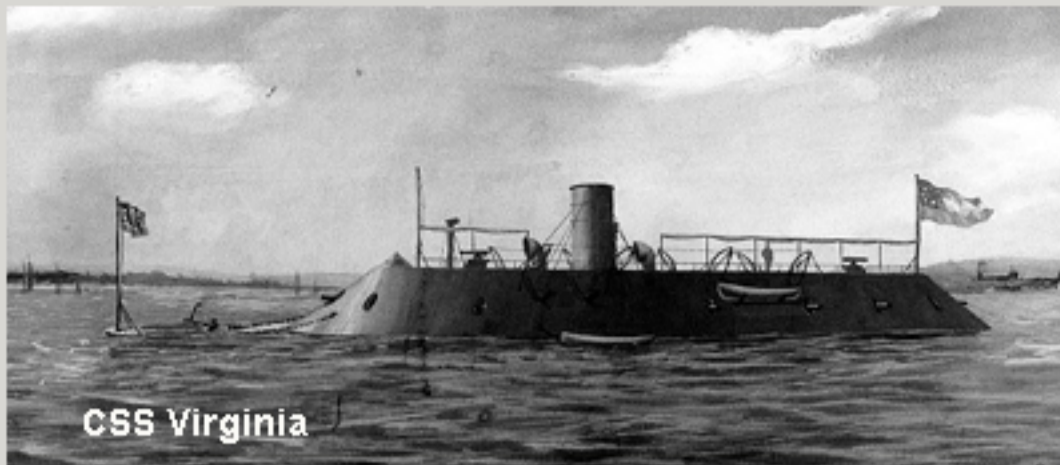


# Monitor vs. Virginia, 1862

---



---

## Monitor vs. Virginia

The preceding month had been the most dramatic in the history of that busy anchorage. *CSS Virginia* -- the scuttled and burnt screw frigate *Merrimack*, raised and rebuilt as a Southern ironclad ram—had made her deadly foray into that roadstead and destroyed the frigate *Congress* and *Cumberland*, originally a frigate but cut down to a razeed sloop of war. The next day, the novel and plucky Union ironclad *Monitor* had challenged and checked *Virginia* when the dreaded Confederate warship reentered Hampton Roads to finish off the remaining Union blockading squadron.

Their fierce fight to a draw on the historic afternoon of 9 March began some two months of an uneasy naval stalemate in Hampton Roads while Union Army transports brought the troops of General George B. McClellan's Army of the Potomac to the area to launch a drive toward Richmond, Virginia, up the peninsula formed by the York and James Rivers. Strict Confederate secrecy covered *Virginia* during the weeks following the epic, but inconclusive, battle. The Southern ironclad had reentered the Norfolk Navy Yard to get a new ram to replace that which had broken off in *Cumberland's* hull as *Virginia* backed free of her first victim. She also received new armor plates to replace those cracked in battle as well as an armored belt just below her vulnerable casemate eves.

## Countering CSS Virginia

Meanwhile, the Union Navy withdrew its sailing warships and some of its deep-draft steamers from Hampton Roads and replaced them with light-draft steam gunboats which were able to maneuver freely in the trick shoal waters inside the Virginia Capes. *Aroostook* was one of these gunboats, and, after entering Hampton Roads, remained constantly ready for action. During this period, the leaders of the Union Navy showed great imagination in devising innovative tactics for combating the ironclad. Lt. Beaumont decided that he might bring *Virginia* to bay by ensnaring her propeller in a long heavy net and seine that *Aroostook's* crew had made of "rattling" stuff. Such a procedure, he reasoned, would "... neutralize her motive power."

When his fellow commanding officers had learned of Beaumont's plan, they seemed to fear *Aroostook* even more than they dreaded *Virginia* lest the gunboat's now notorious net might foul their own screws. For instance, Comdr. James P. McKinstry, the captain of the screw steamer *Dacotah*, would constantly warn his officers,

"Keep out of Beaumont's way. Don't let Beaumont get near you. Keep your eye on the *Aroostook*."

*Virginia* rounded Sewell's Point on 11 April; but, since strategic considerations prevented her from challenging *Monitor* or the other nearby Union warships, *Aroostook's* dreaded net never entered the water. Nevertheless, forces were then at work which would enable the Union gunboat to play a highly significant role in one of the more dramatic scenes of the Civil War.