

Confederate Naval Victory in Hampton Roads on March 8, 1862

Why did the battle on March 8th prove that wooden warships were obsolete?

Lauren Bridewell - Warhill High School

When most people think of the first appearance of the Ironclads in the American Civil War, they think of the battle between the C.S.S. *Virginia* (Merrimack) and the U.S.S. *Monitor* (cheesebox on a raft) on March 9, 1862. This historic action was considered by most a draw.¹ However, many individuals fail to recognize the important use of the ironclad C.S.S. *Virginia* against the Union wooden fleet in Hampton Roads on March 8, 1862.

What led up to the March 8, 1862 engagement? On April 17th, 1861, Virginia seceded from the Union following the lead of her sister southern states. The south needed to have links with Europe for trade of cotton which was crucial to the independence of the southern states. Without a means to defend against the Union blockade, the Confederacy appeared doomed to lose its link to European manufactured goods.² Confederate Secretary of the Navy, Stephen R. Mallory, decided that the best way to use the limited resources available to the Confederate Navy was the creation of a fleet of ironclad warships.³

The C.S.S. *Virginia* did not appear out of thin air.⁴ This specific ship began life as the U.S.S. *Merrimack* when its keel was laid on September 23rd, 1854, at Charleston Navy Yard.⁵ She was commissioned in Boston, Massachusetts, on February 20th, 1856. She visited British ports and also saw service in the Pacific during the first 4 years of service. When she finished her Pacific service, she was ordered to Gosport Navy Yard in Portsmouth, Virginia, and arrived February 16th, 1860.⁶

Gosport Navy Yard was one of the largest navy yards in the United States. The Gosport Navy Yard was commanded by Commodore Charles Stewart McCauley and by early 1861, Gosport was in “disorder and confusion” primarily due to the lack of leadership of McCauley. Union Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, ordered McCauley to guard and protect the yard. Unable to do so, the Union defenders attempted to destroy the yard and sink several ships, including the *Merrimack*, to prevent capture by the Confederates on April 20th, 1861. The next day, the Confederates gained one of the finest ship yards in America.⁷

After mature consideration, the Confederate authorities decided to construct a powerful ironclad warship for the protection of Norfolk harbor and the mouth of the James River.⁸ On May 30th, 1861, the *Merrimack* was raised and moved to Gosport’s dry dock.⁹ At the direction of Secretary Mallory, work was begun to convert the wooden vessel into an ironclad.¹⁰

The roof of the *Virginia* was 170 feet long, built at an angle of 45 degrees, and constructed of pine and oak with overlapping two inch iron plates, making the armament four inches thick. Her bow was armed below with a cast-iron prow about six feet long, to be used as a ram. Her ordnance consisted of ten guns: two seven-inch steel banded Brooke rifles, mounted as pivot guns at the bow and stern; two six-inch rifles of the same pattern, and six nine-inch Dahlgren smooth-bore guns.¹¹ She was launched, commissioned and christened as the C.S.S. *Virginia* on February 17th, 1862.¹²

Mallory appointed Franklin Buchanan as the captain of the C.S.S. *Virginia*.¹³ On February 24th, 1862, Buchanan was ordered to get the *Virginia* ready for combat. His executive officer was Lieutenant Catesby Jones, who was appointed to that position in 1861.¹⁴

On March 8th, as the CSS *Virginia* and her sister ships approached the Union fleet, they were decided *underdogs* based on the cannon count of the two groups:

Confederate:

CSS <i>Virginia</i>	10 cannon
CSS <i>Patrick Henry</i>	10 cannon
CSS <i>Jamestown</i>	2 cannon
CSS <i>Teaser</i>	1 cannon
CSS <i>Raleigh</i>	2 cannon
CSS <i>Beaufort</i>	1 cannon
Total cannon count	26 ¹⁵

Union:

USS <i>Congress</i>	50 cannon
USS <i>Cumberland</i>	24 cannon
USS <i>Minnesota</i>	43 cannon
USS <i>Roanoke</i>	40 cannon
USS <i>St. Lawrence</i>	50 cannon ¹⁶
Total cannon count	202

In addition, the Union forces had the benefit of a variety of shore batteries to further increase their numerical superiority.

