



***"Attachment to the Union alone impels me to offer my services..."***

**-John Ericsson, August 29, 1861**



## Heroes of the Union

The John Ericsson Memorial fittingly resides just south of the Abraham Lincoln Memorial, at the corner of Independence Avenue and Ohio Drive, SW, joining together two heroes instrumental to the preservation of the Union during the Civil War. In August 1916, the American Scandinavian Alliance, under the leadership of S. Adolf Eckberg, gained a \$35,000 Congressional appropriation, which became the seed for a national memorial dedicated to the life and accomplishments of renowned engineer John Ericsson.

## A Revolutionary Mind

Born on July 31, 1803 in Lanbanshyttan, Sweden, the young John Ericsson found diversion not in games or toys, but in the mechanics involved at his father's workplace, in the mines of the province of Vermland, and the Gotha Ship Canal which transversed his native land. The young Ericsson soaked up knowledge like a sponge. By the age of 14, he was employed as a leveller on the Gotha Canal project, in charge of 600 Swedish soldiers. With such talent at his disposal, Ericsson looked beyond his native province. He served a tour of duty in the Swedish army,

during which he attained the rank of Captain (his preferred title for the remainder of his life). Ericsson left Sweden for England in 1826, and made his mark in the development of steam locomotion by rail and by water. His design of a screw propeller, although not the first ever, was the first to be put into practical use. Although Ericsson's design was demonstrated successfully to the British Admiralty, they did not see it fit for use in the Royal Navy. Ericsson's work did catch, however, the attention of an influential United States naval officer.

## Coming to America

Captain Robert F. Stockton, USN, enticed Ericsson to come to the United States to build ships for the navy. Ericsson followed Stockton across the Atlantic in November 1839, never to return to Europe for the remainder of his life. The naval ship which bore his design, was christened the USS *Princeton*. The *Princeton* was a true novelty. With its rigging tied up, the craft moved along, propelled by an unseen force, which burned virtually smokeless coal. Its propeller and engines were below the

waterline, which made it well protected from potential enemy fire. During an 1844 exhibition of the *Princeton*, before president John Tyler and several members of his Cabinet, a gun exploded. The *Peacemaker*, designed by Captain Stockton blew up upon firing. Secretary of State Abel Upshur and Secretary of the Navy Thomas Gilmer were killed among others. Stockton was exonerated from blame, however Ericsson's reputation was severely damaged because of the incident. Government contracts were not forthcoming

## Ericsson Rises from the Ashes

John Ericsson knew that the design of the *Peacemaker* was flawed. Despite his warnings to Stockton in hope that he would alter the design of the doomed weapon, Ericsson received the blame. Nevertheless, his name held respect in many quarters from his design of the propeller. He became a naturalized United States citizen in 1848, and geared his work toward the private sector during this time. A favored concept of his, the Caloric Engine, driven on power generated by hot air, occupied the bulk of his time. Small Calorics were used in factories and businesses. Catalogs extolled their benefits. The Caloric

required a small amount of coal in comparison with that needed to run a steam engine. A ship aptly named the *Ericsson*, was fitted with one of these engines. Sadly it foundered in a storm near New York City in April 1854. Despite this setback, proceeds from the Caloric provided Ericsson with a comfortable life in the wake of the *Princeton* tragedy. Ironically, during this period of privatized work, Ericsson devised plans for an invention which forced the U.S. government to reverse their sour opinion of him, and instead lavish praise upon him.

## The Civil War

The outbreak of the American Civil War changed Ericsson's life. His 1854 plan for a floating ironclad battery, rejected by the French government during the Crimean War, was revived. A suspicious Department of the Navy granted Ericsson permission to build a ship based on this design in response to the Confederate salvage of a scuttled wooden Federal vessel, the USS *Merrimac* at Norfolk Navy Yard. *Merrimac* was converted into an ironclad renamed the CSS *Virginia*. Ericsson's design, christened the *Monitor* cost far less than the millions which European navies were spending on ironclads.

