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The Other Union Ironclad: The USS *Galena* and the Critical Summer of 1862

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Other Union Ironclad: The USS Galena and the Critical Summer of 1862 Kurt Hackemer Mention the ironclads of the Union navy and the image conjured up probably bears a striking resemblance to the Monitor, whose low freeboard and revolving turret make it one of the great technical innovations of the Civil War. Of course, informed observers recognize that the navy's armored fleet included many ship designs, especially on the western rivers, but the monitors captured the public's attention, and likewise the attention of most historians writing on the subject.' Still, the monitors were not the only option considered by the Union during the first year of the conflict. The Confederacy, hoping to break the blockade, pushed ahead with the conversion of the scuttled hull of the frigate Merrimack into an ironclad ram. Rumors of the Rebel efforts

prompted the United States Navy Department in the summer of 1861 to create a naval board to consider the problem and recommend a course of action. The board counseled that the Union build its own ironclads to counter the threat and requested proposals from Northern inventors. The call for ironclads and the subsequent winnowing process produced three disparate designs, which were built as the Monitor, the New Ironsides, and the Galena. The intent of the naval board that recommended the multiple prototypes was to build three experimental vessels the navy could assess and use to determine the direction of future construction. Simply put, no one knew what would work and what would fail.^{2 1} For the best treatment of the armored river gunboats, see John D. Milligan, *Gunboats Down the Mississippi* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute Press, 1965). ² For details of the Monitor's construction, see William N. Still, "Monitor Builders: A Historical Study of the Principal Firms and Individuals Involved in the Construction of USS Monitor," *The American Neptune* 48 (Spring 1988): 106-29. For the New Ironsides, see William H. Roberts, "The Neglected Ironclad: A Design and Constructional Analysis of the USS New Iron Civil War History, Vol. XL, No. 3," *O 1994 by The Kent State University Press* USS GALENA AND THE SUMMER OF 1862²²⁷ Each design offered its own advantages and disadvantages. The Galena was relatively cheap to build, could carry a heavy broadside, and seemed especially suited for riverine operations. It offered a new hull design which, if successful, would significantly reduce damage from enemy ordnance. Its armor scheme was also radically different from either competitors', or from European vessels for that matter. Because it was a gunboat, the Galena could not carry the armor load of the bigger ocean-going cruisers like the French *Gloire*, the British *Warrior*, or the *New Ironsides*. Its plate and rail armor was designed to overcome this obstacle while still providing superior protection and could be manufactured more cheaply than the 4-inch plates used on larger vessels. Necessity forced the search for alternative armor schemes; rolling mills in the United States were as yet incapable of producing those thick plates. Until industry adapted, as it did in the case of the *New Ironsides*, American inventors would try to circumvent convention with technical expertise. They succeeded with the *Monitor* but failed with the *Galena*. The early operational career of the *Galena* illustrates the process by which the Union determined the design of the ironclads used throughout the war from a slightly different perspective, emphasizing tactical failure and performance below expectations as a motivation for choice. However, it also demonstrates the success of the *Galena* at a critical point during the war, when its psychological effect equaled or outweighed its actual physical effect. Delivery of the *Galena* from the builders to the navy on April 15, 1862, came at a critical time for the Union. Although the *Monitor* turned back the *Merrimack* at the Battle of Hampton Roads in early March, the Confederate ironclad still lurked upriver, threatening to come down and complete the destruction of the wooden blockading squadron that discouraged delivery of vital supplies to the Confederacy. No one knew if the *Monitor* could repeat its earlier feat, and all officers concerned eagerly awaited the new ironclad. The navy was not the only service anticipating the *Galena*...

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MENTION THE IRONCLADS of the Union navy and the image conjured up probably bears a striking resemblance to the *Monitor*, whose low freeboard and revolving turret make it one of the great technical innovations of the Civil War. Of course, informed observers recognize that the navy's armored fleet included many ship designs, especially on the western rivers, but the monitors captured the public's attention, and likewise the attention of most historians writing on the subject.¹ Still, the monitors were not the only option considered by the Union during the first year of the conflict. The Confederacy, hoping to break the blockade, pushed ahead with the conversion of the scuttled hull of the frigate *Merrimack* into an ironclad ram. Rumors of the Rebel efforts prompted the United States Navy Department in the summer of 1861 to create a naval board to consider the problem and recommend a course of action. The board counseled that the Union build its own ironclads to counter the threat and requested proposals from Northern inventors.

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