

The Battle of Hampton Roads

Hampton Roads was a peaceful waterway cross-roads prior to the start of the Civil War. The importance of the area, where the James, Nansmond and Elizabeth Rivers flow into the Chesapeake Bay, was instantly realized by both warring parties. The James River provided a direct water route between Richmond and the Chesapeake Bay. The large US naval base at Norfolk was abandoned by the Federals on April 20, 1861 and immediately taken over by the Confederates. This provided them with the potential to build an effective Navy if they could control the Hampton Roads outlet. Meanwhile, the United States knew that if they could control the area, they could lead a combined land and water attack on Richmond and put a quick end to the war.

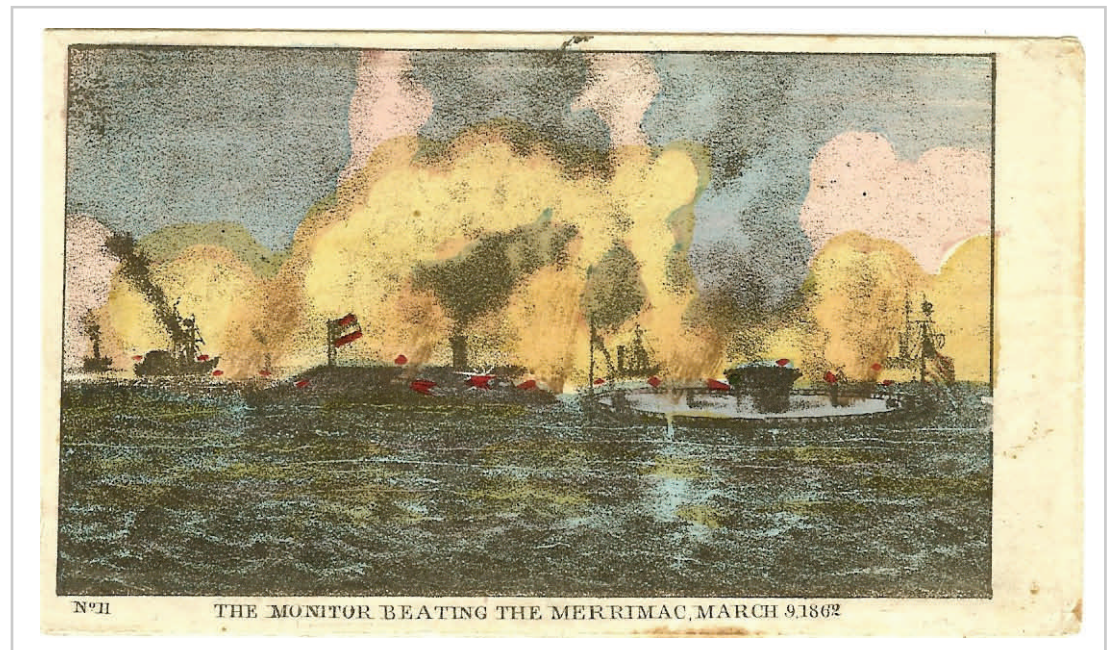
The Union vessels retained control of Chesapeake Bay and Hampton Roads until March 8, 1862, the day the Confederate ironclad *Virginia*, previously the USS frigate *Merrimack*, attacked the Federal fleet. In three hours the CSS *Virginia* destroyed two of the Union's most powerful vessels and planned a return trip the following day to attack the USS *Minnesota*. To counter this, the newly-completed ironclad USS *Monitor* was hastily dispatched to Hampton Roads during the night of March 8 arriving in position to protect the *Minnesota* on March 9th at 2:00 AM. The CSS *Virginia* resumed the attack at 8:45 AM and after a four hour engagement, both ironclads withdrew.



map of Hampton Roads region

Both sides claimed victory. The USS *Monitor* had protected the *Minnesota* and the CSS *Virginia* won a strategic victory as it denied the Union naval use of Hampton Roads and the James River. The Battle of Hampton Roads was certainly the most important naval engagement of the Civil War. Afterwards, the Federals feared to engage the Confederate ironclads without protection from their own ironclads and the Confederates were fearful of losing the *Virginia* which proved to be an effective deterrent against Federal naval aggression up the James River towards Richmond. During the rest of the war the US Navy became overly conservative when approaching areas controlled by Confederate ironclads.

This exhibit traces the building of the Confederate Navy, the conversion of the USS *Merrimack* into the ironclad CSS *Virginia*, both days of the battle (with both Federal and Confederate covers) and the aftermath which included a patriotic response in the North and an attempt in the South to build additional ironclads.



"The Monitor Beating The Merrimac, March 9, 1862"

patriotic design cover by Charles Magnus used on July 12, 1862 from Old Point Comfort

Confederate Forerunners

The Virginia Navy / The North Carolina Navy



Samuel Barron

In April 1861, Barron resigned from the U.S. Navy and accepted a commission as Captain in the Virginia Navy. As chief of the Office of Naval Detail and Equipment, he later assisting in organizing the defense of the Virginia and North Carolina coastlines.

30 May 1861 Winchester, Virginia addressed to Captain Samuel Barron
"Va Navy, Navy Department, Richmond"

CSS Beaufort

The CSS *Beaufort* served as tender to the CSS *Virginia* in the Battle of Hampton Roads.

After participating in the battle of Roanoke Island on February 7-8, 1862, and Elizabeth City two days later, she escaped via the Dismal Swamp canal to Norfolk.

Noah Spruill

Spruill served as Commissary General for the CSS *Beaufort* of the North Carolina mosquito fleet. He was later assigned to the CSS *Chicora*.



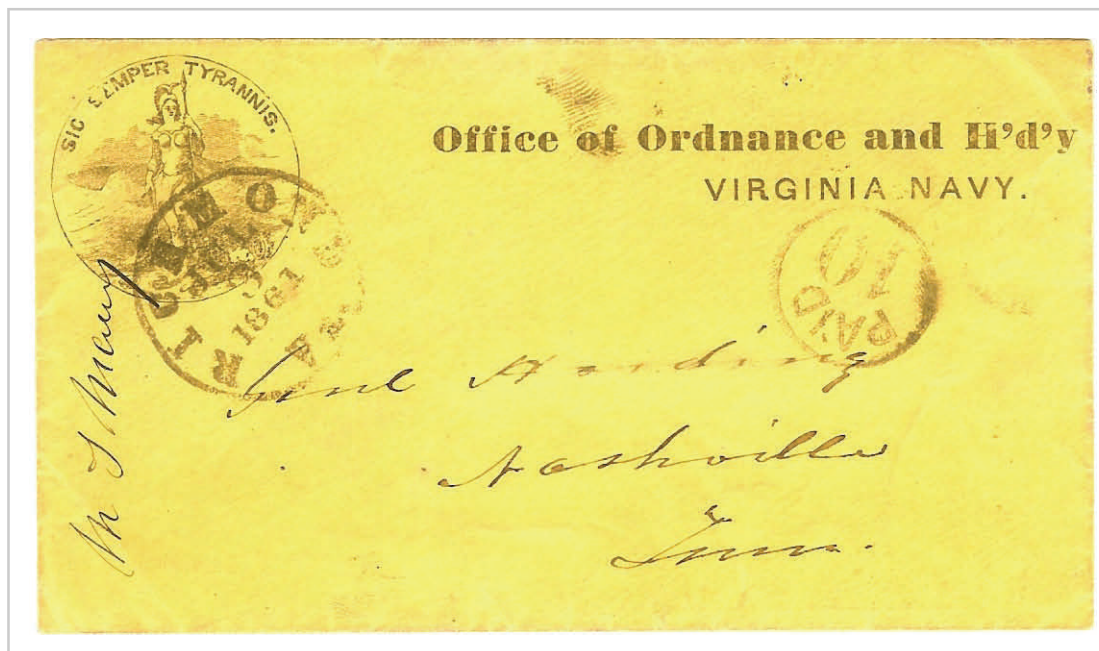
21 June 1861 North Carolina Navy Agent's Office imprint cover
used by Col. Noah Spruill at Norfolk

The Virginia State Navy existed briefly from the time the state seceded until it joined the Confederacy and turned over its military on June 8, 1861. The headquarters was the newly acquired naval base at Norfolk which had been abandoned by the Federals on April 20, 1861.