Despite the obvious advantage the *Virginia* had with its iron coating, it did have some shortcomings. Lieutenant John Taylor Woods recalls, “From the start, the *Virginia* was slow, not over five knots; she steered so badly that, with her great length, it took from thirty to forty minutes to turn. She drew twenty-two feet which was hard to control in the narrow channel of Hampton Roads.”¹⁷

Around 12 o’clock p.m. on March 8th, 1862, the *Virginia* cast loose from the Navy Yard and steamed down from Portsmouth, passing down the Elizabeth River and by Craney Island. Buchanan advised his supporting gunboats, CSS *Raleigh* and *Beaufort*, that he would hoist the “Sink before

Surrender” signal should the *Virginia*’s initial attack against the Union fleet turn against the Confederates.¹⁸ Lieutenant E.V. White, junior engineering officer of the CSS *Virginia*, recalled Commodore Buchanan telling the crew not to mistrust him; that he intended to do his duty, and expected the same from all on board.¹⁹

The Union observed the Confederates coming down the Elizabeth River around 12:45 p.m. and became concerned knowing they were not ready for battle. Clothing and laundry was hanging off multiple Union vessels as the *Virginia* came closer and closer to her targets. A Union officer announced, “I believe that thing is a-comin’ down at last.”²⁰ When the Union saw the Confederates, they began to start the engines and smoke could be seen from the stacks of the ships.

It took the *Virginia* over an hour to steam across the Hampton Roads. Once within range, Union ships began shelling the Ironclad but caused no damage. Lieutenant Thomas O. Selfridge, of the *Cumberland*, recalled, “The shot bounced off like pebble stones and had no effect on her.”²¹ At 2:20 p.m., the Confederates opened fire at the Union ships. The *Virginia*’s first shot hit the *Cumberland* at the starboard rail, scattering splinters across the deck and tumbling multiple marines.²²

The *Virginia* now came abreast of the *Congress*. As the Confederate ironclad passed the helpless frigate, she unleashed four broadside guns and the effect was devastating. The combination of the hot shot and explosive shells were too much for the *Congress*. The frigate was critically damaged by the *Virginia*; however, Buchanan did not pause to finish off his prey.²³

The ironclad continued toward the *Cumberland* like a superhuman monster. The *Cumberland* fired against the oncoming ship, but her shot bounced off, having virtually no effect. Like a half-submerged crocodile, the *Virginia* broke through the anti-torpedo obstructions surrounding the *Cumberland* and rammed the sloop on her starboard side.²⁴ According to Lieutenant John Taylor Wood, it was “wide enough to drive in a horse and cart.”²⁵ Just before the Confederates rammed the

Cumberland, Buchanan ordered the ironclad's engines to be reversed. For the next half hour, the Confederates and the Union exchanged cannon fire as the *Virginia* tried to pull her ram out of the *Cumberland*. The *Cumberland* did do some damage to the *Virginia*: striking the bow-port, destroying one gun, killing and injuring several sailors, riddling the smokestack which caused the gun deck to be filled with smoke, and the damage to the smokestack lowered her speed. The ironclad's sloped slides, coated with grease, helped deflect the shells from the opposing cannons.²⁶

When the *Virginia*'s ram broke off, she backed away and the *Cumberland* began to rapidly sink. Around 3:35 p.m., Lieutenant George Morris, the *Cumberland*'s executive officer, gave command to abandon the ship. The *Cumberland*'s masts protruded above the waves, marking where 121 Union sailors perished.²⁷ After destroying the *Cumberland*, Buchanan turned his ironclad towards the USS *Congress*. Just before 4:00 p.m., the ironclad steamed within 200 yards of the *Congress* and began shelling her.²⁸

About 4:20 p.m., the Captain of the *Congress*, Lieutenant Austin Pendergrast, decided to surrender and sent up the white flag. Buchanan immediately ordered his crew to cease fire. Buchanan ordered the CSS *Raleigh* and *Beaufort* to go alongside the frigate to ferry survivors off the ship.²⁹ At this point, Union shore batteries opened fire on the *Virginia*, killing and wounding both Confederate sailors and Union prisoners. Buchanan, wounded in the shelling, turned command over to Catesby Jones and instructed him to set fire to the *Congress*.³⁰ Earlier the U.S.S. *Roanoke* and *St. Lawrence* had both run aground at Fort Monroe while rushing to the aid of the *Cumberland* and *Congress* at Newport News Point.³¹ Only the *Minnesota* had made it up river before she ran aground near the *Congress*. She was still aground and now provided a final tempting target for the *Virginia*.³²

Jones assumed command of the *Virginia* and continued to fire on the *Congress* until she was ablaze. It was after 5 o'clock and the tide was receding. Jones did not want to risk grounding the

Virginia in order to turn to be in a position to fire at the *Minnesota*.³³ The ironclad was leaking at the bow and the pilots wanted Jones to return to deeper water in the Elizabeth River.

