

# Civil War Ironclads

Ahoy, matey! Do you know the “great-grandfather” of modern warships? If you said the Civil War ironclad, you’re correct! Many ironclad warships of the Union’s navy were constructed at Carondelet shipyard in St. Louis.

In the 1800s, the ironclads made their big debut. They were designed for high seas battles, coastal defense, and cruising long distances. The ship was undeniably unique. These were some of the first ships in history to be armored with metal and propelled by steam. Ironclads effectively brought an end to navies that relied on wind-powered wooden ships. The ironclad’s heavily armored deck was just barely above the waterline, making the ship less vulnerable to cannon fire. Also, explosive torpedoes were introduced at the same time, and the ironclad was an ideal vessel for launching these underwater weapons.

The American Civil War was the first time the ships were used in battle; beginning a new age of naval warfare. Before the war, James Buchanan Eads, an inventive engineer living in St. Louis and familiar with the Mississippi River, proposed that the U.S. government invest in the development of steam-powered, ironclad warships. After much persuasion and near failure, the government funded the building of the ships. The first set of ships built in the United States was collectively known as the City Class Ironclads and were all commissioned in January 1862 for the Union Navy, and were constructed at the shipyard in St. Louis. The ironclad design would be adopted by the Confederacy and both sides improved on Ead's original design throughout the war.

The first combat between ironclads, in March of 1862, involved the Union’s USS Virginia and the Confederacy’s USS Monitor. The Battle of Hampton Roads, fought at the junction of three rivers in Virginia is arguably the most important battle of the Civil War from the standpoint of naval development. Wooden ships were destroyed early in the battle, followed by a duel between the two ironclads. Sensitive areas of both ships were covered in heavy armor, so that shots bounced off the turret and decks, sometimes denting but never breaching them. Neither ship could defeat the other, and both ships returned to their home ports for repairs and strengthening. Navies around the world immediately stopped construction of wooden-hulled ships, as their fleets had become instantly obsolete. Many argue that this battle began the modern arms race.

There is no clear end to the ironclad period, but towards the late 1890s the term ironclad dropped out of use and warship became the popular term. Over time, new ships were constructed to a standard pattern and designated as the model to follow. Although the original ironclads can now only be viewed in museums, their legacy has lived on; its design has inspired all modern battleships and armament.

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**Author(s):**

Written by Maggie Pottkotter (Intern) in the Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Sciences at Texas A&M University, as part of a National Park Service Trails and Rails project funded by Amtrak, 2011.