The North Carolina Navy also existed briefly from the time that state seceded until it joined the Confederacy on May 22, 1861. The headquarters of the "mosquito fleet" of newly converted gunboats operated in and near the North Carolina Sounds from the start of the war until the battle of Roanoke Island on February 8, 1862 after which the remaining vessels went to Gosport Navy Yard near Norfolk.

Confederate Forerunners

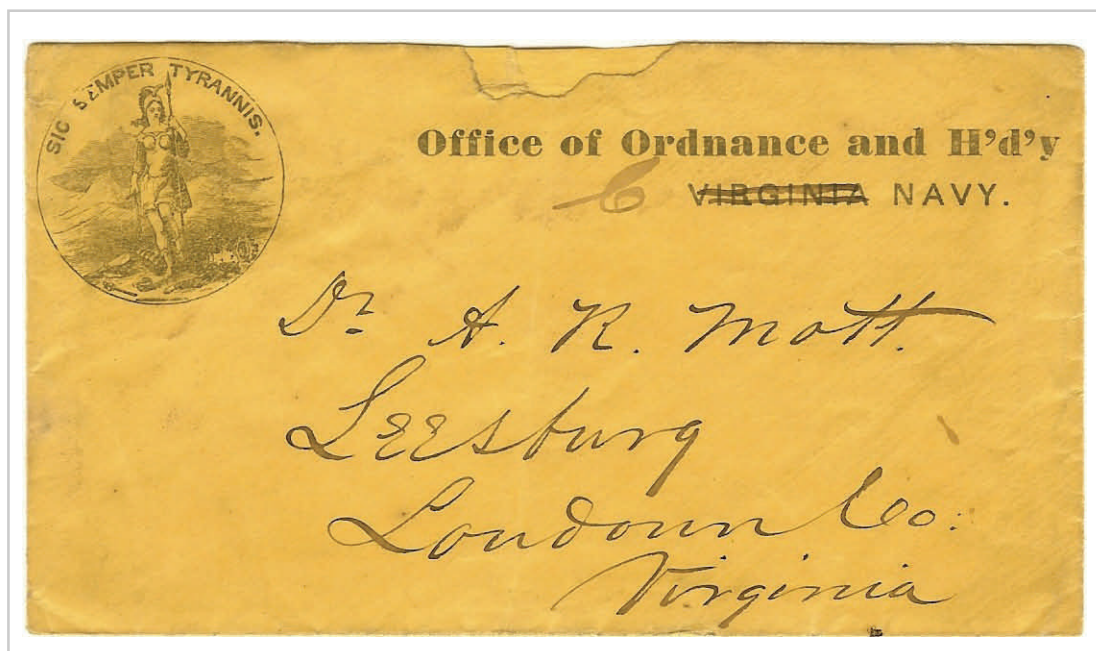
The Virginia Navy



Matthew F. Maury

With the outbreak of the American Civil War, Maury, born in Virginia, resigned his commission as a U.S. Navy Commander to serve on the Confederate side as Chief of Sea Coast, River and Harbor Defenses.

3 July 1861 Virginia Navy Office of Ordnance and Hydrography imprint cover used by Matthew F. Maury at Richmond



Circa. 1861 Virginia Navy Office of Ordnance and Hydrography imprint
"Virginia" corrected in manuscript to "C." (Confederate)

The Virginia State Navy existed briefly from the time the state seceded until it joined the Confederacy and turned over its military on June 8, 1861. The command center was the newly acquired naval base at Norfolk which had been abandoned by the Federals on April 20, 1861.

Confederate Forerunners

CSS *Weldon N. Edwards* / CSS *Confederate States*



CSS *Weldon N. Edwards*

The *Weldon N. Edwards* was assigned to Barron's command for the naval defense of Virginia and North Carolina. In August 1861 she was pronounced worthless.

French Forrest

After a long U.S. Navy career dating from the war of 1812, Forrest served as flag officer for the Virginia Navy after secession. He was then appointed as commander of the naval yard at Norfolk.

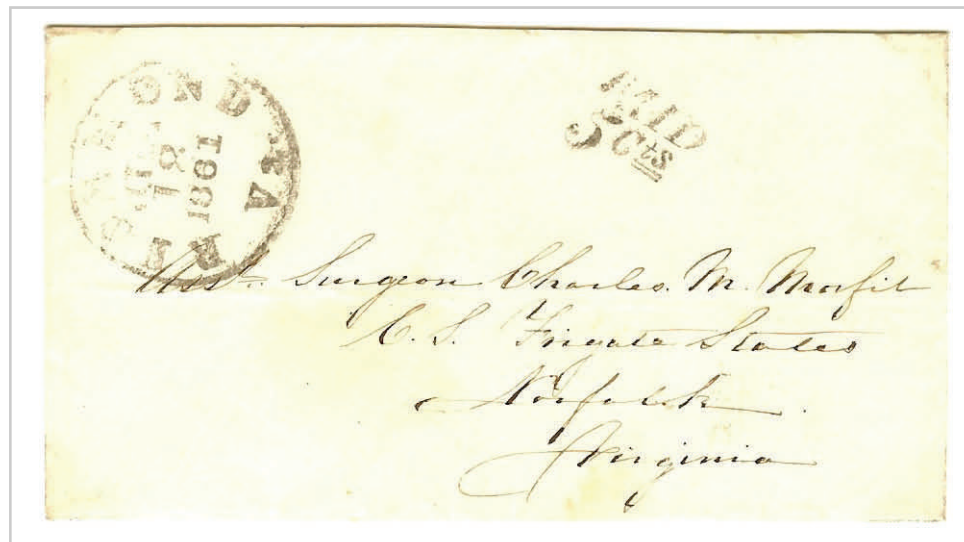
20 August 1861 cover addressed to Samuel Barron at Richmond letter dated from CSS *Edwards* forwarded by naval yard Commander French Forest with signature

Confederate States S. "Edwards"
August 19th 1861. Portsmouth Va

CSS *Confederate States*

The USS *United States* was one of the original Act of 1794 frigates. At the start of the war the Federals abandoned the relic when they surrendered Norfolk.

The ship became the CSS *Confederate States* and was used as a receiving ship prior to being sunk in the Elizabeth River in April 1862 as an obstruction.

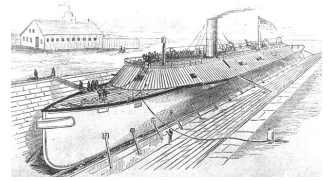


18 July 1861 cover addressed to the CS Frigate *States* at Norfolk

Some vessels of the Confederate Navy, such as the two illustrated above, saw very limited service before being scuttled or sunk as obstructions. The CSS *Confederate States* was one of many that were sunk after the battle of Hampton Roads to prevent further Federal incursions up the James River.

Confederate Forerunners

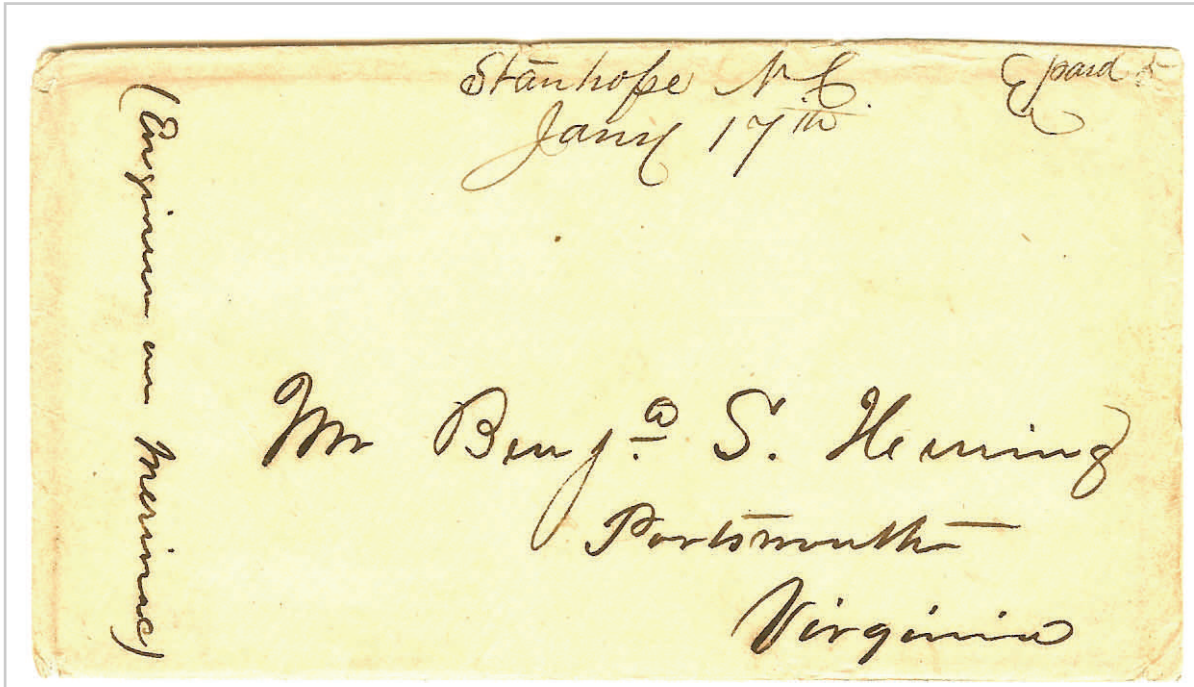
CSS *Merrimack* rebuilt as the CSS *Virginia*



