

# SUPER STEAMERS: EXTENDING THE WOODEN WARSHIPS

*With the introduction of the ironclad warship during the Civil War, notably Monitor and Merrimac, historians too often ignore the continuing development of the wooden screw steamer. In reality, the zenith of the wooden warship was yet to be reached*

**BY GENE T. ZIMMERMAN**

When Civil War broke out in the United States in 1861, the Union forces boasted many wooden warships while the Confederacy had relatively few. Thus, the naval side to the war was that of blockaders versus fast merchantmen. For this reason historical works have concentrated on the development of iron warships as a means to break and enforce the blockade. This unfortunate and unrealistic belief that the development of the wooden warship ended with the introduction of the *Virginia* and *Monitor* has been fostered by a thousand pamphlets and books. And yet, the facts remain that development of wooden screw steamers continued. The Confederacy had several screw steamer raiders built in England that could run with the Union's best. Probably the most famous of these was *CSS Alabama* which had Union cruisers scouring the Atlantic while she scurried from port to port and sinking to sinking.

When the Civil War broke out, there was general expectation among southerners that England and France would recognize their secessionist government, and thus complicate matters no end for the north. There were good reasons for this feeling. Southern cotton made up most of the world's supply, and England and France were the world's largest market for that cotton. English mills were highly dependent on Southern production, and the South was a large user of English finished goods. The

South wanted low or no tariffs on imported goods because they depended heavily on outside production. Northern

mills took advantage of tariffs to force European goods to rise in price. Thus, a Southern nation would provide England and France with a tremendous market.

Napoleon III had even greater ideas. Dreaming of regaining part of the former North American Empire that had been lost by France through war and trade, he took over Mexico, and set up a relative, the Austrian Maximilian I, on that throne. French troops landed with the new emperor to insure his ascendancy without fear of American intervention, for the Monroe Doctrine was temporarily suspended. This further increased Southern hopes, and Northern fears for it seemed inevitable that France

must recognize the CSA if she were to escape the eventual consequences of her action. Confederate agents worked tirelessly to gain this recognition using trade and land as inducements. In part, they were successful.

The Confederacy received loans and supplies from European bankers, merchants, and governments. European officers manned some of the raiders, and even



One of the most successful of the Confederate blockade runners was *CSS Colonel Lamb*. Built in 1864 by Jones, Quiggin & Company, she was a near sister to *Hope* that preceded her that year, but which had a much longer deckhouse. She is identified with the dashing Capt. Tom Lockwood and was christened by his wife. The shipbuilder William Quiggin registered her in his own name then quietly transferred her to Confederate agent J.B. Lafitte in Nassau, where she was fitted out. She survived the war intact and was sold to the Brazilian government. After loading a cargo of explosives for Brazil in Liverpool, she blew up at anchor in the Mersey the night before sailing. Many of the *CSS* blockade runners were painted a light gray to blend with the sea. The Union "super-steamers" were created to stop the Confederate blockade runners.



Lithograph by Louis Prang Company: *The Monitor and Merrimac: The First Fight Between Ironclads*. By early 1862, English mills were having difficulties staying open as supplies of high-quality cotton from the American South were dwindling because of the effectiveness of the Union blockade. Today, it is perhaps forgotten that the English Parliament nearly went so far as to declare war against the Union after a Union ship stopped an English vessel and seized two Southern envoys that were onboard. This near act of piracy saw the British ship troops to Canada while the Royal Navy was put on alert. However, the British realized the threat of Union ironclads. Of the 149 first-line Royal Navy ships, only two could face the monitors. The two Royal Navy ironclads, all of such vessels were coastal in design, could be placed near Canadian ports to protect incoming transports.