

# John Ericsson

Excerpted from *Forgotten Delights: The Producers*  
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*Artist:* Jonathan Scott Hartley

*Dedicated:* 1893; second version cast 1902, dedicated 1903.

*Medium and size:* Bronze (10 feet), on a granite pedestal (11 feet), with four bronze reliefs (each 12" x 27.5").

*Location:* Battery Park, north end of Eisenhower Mall, between Castle Clinton and Battery Place. The statue faces south, but is situated in a shady area of Battery Park and has a fence that keeps visitors at a distance. Take binoculars.

## About the statue

When *Ericsson* was unveiled in 1893, to a 21-gun salute and a lengthy parade, New Yorkers saw a man standing languidly, gesturing with a compass in his right hand to a small square of paper in his left. The swaying figure didn't look much like the Ericsson who had for decades been a familiar sight in New York, and whose ironclad battleship the *Monitor* had saved New Yorkers, they believed, from a Confederate naval attack.

The sculptor, Hartley, was so dissatisfied with the original version that he had a revised model cast at his own expense. Rededicated with another 21-gun salute in 1903, *Ericsson* now stands tall and confident, with a stern look to his mouth and a frown on his brow. In one hand is a roll of blueprints, in the other a model of the *Monitor*. As I noted when describing *Morse*, a good portrait shows more than physical appearance: it shows a characteristic pose and expression, one that is consistent with the sitter's personality and accomplishments. This second version of *Ericsson* fulfills that requirement. The first did not.

Reliefs on the pedestal display several of Ericsson's inventions. On the front is the *Princeton*, the first screw-propelled vessel of war—still bearing the masts and rigging of a sailing vessel. On *Ericsson's* left the *Monitor* battles the *Merrimac*. Behind him is a rotary gun carriage. To his right, firemen battle a raging blaze using the steam-driven fire engine for which Ericsson won a prize in 1840, an era when flames often destroyed hundreds of New York City buildings at a time.

## About the subject

On January 30, 1862, the day of the *Monitor's* launch, New Yorkers crowded the shores of the East River, awaiting a catastrophe. The ship was constructed mostly of iron: how could she possibly move, or even float? Thomas Rowland, one of Ericsson's builders, recalled:

It was the opinion of most shipbuilders that she would 'throw pitch pole'—that is to say, her stern would go immediately down into the mud at the bottom of the river

and she would turn a somersault. But her peculiarities I had provided for by putting air tanks under her stern and by an automatic device allowing the air to escape and the water to run into those tanks just in proportion as the vessel should be immersed in the water while leaving the ways. She was enabled thereby to slide into the water as quietly as a duck going into a pond to swim. Her decks were scarcely wet. Capt. Ericsson stood at the extreme stern and would certainly have been drowned had the fears of those ancient shipbuilders proved correct. (*New York Times* 9/14/1890)

Why was this floating tin can built?

In late 1861, the North learned that a Confederate ironclad would soon be ready to devastate the Union's port cities. The Confederacy had raised the half-burnt frigate *Merrimac* from Norfolk harbor, christened it the *CSS Virginia* and iron-plated its charred remains. Confederates boasted of "the immense power and strength of the *Merrimac* in the most extravagant manner" (*New York Times* 3/10/1862). Stiles notes that she was "a jury-rigged vessel with barely functioning engines but still the most powerful warship afloat" (p. 68)—simply because she could withstand shelling indefinitely while mercilessly bombarding her opponents.

The Navy urgently invited proposals for a Union ironclad. Ericsson (1803-1889), a Swedish-born naval engineer with four decades of experience, proposed a radically different type of warship: small and maneuverable, with two powerful guns in a rotating turret, a low, stable design, and propeller and engines tucked below the waterline. After a struggle with the Navy Board (see sidebar), Ericsson was awarded the contract.

"Returning immediately to New York," he wrote,

I divided the work among three leading mechanical establishments, furnishing each with detailed drawings of every part of the structure; the understanding being that the most skillful men and the best tools should be employed; also that work should be continued during night-time when practicable. The construction of nearly every part of the battery accordingly commenced simultaneously, all hands working with the utmost diligence, apparently confident that their exertions would result in something of great benefit to the national cause. Fortunately no trouble or delay was met at any point; all progressed satisfactorily; every part sent on board from the workshops fitted exactly the place for which it was intended.

One can only speculate how much of Ericsson's legendary "rude and forcible eloquence" such coordination and speed required, from three independent shops in Brooklyn and Manhattan in the dead of winter. "Capt. Ericsson was a very stern, positive man," said his builder Rowland, "but he was easy enough to get along with if you did what he told you to do. I always did, and so never had any trouble with him."

In early March, as the *Monitor* wallowed her way south through heavy seas ("The water came down under the turret like a waterfall," noted Executive Officer Dana S. Greene), the telegraph flashed the news to New York and Washington that the *Merrimac*, on her maiden run, had rammed and sunk a 50-gun Union frigate at Hampton Roads, set another on fire, and run a third aground. In a single day's battle, the South suddenly had the chance to break the Union blockade and become an international sea power. In New York there was a "feeling of dread, akin to panic." The Common Council was

instructed to appropriate the enormous sum of \$500,000 for harbor defenses, "at any sacrifice and at every hazard."