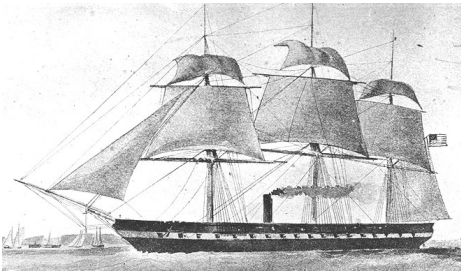
after conversion

CSS *Merrimack*

The CSS *Virginia* was built in 1856 as the USS *Merrimack* and was converted to an ironclad by the Confederates. During the conversion, she was referred to as the CSS *Merrimack*. The conversion was really a rebuild from the waterline up.



17 January 1862 cover from Stanhope, NC
addressed to Herring as “Engineer on *Merrimack* (sic)” at Portsmouth



before conversion (USS *Merrimack*)

Catesby ap Roger Jones

Jones, while in the US Navy, served as ordnance officer on the USS *Merrimack*. After secession, he joined the Confederate Navy and was employed in converting the steam frigate into the CSS *Virginia*. He served as executive and ordnance officer when she was commissioned and was in command of the ironclad when it fought the *Monitor*.



7 August 1861 cover to Catesby ap Roger Jones at James Town Island
at this time Jones was in charge of the conversion
of the former USS *Merrimack* to the CSS *Virginia*

The USS *Merrimack* was burned to the waterline when the Union forces abandoned the Norfolk Naval Yards in April 1861. The Confederacy raised the ship a few weeks later and rebuilt her with iron plate armor. The ship was commissioned as the CSS *Virginia* in February 1862. Limited supplies and the new design delayed her sailing until March 8, 1862. Both covers show use before commissioning as the CSS *Virginia*.

The First Day of the Battle

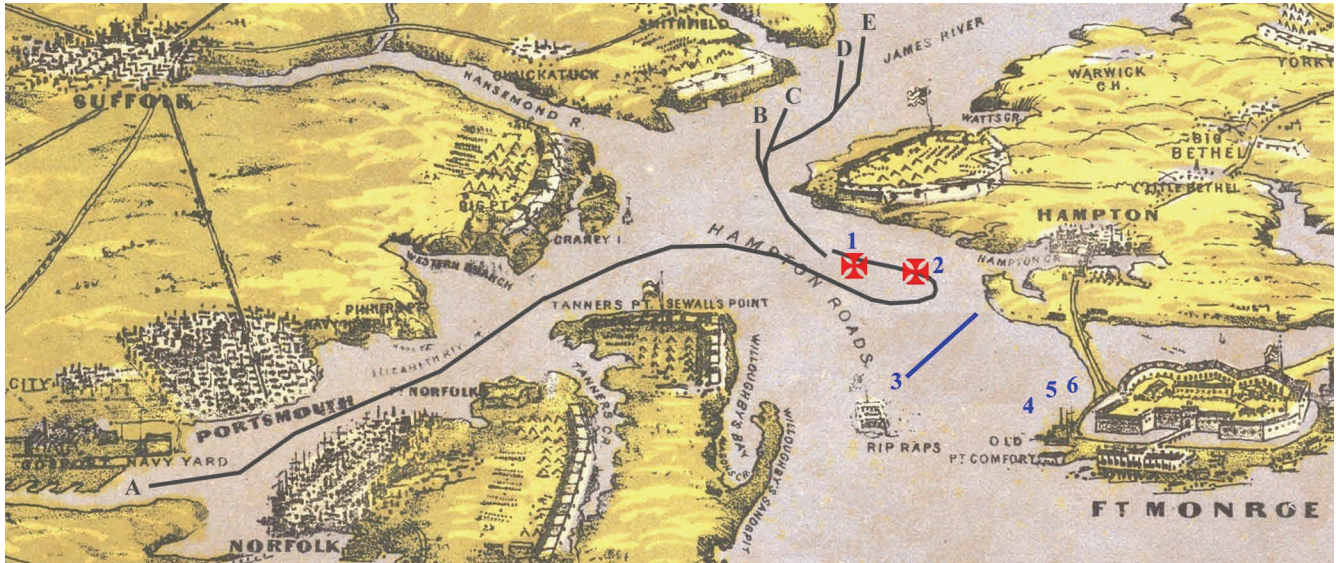


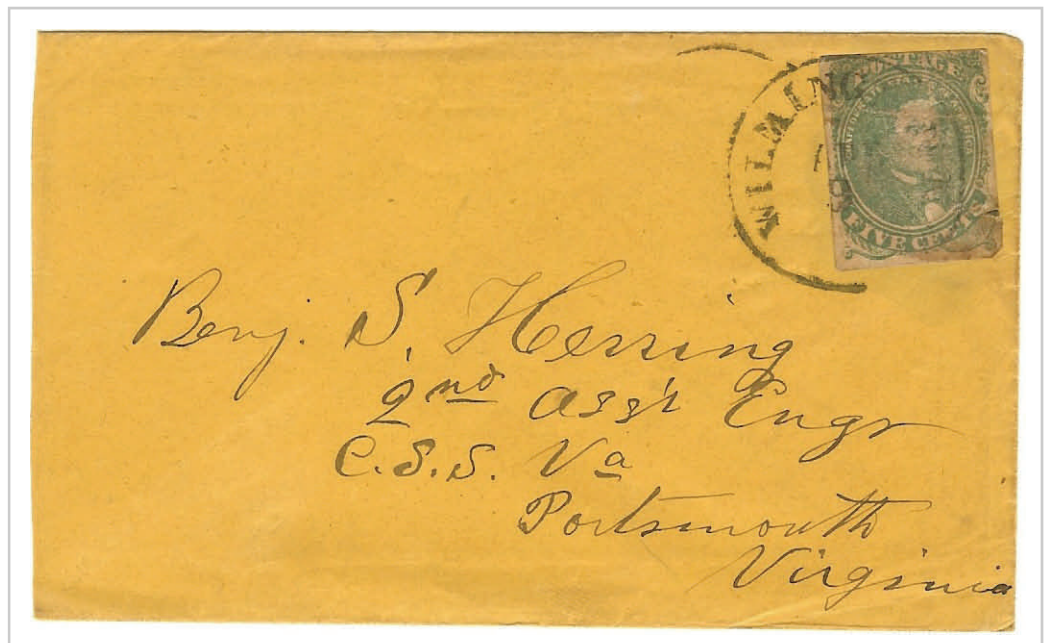
diagram of the first day of battle (March 8, 1862)

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| A - CSS <i>Virginia</i> | 1 - USS <i>Congress</i> |
| B - CSS <i>Beaufort</i> | 2 - USS <i>Cumberland</i> |
| C - CSS <i>Raleigh</i> | 3 - USS <i>Minnesota</i> |
| D - CSS <i>James</i> | 4 - USS <i>Roanoke</i> |
| E - CSS <i>Patrick Henry</i> | 5 - USS <i>St. Lawrence</i> |
| | 6 - USS <i>Vanderbilt</i> |

Day 1 - The CSS *Virginia* (A) departs naval yard and enters Hampton Roads. Passing the USS *Congress* (1), she engages the USS *Cumberland* (2) and finally sinks her by ramming. She is then joined by the CSS *Beaufort* (B) and CSS *Raleigh* (C) for a successful attack on the USS *Congress* (1). The USS *Minnesota* (3) moves up the river but does not engage. Two additional unarmed CSA vessels (D,E) remain in the wings. Three Federal vessels remain at anchor at Ft. Monroe (4,5).

