repairs, sailed for Hampton Roads and arrived there on 22 October with intelligence data for Rear Admiral S. P. Lee. On 6 November, the screw steam gunboat received orders to remain in Virginia waters and to maintain a "strict and vigorous" blockade of the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay between Fortress Monroe and the south side of the Piankatank River. Proceeding to Yorktown, Va., *Putnam* joined a small flotilla there operating with the Army in an attempt to take Mathews Court House up the East River. Ordered to capture or destroy all Confederate vessels that could be used to run the Union blockade, *Putnam* operated in that capacity until the campaign against Mathews Court House had been successfully accomplished by 23 November,

Subsequently serving as guard vessel in the York River and off neighboring coasts, she cooperated with the Army in landing troops on expeditions up to West Point and also patrolled to check for violations

of the blockade until 15 January 1863. By that time, her boilers had become useless, and she was unable to move, having no steam. She nevertheless remained on active service in those waters, stationed so as to enfilade Gloucester Point, until she was towed to Baltimore to receive a new boiler and rifle screening. She returned to her station in June 1863 and resumed duty helping to blockade Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries.

On 11 August, *General Putnam*, *Commodore Jones*, and *Commodore Morris* were operating in the Piankatank River on blockade duties when they sighted a schooner, a canoe, and a launch that had run the blockade. Men from the steamers manned two cutters, two boats, and a gig to give chase but soon encountered heavy sniper fire from Confederate soldiers and guerrillas in the woods. After *Putnam's* commanding officer, Acting Master Hotchkiss, had been slain in the engagement, the boats then withdrew. Upon Hotchkiss' death, Acting Master Lewis assumed command of *General Putnam*; and the ship shelled the woods for about four miles as she dropped down river.

Subsequently towed to Yorktown, *General Putnam* was stationed at the mouth of Queen's Creek, where she formed an indispensable part of the defense of Yorktown while Major General Foster erected a citadel there. By that time, *General Putnam*—with an "overweight boiler"—had become less useful for blockade duty; but she found profitable employment dragging for torpedoes near Yorktown. Acting Master H. H. Savage took command of *General Putnam* off Newport News on 16 November 1863; and the tug soon proceeded up Nansemond River, where she later captured a large runner and destroyed a canoe used by the Confederate forces in the area for running mail across the river. *General Putnam* remained on picket duty off the mouth of the Nansemond River to intercept blockade runners until 15 December, when she returned to Newport News.

In February and March of 1864, she patrolled the Back and Poquosin Rivers and joined an expedition on 8 March to head up the Mattaponi River, convoying Army transports. She covered the landing of General Kilpatrick's troops at Sheppard's Landing, two miles above West Point, before proceeding to the mouth of the Rappahannock and ascending that river to a point five miles below Urbana. On 13 March, *General Putnam* returned to Yorktown and later resumed her patrols on the Back and Poquosin Rivers. From mid-April 1864, *General Putnam* operated in joint Army-Navy operations in the James and Nansemond Rivers, covering the landings of troops and, upon occasion, providing covering fire. She moved ahead of Army transports, dragging for torpedoes from Harrison's Bar to one mile above Bermuda Hundred, clearing a channel for the landing of troops at City Point and at Bermuda Hundred. She then operated with General Graham's gunboats, supporting the occupation of Fort Powhatan and Wilson's Wharf.

General Putnam then accompanied Army gunboats up the Appomattox River and anchored at Gilliam's Bar. She then reconnoitered the river below the bar and, by order of General Graham, towed the gunboat *Chamberlain* down into the channel. Informed that Confederate pickets had advanced, in force, as far as Gilliam's Bar, the Union flotilla retreated on 11 May to Point of Rocks and shelled the nearby woods. During the action, *General Putnam* discovered the Confederate battery at Fort Clifton, opened fire on the enemy guns, and soon obtained the range. The battery replied, but a shell from *General Putnam's* 24-pound howitzer exploded in the embrasure of their rifled gun, causing the Confederate gunners to break and run. After that engagement, the Union steamer returned down river, only to engage in further combat operations on the Appomattox River almost daily into June, remaining on guard against surprise attacks. Union forces repeated the attack upon Fort Clifton on 9 and 10 June and silenced the enemy battery there.

On 28 July 1864, *General Putnam* was reassigned to the James River and, for the remainder of her naval service, *General Putnam* operated alternately in the James and Appomattox Rivers, and also in Mobjack Bay, until March of 1865 when she returned to York-town. Detached from the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron on 18 March 1865, she patrolled the Rappahannock and St. Mary's Rivers. After the collapse of the Confederacy in April, the tug was ordered to the Washington Navy Yard with 23 other vessels from her division. *General Putnam* arrived there on 14 May and was decommissioned on 2 June 1865.

She was subsequently bought at auction by the Treasury Department for use by the Lighthouse Board. As the tender *General Putnam*, she was assigned to the 3rd Lighthouse District. She was rammed and sunk after being assigned to the 2nd Lighthouse District. She was then raised and repaired at a

cost of \$4,738 at Wilmington, Delaware. The vessel *Martha Washington* was chartered to cover the *General Putnam's* area of responsibility while she was being repaired. She was then assigned to the 3rd Lighthouse District. Her name was shortened to simply *Putnam* in September of 1869. She was rebuilt and lengthened to 135 feet in 1877. She was transferred back to the 2nd Lighthouse District. She was overhauled in New York in August 1880, and was rebuilt yet again in 1889 for \$18,500. In March of 1891 she was transferred to the 7th Lighthouse District and was based out of Key West, Florida. She was placed out of service in 1891 and was sold in 1893 for \$1,825. She then entered the merchant service as the SS *Putnam*, operating until 1896.

Sources:

Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships.

Douglas Peterson. *United States Lighthouse Service Tenders, 1840-1939.* Annapolis: Eastwind Publishing, 2000.
