

## Episode 131: Union Navy attacks Charleston

<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>

As the weather began to warm in the spring of 1863, Abraham Lincoln continued to look in vain for some good news from the battlefields. After being pushed back from Richmond in the previous summer, his Army of the Potomac had followed a bloody draw at Antietam with a crushing defeat in December at Fredericksburg. Ulysses Grant was having little luck taking the Confederate bastion at Vicksburg, Mississippi. Lincoln pressed his commanders for a symbolic victory to reinvigorate the fatigued North.

In this tense political climate, Union Rear Admiral Samuel Francis Du Pont advocated for a combined naval and army assault on Charleston, South Carolina. Although Charleston was strategically no more important than several other blockaded ports in the South, the city and Fort Sumter remained a defiant symbol of the insurrection's beginnings. For this reason in particular, Du Pont believed capturing the city would strike a dagger at the heart of the rebellion.

Union Army head Henry Halleck did not care much for Du Pont's plan and would commit only a small number of land forces and only then to mop up whatever victory Du Pont's ships could achieve. Despite this lack of support, Du Pont pressed on with the plan. At his command would be nine ironclad ships from the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron. Seven of these were of the Passaic class of ironclads, improved versions of the original *U.S.S. Monitor*. Also part of the squadron was the *U.S.S. New Ironsides*, a much larger ironclad and the interesting new ship *Keokuk*. The *Keokuk* had two revolving gun turrets and armor that consisted of alternating iron bars and oak planks, all covered with a sheath of iron.

Opposing the Union squadron was a formidable defense around Charleston. Several rings of batteries, including Fort Sumter, circled and protected the harbor. In addition, numerous mines and obstructions had been placed throughout the harbor except in a narrow shipping lane that could be navigated by blockade runners. Du Pont assembled his fleet on April 5 and sent several smaller boats ahead to mark the navigable channel. The weather turned bad on April 6 and it was until the afternoon of April 7 that it had cleared enough for Du Pont to give the go ahead to begin the assault.

If Lincoln was hoping for good news, it would not come on this day. The *New Ironsides* was unable to maneuver in the strong currents and pulled aside to let the other boats pass. This was a dream come true for the Confederates as the *New Ironsides* anchored directly above a large mine that could be detonated electrically from the shore. To the dismay of those on shore, the circuit did not work and the mine did not explode. The other Union boats were not as fortunate as they were pummeled from Southern batteries on all sides. The Confederates hit the Union fleet over 500 times while the ironclads only returned about 150 shots. After two hours of this one-sided fight, Du Pont had had enough and ordered the ships to retreat out of the harbor. The *Keokuk*, struck 90 times, sunk the next morning. One Union officer and five Confederates had been killed. Fort Sumter, though hit hard, was easily repaired and remained a constant reminder to the Union that Charleston remained under Southern control.

Du Pont concluded correctly that Charleston would not be taken by naval forces alone. Still, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles seemed disgusted by the whole episode and would relieve Du Pont of his command two months later.