CSS *Virginia*

The CSS *Virginia* was built in 1856 as the USS *Merrimack* and was converted to an ironclad by the Confederates. After the battle of Hampton Roads the vessel served as a deterrent to Federal naval aggression along the James River until the evacuation of Norfolk when she was fired on May 11, 1862 to prevent capture.



9 April 1862 cover from Wilmington, NC
addressed to Benjamin Herring of "C.S.S. Va." at Portsmouth

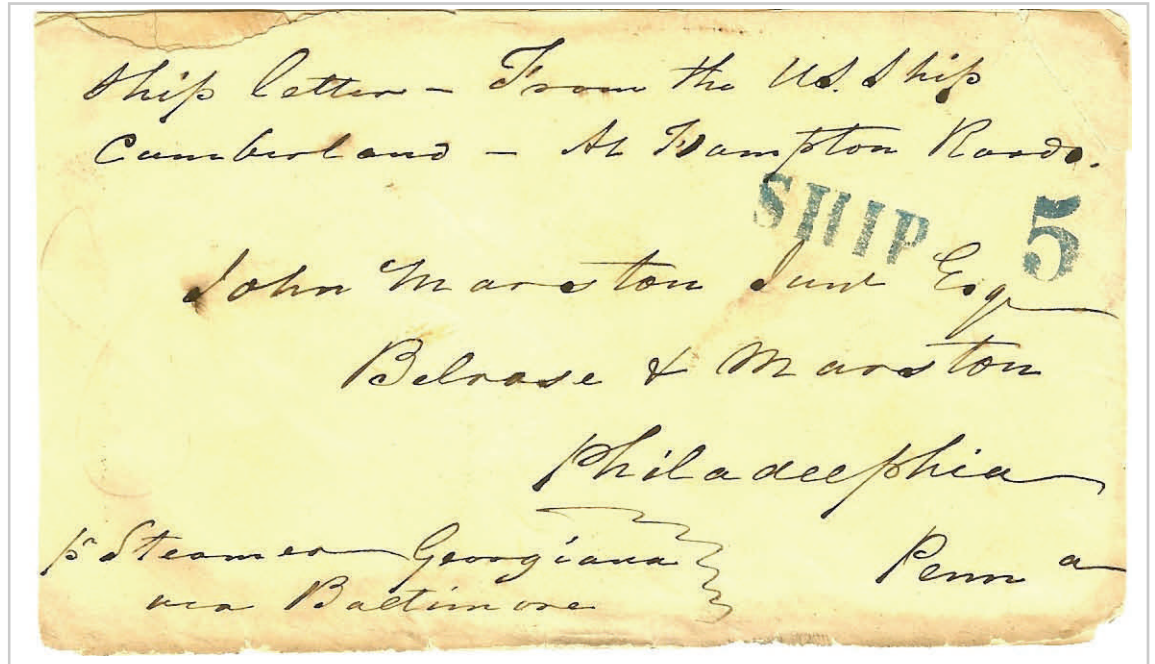
The first day of the battle was a smashing success for the Confederate Navy destroying two large Federal frigates while suffered few casualties. As dark approached the CSS Virginia took position under protection of the Confederate batteries at Sewall's Point with great expectations that the next days work would be equally rewarding.

Federal Participants

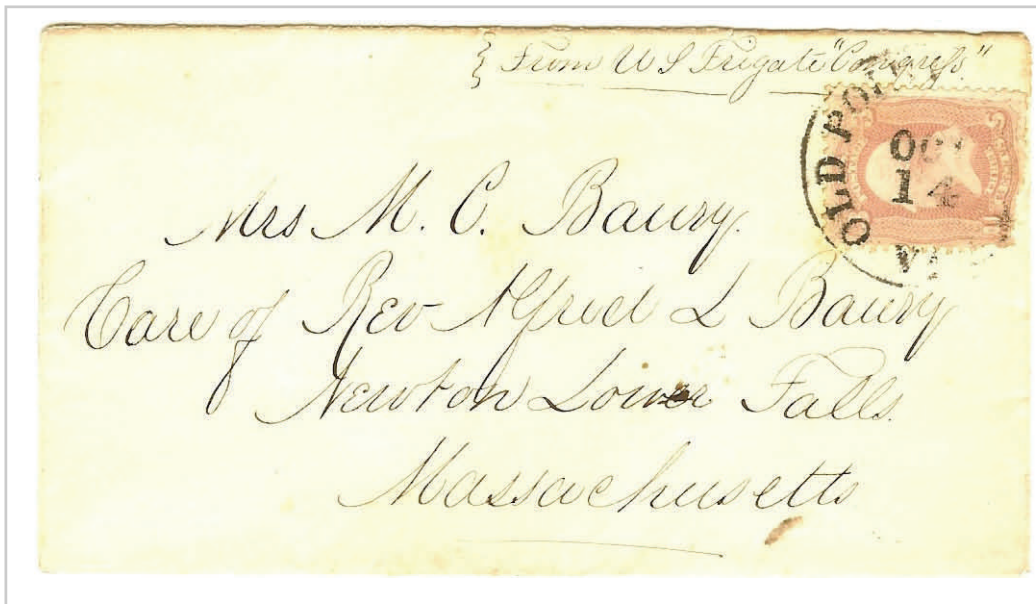
USS *Cumberland* / USS *Congress*

USS *Cumberland*

The frigate *Cumberland* was towed out of the Norfolk navy yard when war commenced and served briefly with the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron before being rammed and sunk by the CSS *Virginia* on the first day of the battle of Hampton Roads.



letter posted from the USS *Cumberland* at Hampton Roads (pre war use)



cover posted from the US Frigate *Congress*
14 October 1861 Old Point Comfort, Virginia postmark

USS *Congress*

Late in 1861 the frigate *Congress* was assigned to the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron. After running aground on the first day of battle at Hampton Roads, she was attacked by the Confederates and forced to strike her colors after severe damage and casualties. The CSS *Virginia* eventually burned the ship to the waterline before departing.

Both of these Federal frigates were destroyed on the first day of the battle of Hampton Roads with heavy casualties of 300 dead and 100 wounded. The first was sunk after ramming and the second burned to the waterline.

Confederate Participants

CSS *Beaufort* / CSS *Patrick Henry*



circa late 1862 cover addressed to Lieut. Commander William Murdaugh on the CSS *Beaufort* at Richmond

CSS *Beaufort*

The CSS *Beaufort* served as tender to the CSS *Virginia* in the Battle of Hampton Roads.

After the battle, from May 1862, she operated on the James River until the evacuation of Richmond on April 3, 1865.

William Murdaugh

Murdaugh was in command of the CS schooner *Manassas* and was seriously wounded in the Federal attack on Fort Hatteras. Upon recovery, he was assigned to the CSS *Beaufort* late in 1862.

CSS *Patrick Henry*

The former passenger steamer *Yorktown* was converted to a lightly protected ship of war and assigned to the James River squadron.

The ship engaged the USS *Congress* during the battle of Hampton Roads. After additional service on the James River, she was designated as an academy ship in May 1862.

William H. Parker

Parker commanded the CSS *Beaufort* in early 1862, taking part in the Roanoke Island battle and the actions at Hampton Roads. After serving as Executive Officer on the CS ironclad *Palmetto State*, he became Superintendent of the Confederate Naval Academy on board CSS *Patrick Henry* in the James River. He also commanded the ironclad *Richmond*.



16 August 1863 cover addressed to Capt. John Pembroke at Wilmington forwarded to care captain William Parker, CSS *Patrick Henry* at Richmond
Capt. Pembroke had previously served on the CSS *Virginia*

On the first day of battle the CSS Beaufort was ordered to assist taking prisoners from the sinking USS Congress. The Federal shore batteries, seeing that their ship had struck her colors, commenced firing causing many casualties on both sides. The side-wheeler CSS Patrick Henry spent much of the day shelling the Federal shore batteries and then the grounded Union vessels.

