

Raphael Semmes

Raphael Semmes is the only American ever to hold the ranks of a Navy rear admiral and an Army brigadier general simultaneously. He was born in Charles County, Maryland, on September 27, 1809. He was the fourth child of Richard and Catherine (Middleton) Semmes, but was raised by his uncle, Raphael Semmes, when he lost his parents at an early age. Another uncle, Benedict Semmes, secured an appointment for him as a midshipman in the U.S. Navy in 1826. He also studied law while he trained as a naval officer. He was admitted to the Maryland bar in 1834. Shore duty in Cincinnati, Ohio, allowed him to begin a practice in law. While in Cincinnati he married Anne Elizabeth Spencer in 1837, the same year he was commissioned a Lieutenant. Raphael and Ann Elizabeth would have six children.

During the Mexican War (1846-1848), Semmes commanded the USS *Somers*, a brig used to blockade the port of Veracruz. A storm caused the *Somers* to founder and 39 crewmembers lost their lives. A court of inquiry praised Semmes for the way he handled the ship. Semmes accompanied General Winfield Scott as his army fought its way to Mexico City.

After the war Semmes settled in Mobile, Alabama, which he considered his home for the remainder of his life. Again he practiced law in addition to his naval duties and wrote a book, *Service Afloat and Ashore During the Mexican War* which was published in 1851. He was promoted to commander in 1855 and assigned to the Lighthouse Service as an inspector in Washington, DC. His support of states' rights and antipathy for a Republican president led to his resigning his commission from the Navy on February 15, 1861. Alabama had voted to secede from the Union a month prior.

Before the war began, President Jefferson Davis sent him north to purchase military supplies for the Confederacy. He returned to find he had been commissioned a commander in the Confederate Navy. He convinced the Secretary of the Confederate Navy, Stephen Mallory, to convert a packet steamer into a commerce destroyer renamed the CSS *Sumter*. The *Sumter* was inadequate for long periods at sea but managed to capture 18 U.S. merchant ships before Semmes had to abandon her. Semmes was promoted to Captain and ordered to England to take possession of a new ship, the CSS *Alabama*.



CSS Alabama

For the next two years he sailed the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and captured 64 enemy vessels. He burned or released 63 of them and one was converted into a war vessel, the CSS *Tuscaloosa*. On January 1, 1863, he sank the USS *Hatteras* off the Texas coast. He became known to his men as "Old Beeswax" from his habit of pacing the quarterdeck while twisting his waxed moustache.

In June of 1864, Semmes sailed the Alabama to Cherbourg, France, for badly needed repairs. The arrival there of the USS *Kearsarge* meant that he had to flee or fight. Thinking the ships to be fairly evenly matched, he decided to fight. Unfortunately, his gunpowder had deteriorated, the *Kearsarge* had superior guns and marksmanship and the *Alabama* was sunk on June 19, after an hour of battle. Semmes and several others were rescued by an English yacht and taken to England where he was feted by admirers.



"Old Beeswax" returned to the Confederacy in December of 1864, was promoted to rear admiral in February of 1865, and given command of a James River squadron. When the fall of Richmond, Virginia, the Confederate Capitol, became obvious, he destroyed his boats on April 2 and brought his cadets to Danbury, Virginia. Jefferson Davis then designated him as a brigadier general and he and his cadets escorted Davis as he fled south. He was with General Joseph E. Johnston when Johnston surrendered on April 2, 1865, in North Carolina. Semmes was paroled with the rest of the

army, but was later arrested on charges of treason, piracy, and ill-treatment of prisoners. After three months of imprisonment, without a trial, in the New York City Navy Yard the charges were found to be groundless and he was released.

He returned to Mobile, Alabama, and was elected probate judge in May of 1866 and U.S. authorities refused to allow him to take office. He tried his hand at teaching at Louisiana State Seminary and as editor of the Memphis Daily Bulletin. He returned to Mobile and practiced law, gave lectures and wrote another book, *Memoirs of Service Afloat During the War Between the States*.

He died in Mobile, Alabama on August 30, 1877, after contracting food poisoning and was buried, with his wife, in the city's Catholic Cemetery.