When she arrived at Chesapeake Bay, the *Monitor* was immediately sent on to Hampton Roads. Next day the crew of the *Merrimac*, returning to destroy the grounded Union vessel, spied a strange object floating nearby: "an immense shingle floating on the water, with a gigantic cheese box rising from its center; no sails, no wheels, no smokestack, no guns" (quoted in Ward, Burns, p. 101). In view of 20,000 cheering Union and Confederate troops, the ships battled for four and a half hours, sometimes close enough to bump hulls, but with negligible damage to either ship. Finally the *Merrimac* lumbered back to harbor to restock her ammunition. That night both sides celebrated victory, although the day's result had been a stalemate.

But long term, the *Monitor*'s actions were decisive, as Greene noted (see quote below title of this essay). The Union blockade remained intact. The *Merrimac* was bottled up harmlessly in Hampton Roads until the Confederates were faced with the loss of Richmond and Norfolk: then they sunk her, since she drew too much water to sail upriver.

Although the *Monitor* was only in service for a few months (she went down in a storm off Cape Hatteras in late 1862), her effect on naval warfare was profound.

For the previous three hundred years, the fate of nations had been decided by huge, lumbering ships of the line, great clumsy square riggers carrying up to 120 guns and manned by enormous crews of anywhere from five hundred to twelve hundred men. Then, on the morning of March 9, 1862 ... the nimble little *Monitor*, armed with only two eleven-inch Dahlgrens, and manned by a crew of only fifty-eight men, relegated every ship of the line to the scrap heap and established an entirely new set of priorities for the navies of the world." (deKay p. 1)

Shortly after hearing of the battle of the American ironclads, the British Navy—the most formidable in the world—cancelled all outstanding orders for wooden sailing ships. Iron construction, iron plating and turrets were to be the characteristics of the warship of the future. In the United States alone sixty-six *Monitor*-type vessels were built, the last of which remained in service until 1925, sixty-three years after the original *Monitor* was launched.

### **Bibliography and further reading**

On the statue, see *New York Times* 4/15/1893, 8/2/1903. Margot Gayle and Michele Cohen, *The Art Commission and the Municipal Art Society Guide to Manhattan's Outdoor Sculpture*. New York, 1988) p. 5. Smithsonian Institution Research Information System (<http://siris.si.edu>), Inventory of American Sculpture, control #IAS 76003495.

On Ericsson, see Michael A. Cavanaugh. "Ericsson, John"; <http://www.anb.org/articles/05/05-00220.html> (American National Biography Online Feb. 2000). The account of Ericsson's trip to Washington and his own highly technical account of the *Monitor* appear in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, v. 1 (New York, 1887), pp. 750 and 730-744. See T.J. Stiles, *In Their Own Words: Civil War Commanders*, pp. 67-69 on the importance of the battle between the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac* and pp. 69-75 for the launch of the *Monitor* and an account of the battle of the ironclads by S. Dana Greene, executive officer of the *Monitor*.

For contemporary stories on the *Monitor*, see Rowland's account in *New York Times* 9/14/1890; 3/10/1862 and 3/13/1862 on the battle of the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac*; 3/9/1889 and 3/12/1889

on Ericsson's death and obsequies. A recent, well-written popular account is James Tertius deKay, *Monitor: The Story of the Legendary Civil War Ironclad and the Man Whose Invention Changed the Course of History*, 1997. For photographs, see Geoffrey C. Ward, Ric Burns and Ken Burns, *The Civil War, An Illustrated History*, pp. 98-102.

Note: The *Merrimac* was christened the *Merrimack*, but the "k" seems to have been deep-sixed even before Union troops sunk her in Hampton Roads, just after the South seceded. Most historians refer to her as the *Merrimac* even though the Confederates renamed her the *Virginia*.

The *Monitor* is being raised, piece by piece, by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, whose log of the excavation can be found at <http://oceanexplorer.noaa.gov/explorations/monitor01/tour/tour.html>.

On the devastating fires in early New York that Ericsson's fire engine helped control, see the essay on *Cooper* in this volume and the essay on the *Bethesda Fountain* in the forthcoming *Forgotten Delights* volume on allegories.

### **Provenance**

Inscription on base: "The City of New York erects this statue to the memory of a citizen whose genius has contributed to the greatness of the Republic and the progress of the world." Paid for by New York City taxes. Collection of the City of New York.

### ***Ericsson vs. the Bureaucrats***

With his previous experience of the waste of time and patience required to accomplish anything at Washington, Captain Ericsson, who is not, it must be said, like the man Moses, 'exceeding meek,' would not himself go to the capital to secure attention to his ideas. [When he finally appeared before the Navy Board:] The vessel had not sufficient stability, Commodore Smith exclaimed; in fact, it would upset and place her crew in the inconvenient and undesirable position of submarine divers. Now, if there is anything which especially distinguishes the *Monitor*, with its low free-board, it is the peculiarity which it has in common with the raft it resembles—its inability to upset. In a most earnest and lucid argument, Captain Ericsson proceeded to explain this. Perceiving that his explanation had its effect, and his blood being well warmed by this time, he ended by declaring to the board with great earnestness: "Gentlemen, after what I have said, I consider it to be your duty to the country to give me an order to build the vessel before I leave this room."

—Col. William Church in *The Century Magazine*, April 1879 (reprinted in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, I, 750)

**This essay is excerpted from *Forgotten Delights: The Producers*, the first in a series of books on Manhattan's outdoor representational sculpture.**

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