The Second Day of the Battle

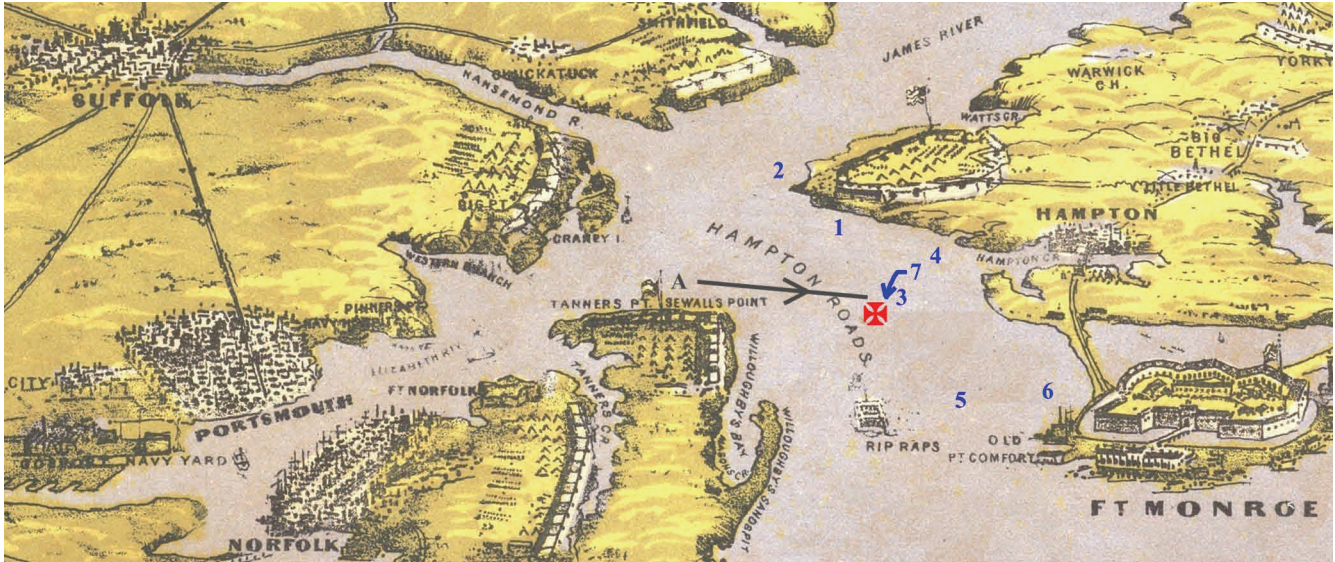


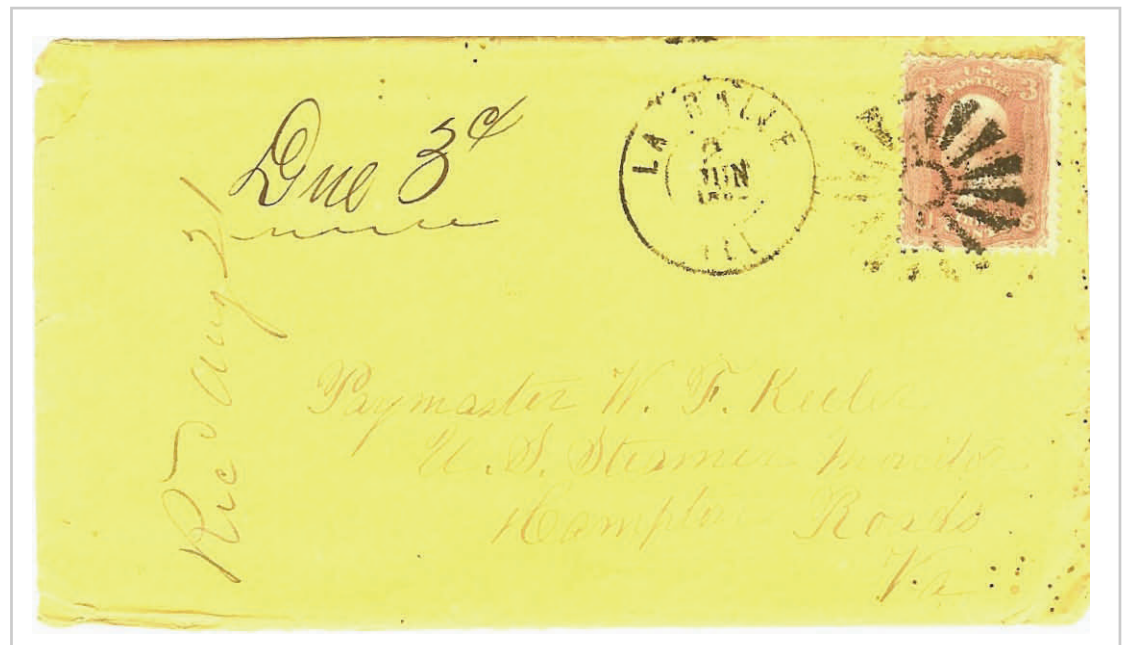
diagram of the second day of battle (March 9, 1862)

- A - CSS *Virginia*
- B - CSS *Beaufort*
- C - CSS *Raleigh*
- D - CSS *James*
- E - CSS *Patrick Henry*
- 1 - wreck of USS *Congress*
- 2 - wreck of USS *Cumberland*
- 3 - USS *Minnesota*
- 4 - USS *Roanoke*
- 5 - USS *St. Lawrence*
- 6 - USS *Vanderbilt*
- 7 - USS *Monitor*

Day 2 - The CSS *Virginia* (A) departs position at Sewall's Point to engage the USS *Minnesota* (3). The USS *Monitor* (6) moves into a position between the two ships and engages the CSS *Virginia* (A).

USS Monitor

The ironclad USS *Monitor* was launched on January 30 and commissioned on February 25, 1862. After a mechanical failure on her maiden voyage, she headed for the Virginia Capes on March 6. Arriving at Hampton Roads after the first day's fight had ended, she took position near the USS *Minnesota*. After fighting the CSS *Virginia* for four hours at close range, both vessels retreated with each side claiming victory. She was later lost on December 31, 1862 after foundering in a storm off Cape Hatteras.



2 June 1862 cover from La Salle, Illinois addressed to Paymaster Keeling of "U.S. Steamer *Monitor*" at Hampton Roads

The second day of the battle began with the CSS Virginia steaming towards the USS Minnesota. Upon the approach, the much smaller USS Monitor moved between the USS Minnesota and the CSS Virginia. After four hours of the ironclads pounding each other to little effect, the Monitor stood down in water too shallow for the CSS Virginia to follow and, as the tide was changing, the CSS Virginia steamed back toward the Elizabeth River.

Federal Participants

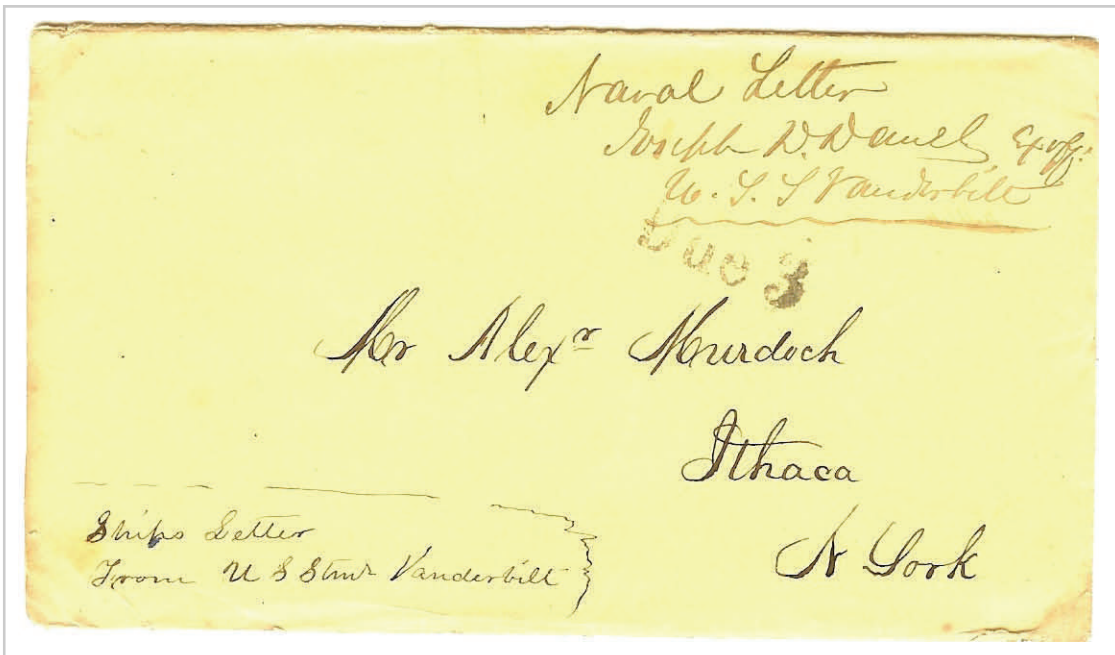
USS *St. Lawrence* / USS *Vanderbilt*

USS *St. Lawrence*

After a successful tour of duty capturing blockade runners and a CSA raider, the ship arrived at Hampton Roads on March 6, 1862. On the first day of the battle the frigate was towed toward the scene of action and received hits from the CSA shore batteries. Later, she was damaged by a direct hit from the CSS *Virginia*. The following day she remained at anchor near Ft. Monroe. She later rejoined the blockade squadron.



