

## **Launching of the U.S.S. *Monitor*** **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

On Thursday, January 30, 1862, the U.S.S. *Monitor*, the U.S. Navy's first ironclad warship, was launched at Greenpoint, Long Island, New York. The ironclad vessel, which appeared oddly constructed and referred to by some as a "cheesebox on a raft," was the revolutionary design of Swedish inventor John Ericsson. Other ships in the bay saluted the *Monitor* as it was launched, accompanied by the cheers of the crowd.

Ericsson had for several decades experimented with steam propulsion and new ship designs. In the 1830s while living in Great Britain he had developed a screw propeller but the British navy had not adopted his design. He received a more receptive audience in the United States, and in the 1840s he had designed the U.S. Navy's first steam frigate, the *Princeton*. Unfortunately while undergoing testing and trials, an experimental cannon aboard the ship had exploded, killing two cabinet members and several other dignitaries. While Ericsson was not responsible for the explosion of the weapon, he was nonetheless tainted by the incident, and his relations with the Navy Department soured.

Upon the outbreak of the Civil War, however, Ericsson's services would again be required. The United States had called for the construction of an ironclad vessel following the secession of Virginia and the capture of the Gosport Navy Yard. During its evacuation by Union forces, the frigate U.S.S. *Merrimack* was partially destroyed, but the Confederates began quickly to salvage its hull and machinery, replacing the superstructure with sloping iron armor. The Union recognized the need for an ironclad warship to counter the Confederate vessel, renamed the *Virginia*, and solicited designs. Ericsson's plan for a "floating battery" was first rejected, but

later accepted partly upon the recommendation of President Lincoln, who stated of its design:

“All I have to say is what the girl said when she stuck her foot in the stocking. It strikes me there’s something in it.”

Operating under extremely short time constraints, Ericsson supervised construction of the *Monitor* in just over 100 days. The ship was 172 feet long, with a beam 41 feet wide, drawing a draft just over 10 feet, and displacing just under 1000 tons. It was protected by iron plating, and had an unusual appearance with an armored deck that scarcely broke the waterline. The pilothouse, the 10-foot high turret, and some fittings and a removable smokestack were the only parts on the deck that showed above the waterline. The pilothouse was the most vulnerable point on the *Monitor*, while the turret was protected with nine 1-inch thick iron plates.

Ericsson’s innovations included the ship’s steam propulsion utilizing his fan-like marine screw propeller and, most dramatically, its steam-powered armored gun turret that rotated 360 degrees. Downfalls of the technology included the low freeboard, which limited its seaworthiness, the position of the pilothouse which led to it being targeted by enemy fire, and the heavy turret that made it more vulnerable to capsizing.

Following its construction, the *Monitor* was fitted with two 11-inch Dahlgren cannon and towed to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, where it was commissioned on February 25. After hurried preparations to ready it for sea, the ship left Brooklyn on March 6, en route for Hampton Roads, from which word had reached the Navy Department that the C.S.S. *Virginia* was nearing completion. The ship arrived too late to prevent the *Virginia* from sinking or damaging several Union ships on March 8, but the stage was set for the first battle between ironclad warships the following day.