

North Carolina, CSS ^[1]

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by Edwin L. Combs, 2006

The CSS *North Carolina* was a steam-powered [ironclad](#) ^[2] ram, one of two *Richmond*-class [ironclads](#) ^[2] built for the [Confederate](#) ^[3] navy in [Wilmington](#) ^[4] during the [Civil War](#) ^[5]. Six *Richmond*-class ships were laid down in Richmond, Wilmington, Charleston, and Savannah during the spring of 1862. Naval shipbuilder [John L. Porter](#) ^[6] designed these vessels for harbor defense, adapting plans he had originally conceived in 1846. The new vessels were 174 feet long, 150 feet between perpendiculars with an extreme beam of 45 feet; they carried four rifled guns housed in a sloping rectangular casemate placed amidships. For protection, four inches of iron plating covered the casemate and two inches of armor blanketed the decks. The *Richmond* ironclads had an elliptical shape, coming to a point at both ends. At the stem, a formidable ram added another weapon to the ships' battery; at the stern, an overhang protected the propeller.

The *North Carolina*'s career was brief and uneventful. The ship was usually stationed near the mouth of the [Cape Fear River](#) ^[7] opposite the town of Smithville, where it maintained a defensive position in cooperation with nearby forts. But navigation on Cape Fear was almost impossible for the ironclad. Its weak engines could not stem the river current, and its deep draft frequently caused it to run aground. As a result, the underpowered ironclad had to be towed almost everywhere it went.

Although the *North Carolina* was poorly built and unfit for combat, it did achieve limited success in the defense of Cape Fear. The ironclad's presence on the river helped deter Union attacks on Wilmington and the Cape Fear region until December 1864. Union intelligence was unaware of the ship's decrepit condition until late summer 1864, and Federal naval commanders did not want to attack unless their squadron included monitors to combat the *North Carolina* and any other ironclads the Confederates might have in commission. The deterrence provided by the *North Carolina* against Union attack was the defective ironclad's most important service during its short career.

References:

William N. Still Jr., *Confederate Shipbuilding* (1987).

Still, *Iron Afloat: The Story of the Confederate Armorclads* (1985).

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