cover addressed to the fleet surgeon aboard the USS *St. Lawrence* at Key West, Florida
20 August 1862 use prepaid carrier fee



endorsed cover from executive officer Joseph Danels aboard the USS *Vanderbilt*

USS *Vanderbilt*

The *Vanderbilt* was a side-wheel mail steamer when offered to the US Army by Cornelius Vanderbilt when war erupted. At Hampton Roads battle she lay in reserve with the intention of use as a ram against the CSS *Virginia*. She did not participate directly in the battle and was transferred to the Navy on March 24, 1862. She was later assigned to search for the CS raider *Alabama*.

Both of these ships survived the Battle of Hampton Roads remaining at anchor during the engagement and being too far away to provide support without the risk of being grounded.

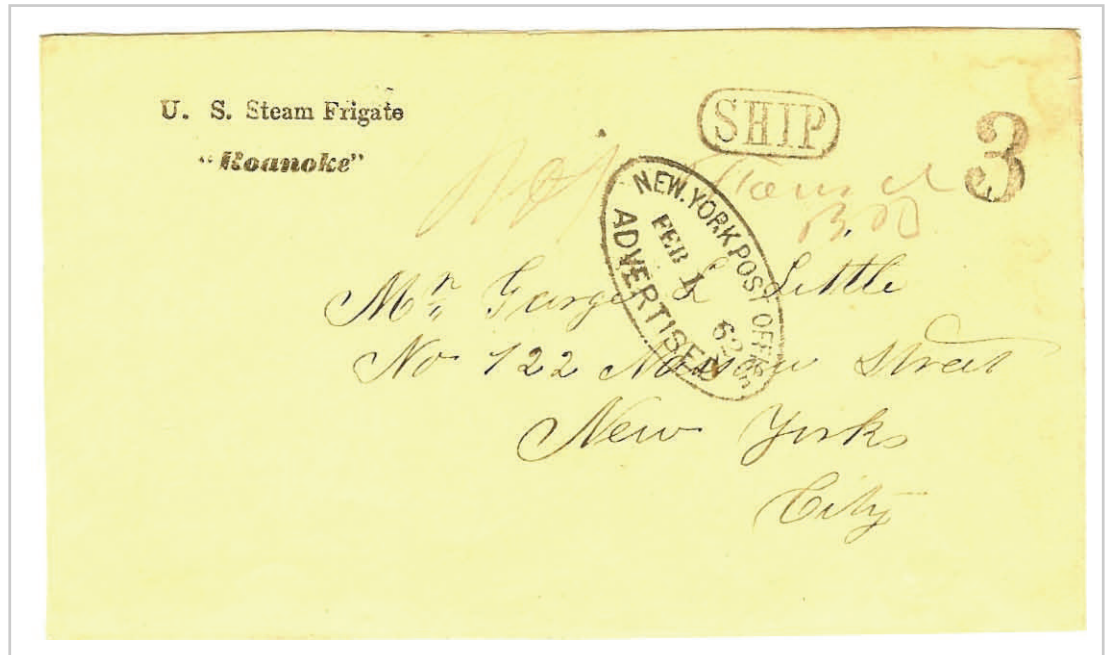
Federal Participants

USS *Roanoke* / USS *Minnesota*

USS *Roanoke*

The steam frigate *Roanoke* was positioned at Fort Monroe during both days of the battle. Her deep draft prevented her participation as a combatant. Following the battle, she transported men from the USS *Congress* and USS *Cumberland*, which had been destroyed, to New York City and was decommissioned on March 25, 1862.

The following year she was converted to an ironclad and re-commissioned.



imprint cover posted from the USS *Roanoke* at Fort Monroe, sailor's concession rate entered mails at New York City and advertised February 1, 1862



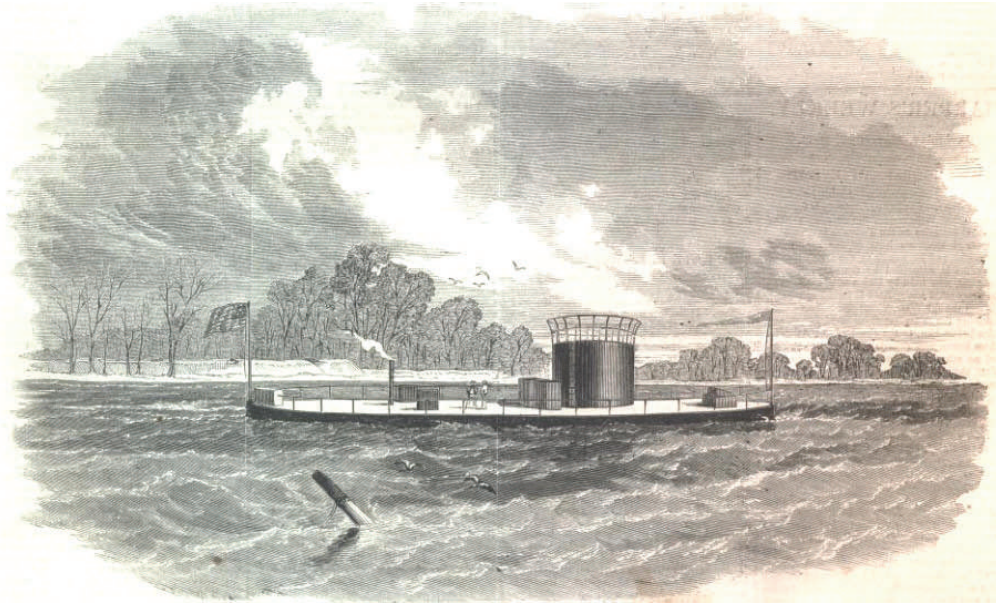
US Frigate *Minnesota* patriotic cover posted
3 March 1862 Old Point Comfort, Virginia postmark

USS *Minnesota*

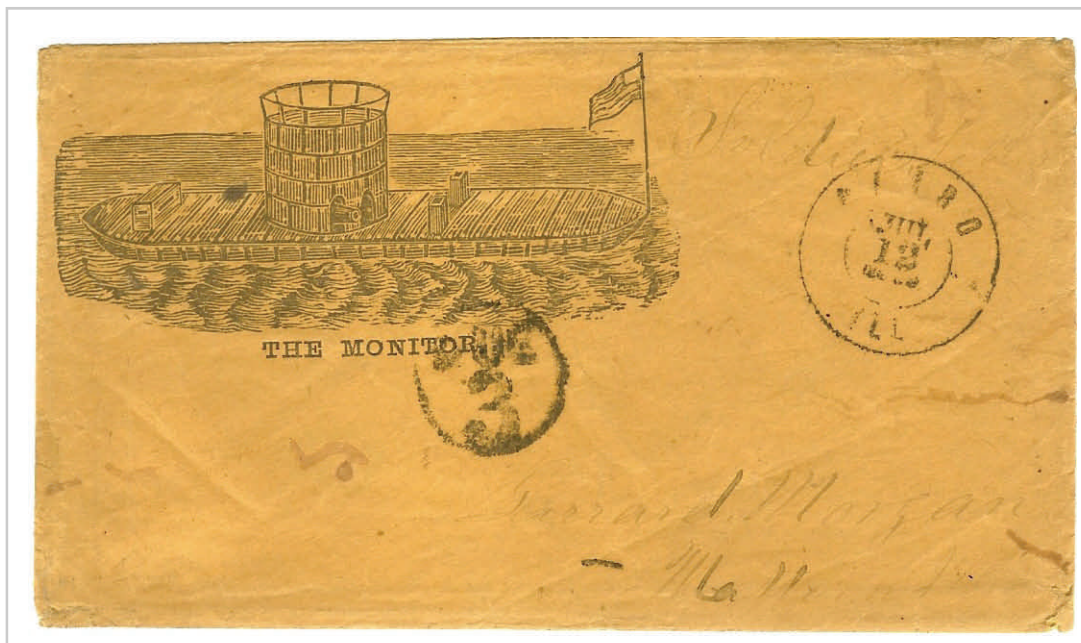
After September 23, 1861 the frigate *Minnesota* was the flagship of the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron. On the first day of the battle she grounded shortly after spotting the Confederate fleet enter the Hampton Roads. After surviving mild damage the first day, she again drew fire the second day although largely under the protection of the USS *Monitor*.