For less than \$300,000 her parts were pieced together between October 1861 to January 1862, at Continental Iron Works in Brooklyn, New York. Its design was revolutionary. The *Monitor* was 172 feet long. With no more than 18 inches of freeboard, its hull was barely visible. *Monitor's* most notable feature, a revolving turret, nine feet tall, 20 feet across, held two 11-inch Dahlgren smoothbore guns. Many likened its look to a "cheesebox on a raft." Its nondescript appearance belied its formidable nature, as the *Virginia* discovered at Hampton Roads near Norfolk, Virginia on March 9, 1862.

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### Duel of the Ironclads

On March 8, prior to *Monitor's* arrival in the neck of water known as Hampton Roads, *Virginia* slipped anchor and attacked the wooden U.S. blockading fleet stationed there. The Confederate ship sank the USS *Cumberland* and burned the USS *Congress*. The helpless USS *Minnesota*, which ran aground, seemed easy prey for *Virginia* the following day. Late that evening the *Monitor* arrived. It took position next to the *Minnesota* and waited. The next morning, *Virginia* returned

and fought the *Monitor* for four hours in the first ever battle between ironclad ships of war. During the battle, a gunner on *Virginia* was questioned by his commander as to why he no longer fired at his enemy. He stated in his reply, "I can do her about as much damage by snapping my thumb at her every two minutes and a half." That was indeed a true testament to *Monitor's* invulnerability. Although both sides claimed victory, *Virginia* no longer posed a serious threat to the fleet.

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### John Ericsson's Legacy and Memorial Dedication

The building of the *Monitor* was an extremely selfless act. While Ericsson gained accolades for this revolution in naval design, he gained no monetary recompense for his effort. He stated his motive plainly in a letter to President Lincoln in August 1861. "Attachment to the Union alone impels me to offer my services..." Indeed, several more vessels related to this ship became a new type of naval warship. Monitor-type vessels would be a steady part of the United States naval arsenal until the end of the nineteenth century. After the war, Ericsson became instrumental in the development of the first torpedo boats for the U.S. Navy. Although immortalized for his impact in naval developments, he continued to develop ideas outside the scope of the military." Much like his earlier work, he proceeded toward the development of alternative methods of power generation. Side by side with his development of the Caloric engine is his work as a pioneer in the field of harnessing solar energy.

In order to honor such a powerful figure, a sculptor of unquestioned quality was needed for his memorial. In 1921, the John Ericsson Memorial Commission decided upon the model of sculptor James E. Fraser. The seated, brooding figure of Ericsson, seemingly deep in thought has at his back, allegorical figures representing Vision, Adventure, and Labor. With her eyes fixed to the future, the female figure of Vision peers over the figure of Ericsson, representing the genius exemplified in his life's work. Labor is represented by an ironworker, a figure which proved vital in bringing Ericsson's ideas to life.

Adventure, represented as a Viking warrior, evokes the trailblazing spirit of his native land, just as Ericsson, through his creations eclipsed scientific frontiers. At the backs of the figures in the statue group is a rendering of the Norse Tree of Life, the Yggdrasil. Its roots were claimed to have touched the worlds of Norse mythology, just as Ericsson's accomplishments have resonated from his time to the present day. the statuary component of the memorial rests upon a flat surface representing the compass of a mariner, the profession most recognizably touched by Ericsson's genius.

John Ericsson joined the pantheon of heroes on the National Mall, with the dedication of the memorial honoring him on May 29, 1926. President Calvin Coolidge and Crown Prince Gustav Adolf of Sweden delivered speeches before a crowd of 5,000 which gathered to pay tribute to the great engineer. Traditional Swedish hymns and American patriotic favorites were joined by the strains of the *John Ericsson Memorial March* composed by Axel W. E. Austin. Ericsson's legacy as a naturalized citizen who accomplished great and noble deeds for his adopted country, held great sway in the wake of the great influx of immigrants at the turn of the 20th century. President Coolidge perhaps best captured the spirit of the dedication in his hope that Americans of all races who visit Washington, DC and its monument to Washington and memorial to Lincoln, and now to Ericsson will reflect that these heroes "were bound together by the tie that surpasses race and blood in the communion of a common spirit...Of such is the greatness of America."