As darkness fell on Hampton Roads, the *Virginia* was steaming back to her anchorage. In her wake, the *Cumberland* had sunk, the *Congress* was in flames from stem to stern, and the *Minnesota* was aground. The age of the wooden warship ended on March 8th, 1862, when the *Virginia* attacked and decimated the Union fleet in Hampton Roads.³⁴

The next day, the U.S.S. *Monitor* arrived on the scene a day late. This Union warship came from New York and was an ironclad that was built to take on the *Virginia*. The battle between the *Virginia* and the *Monitor* resulted in a draw. It proved to be an even matter, but the day before, the C.S.S. *Virginia* had destroyed all the wooden ships she engaged. The Union shelling on the *Virginia* had little effect. In a battle between an ironclad and wooden ships, the wooden frigates stood no chance. The battle on the 8th of March, not the 9th of March, determined that the reign of wood was over, that the age of iron had arrived, and a new day in naval history had dawned.³⁵

Footnotes

- ¹ Wertz, Jay, *The Civil War Experience 1861-1865*, New York, 2005, page 41
- ² Quarstein, John V., *C.S.S. Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page vi
- ³ Konstam, Angus, *Hampton Roads 1862 First clash of the Ironclads* Great Britain, 2002, page 7
- ⁴ Quarstein, John V., *A History of the Ironclads*, Charleston, SC, 2006, page 9
- ⁵ Quarstein, John V., *C.S.S. Virginia Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 2
- ⁶ Quarstein, John V., *C.S.S. Virginia Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 5
- ⁷ Quarstein, John V., *C.S.S. Virginia Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 6-18
- ⁸ White, E.V., *The first Ironclad Naval Engagement in the World*, New York, 1906, page 6
- ⁹ Quarstein, John V., *A History of the Ironclads*, Charleston, SC, 2006, page 72
- ¹⁰ Quarstein, John V., *C.S.S. Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 34
- ¹¹ White, E.V., *The First Ironclad Naval Engagement in the World*, New York, 1906, page 6-7
- ¹² Quarstein, John V., *The Monitor Boys*, Charleston, SC, 2011, page 62
- ¹³ Quarstein, John V., *C.S.S. Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 63
- ¹⁴ Quarstein, John V., *Hampton and Newport News in the Civil War*, Lynchburg, VA, 1998, page 85 and 88
- ¹⁵ Scharf, *History of C.S. Navy*, New York, 1887, page 217
- ¹⁶ Konstam, Angus, *Hampton Roads 1862 First clash of the Ironclads*, Great Britain, 2002, page 25
- ¹⁷ Nichols, Roy, *Battle and Leaders of the Civil War-Vol.1*, New York, 1956, page 696
- ¹⁸ Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia: Sink Before Surrender*, Charleston, 2012, page 9
- ¹⁹ White, E.V., *The first Ironclad Naval Engagement in the World*, New York, 1906, page 7
- ²⁰ Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 78
- ²¹ Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 79
- ²² Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 79
- ²³ Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 80
- ²⁴ Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 81
- ²⁵ Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 81
- ²⁶ Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 84
- ²⁷ Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 85
- ²⁸ Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 87
- ²⁹ Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 88
- ³⁰ White, E.V., *The first Ironclad Naval Engagement in the World*, New York, 1906, page 9 and 10
- ³¹ Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 86 and 87
- ³² Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 90
- ³³ Quarstein, John V., *The CSS Virginia- Mistress of Hampton Roads*, Lynchburg, VA, 2000, page 90 and 91
- ³⁴ Trexlor, Harrison A., *The confederate Ironclad*, Dallas, Texas, 1938, page 28
- ³⁵ Trexlor, Harrison A., *The confederate Ironclad*, Dallas, Texas, 1938, page 28