Both of these Federal frigates survived the Battle of Hampton Roads. The USS Minnesota was the principal object of attack on the second day of the battle and was saved by the timely arrival of the USS Monitor. She did engage the CSS Virginia briefly while the USS Monitor was replenishing ammunition and was damaged after delivering a massive broadside.

Federal Aftereffects The Patriotic Response



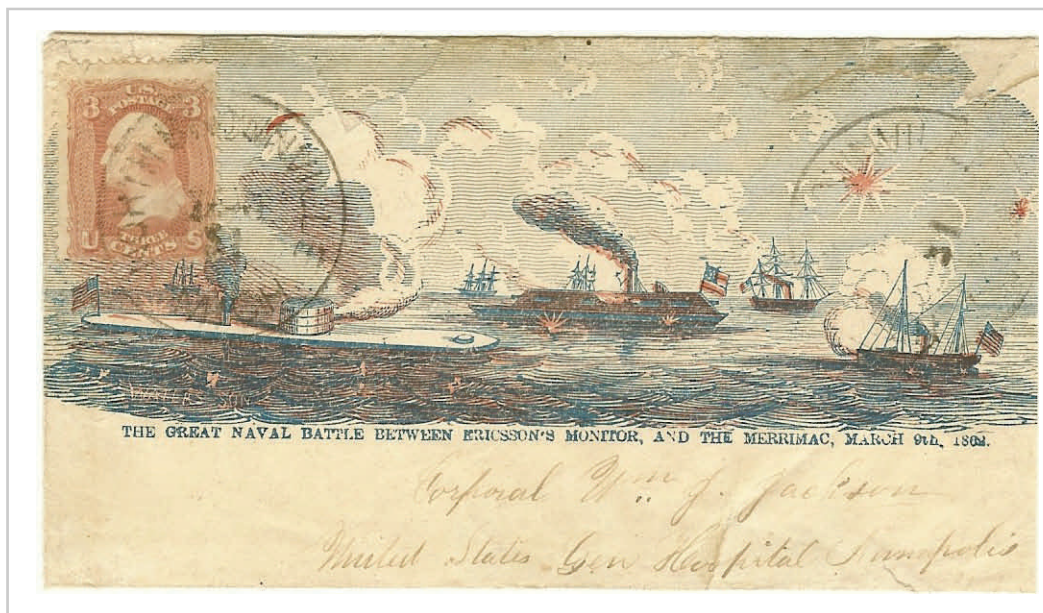
woodcut illustration of the *Monitor* that appeared in March 22, 1862 edition of *Harpers Weekly*



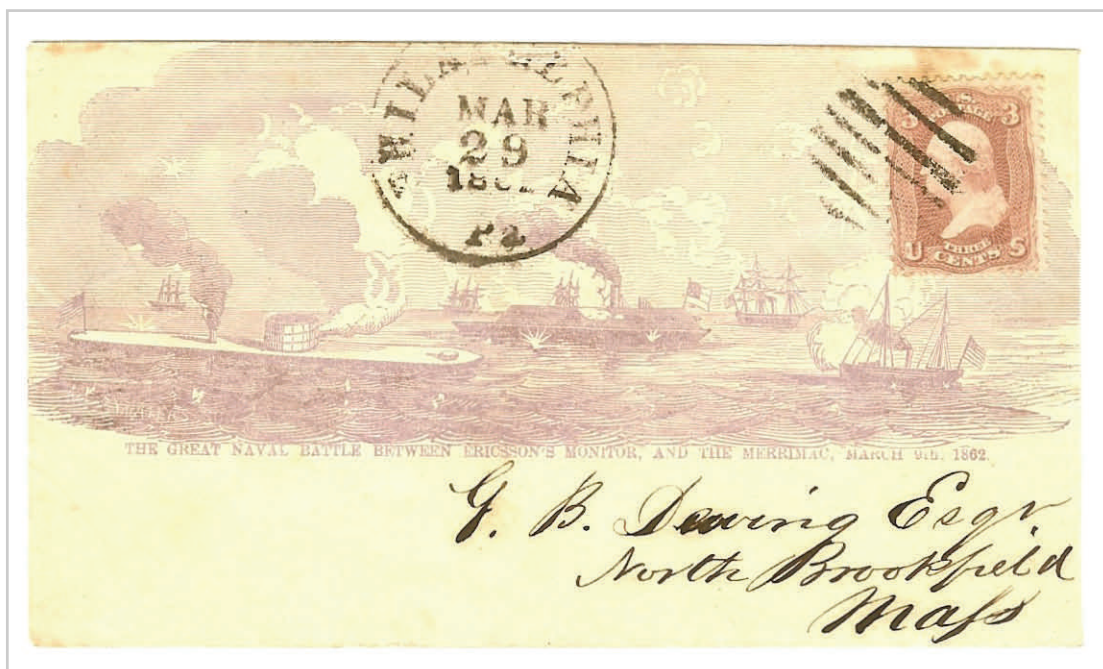
“The Monitor” crude woodcut design patriotic cover
used from Cairo, Illinois in July 1862

In the North the patriotic response to the battle, termed a Union victory, was immediate and sustained. Images of the engagement appeared in the March 22, 1862 issue of Harper’s Weekly as well as other publications. This cover shows a design derived from the magazine illustration.

Federal Aftereffects The Patriotic Response



“The Great Naval Battle Between Ericsson’s Monitor, and the Merrimack, March 9, 1862”
multicolor design patriotic cover used from North Brownville, Michigan in 1862



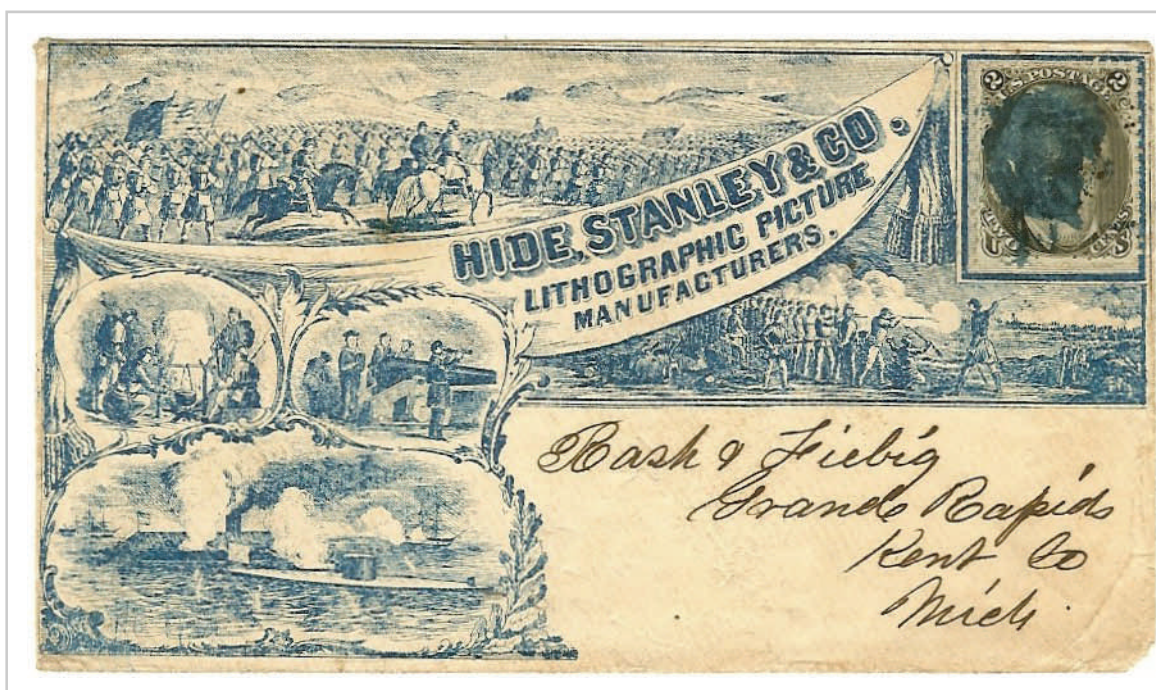
“The Great Naval Battle Between Ericsson’s Monitor, and the Merrimack, March 9, 1862”
mono-color design patriotic cover used from Philadelphia March 29, 1862

In the North the patriotic response to the battle, termed a Union victory, was immediate and sustained. Images of the engagement appeared in the March 22, 1862 issue of Harper’s Weekly as well as other publications. The two covers here were printed that same month from a woodcut illustration by Waters.

Federal Aftereffects
The Patriotic Response



a lithographed design patriotic cover showing the *Monitor* used from Washington, DC in November 1862



a lithographed composite design including vignette of the battle used from Chicago, Illinois after July 1863

These two covers were produced slightly later and use designs produced by lithography. The lower cover, an advertising cover for the lithography firm of Hide Stanley, shows the lasting popularity of images of the engagement.

Confederate Aftereffects

New Ironclads: CSS *Richmond* / CSS *Drewry*



circa late 1862 cover addressed to 1st Assistant Engineer aboard the CSS *Richmond* at Richmond

CSS *Richmond*

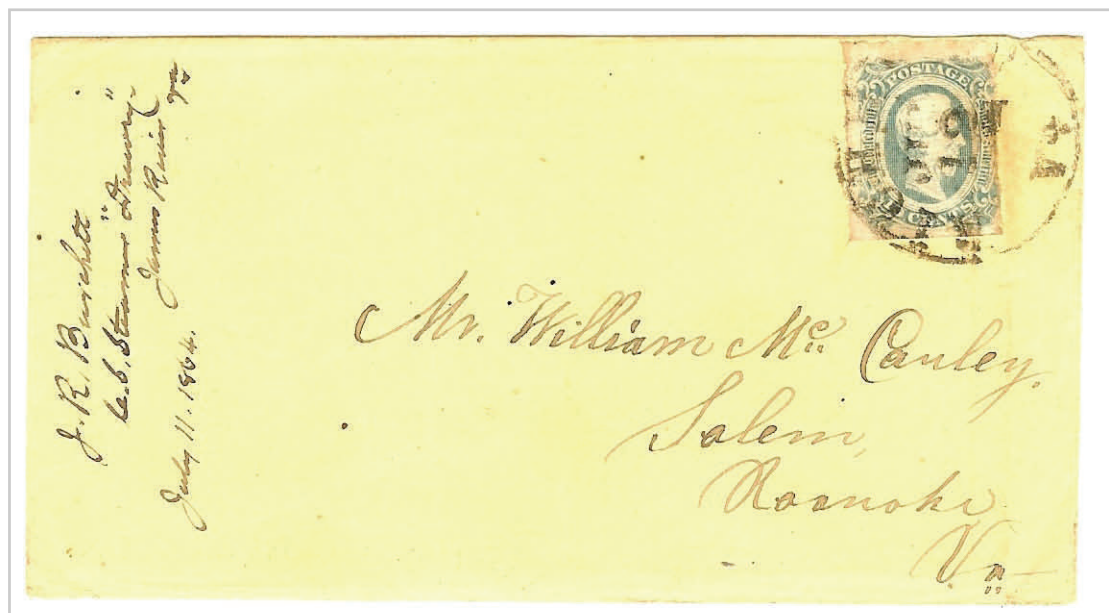
The ironclad CSS *Richmond*, also known as *Virginia II*, was begun immediately after Hampton Roads battle and was launched on May 6, 1862. That same night she was towed up the James river to escape the Federal forces again in possession of the naval yard at Norfolk

She served on the James River until ordered destroyed by Semmes prior to evacuation of Richmond in April 1865

CSS *Drewry*

Also completed after Hampton Roads battle, the CSS *Drewry* was a wooded gunboat attached to the James River squadron.

She was destroyed in Trents Reach on January 24, 1865 by cannon shots, one exploding the magazine, as she was assisting the CSS *Richmond* get afloat.

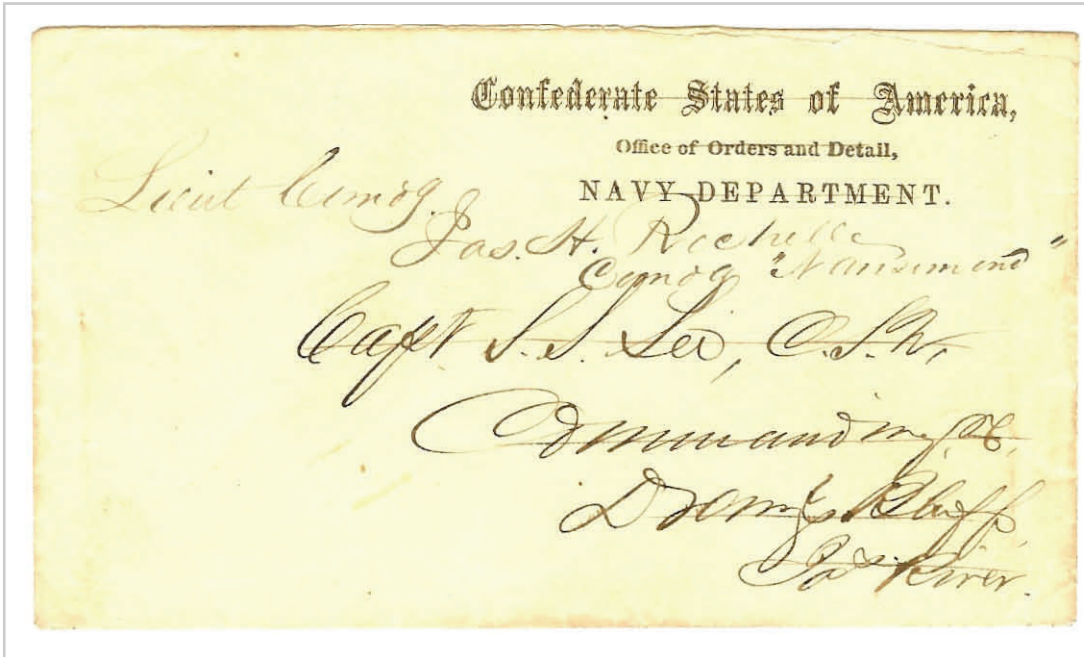


12 July 1864 cover endorsed from a sailor aboard the CSS *Drewry* at James River

After the battle of Hampton Roads the Confederates redoubled their efforts to provide iron cladding to as many vessels as possible. This effort was severely limited by the inability to gather materials. The CSS Richmond was rushed to completion and barely escaped Federal capture in May 1862.

Confederate Aftereffects

New Ironclads: CSS *Nansemond* / CSS *Arkansas*



CSS *Nansemond*

The CSS *Nansemond* was a wooden steamer built in 1862 and assigned to the James River squadron. She departed Norfolk on May 4th just prior to the CSA evacuation of Norfolk.

She took part in engagements along the James River throughout 1864 and was destroyed on April 3, 1865 to preclude capture.

James H. Rochelle

Lieutenant Rochelle's first command in the Virginia State Navy was the CSS *Teaser*, the pioneer "aircraft carrier" (balloon ship) and later minelayer when in June 1862 it was tasked to assist Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. In 1863 Rochelle took command of the CSS *Nansemond* where he remained until March 1864.

circa late 1863 CSA Navy Department imprint cover
directed to Sidney Smith Lee (brother of Robert E. Lee) at Drewry's Bluff
re-addressed to Lieut. James Rochelle, Comdg. *Nansemond*

CSS *Arkansas*

This ironclad ram was built in Memphis and served with distinction on the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers before being abandoned in August 1862 near Baton Rouge.



25 June 1862 cover addressed to a sailor aboard the CSS *Arkansas* at Yazoo City

The CSS Nansemond survived the evacuation of Norfolk and served on the James River while the CSS Arkansas, an ironclad built on the Mississippi River, provided valuable service to the Confederacy in that theater.