

**Guide to the John Ericsson Letter, 1864
Catalog Number MS312**

The Library at The Mariners' Museum

Contact Information:

The Library at The Mariners' Museum

100 Museum Drive

Newport News, VA 23606

Phone: (757) 591-7782

Fax: (757) 591-7310

Email: library@mariner.org

URL: www.mariner.org/library

DESCRIPTIVE SUMMARY

Repository: The Library at The Mariners' Museum

Title: John Ericsson Letter

Catalog number: MS312

Accession number: CA15

Physical Characteristics: 11 handwritten pages

Language(s): English

Creator(s): John Ericsson

SCOPE AND CONTENT

This collection consists of an eleven page letter from John Ericsson to the editor of the New York *Herald* dating from July 13, 1864. Through the letter, Ericsson responds to criticisms of the USS *Monitor* and the entire fleet of Passaic class ironclad monitors. Among the criticisms of Ericsson's detractors are that large sums of money have been wasted, the ships are not seaworthy, they cannot fire their guns at sea, that they cannot carry enough coal for a transatlantic voyage, and that they lack the proper means of ventilation. Within the letter, Ericsson responds in detail to each charge leveled against the monitor ironclad ships. The letter was penned by a secretary and signed by Ericsson.

ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

Accession number

CA15

Accession date

1943

Restrictions

Collection is open to all researchers.

Publication Rights

Copies of any materials may not be reproduced, published, or distributed, in any form without written permission from The Mariners' Museum.

Preferred Citation

John Ericsson Letter, 1864, MS312

The Library at The Mariners' Museum, Newport News, Virginia

BIOGRAPHICAL/HISTORICAL SKETCH

John Ericsson was born in the province of Vermland, Sweden, on July 31, 1803. The son of a mining engineer, Ericsson showed an early interest in mechanics. By the age of ten, he had designed and constructed a miniature sawmill and by 13, he was a cadet in the Swedish navy. By the age of 17, he entered the Swedish army, joining as an ensign in the 23rd. Corps, a specialized engineering unit for the army. While serving in the army, Ericsson became interested in steam engines and developed the theory for his caloric engine, which operated on the principle that air heated to very high temperature could be used to drive engines.

In 1826 Ericsson published a paper on his work to develop a caloric engine. That year he demonstrated his invention to the British Society of Civil Engineers. Although the engine failed in the demonstration, Ericsson impressed the English engineer John Braithwaite. Braithwaite was impressed with the young Swede's determination and offered him a position as a partner in his firm. In the ten years that Braithwaite and Ericsson worked together they developed some 30 new inventions, including an evaporator, a depth finder, a series of improved engines, and a steam engine with a surface condenser.

By 1836, Ericsson had patented a design for the screw propeller. An American naval officer, Robert Stockton, was impressed with Ericsson's propeller and persuaded him to immigrate to the United States. In 1839, with Stockton's influence, Ericsson was awarded a contract to build a screw-propelled warship for the United States Navy. Launched in 1843, the USS *Princeton* was the first warship in naval history to be designed and built as a screw-powered ship. During the ship's trials in 1844, one of the guns exploded killing several dignitaries on board. Efforts by the Navy to assign the blame to Ericsson, led the engineer to redirect his creativity into civilian fields.

By June 1862, Confederate forces started the conversion of the USS *Merrimack* into the CSS *Virginia*. Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, countered with the creation of a board to build an ironclad vessel. After presentations and negotiations, Ericsson's design of the USS *Monitor* was accepted. *Monitor's* successful battle with the Confederate ironclad *Virginia* on March 9, 1862, made Ericsson a hero in the North. Throughout the rest of the Civil War, Ericsson was involved in the design and construction of a number of ironclad monitor type vessels of the United States Navy.

After the Civil War, Ericsson continued his work on maritime and naval technology. He designed ships for foreign navies, experimented with submarines and self-propelled torpedoes, and worked on technologies as exotic as solar energy. Ericsson continued to work on his invention until his death in New York City on March 8, 1889. In August 1890, following a memorial service at New York, his body was placed on board the cruiser *Baltimore*, which carried him across the Atlantic to his native Sweden for burial.

FOLDER LISTING

Folder 1 Finding Aid

Folder 2 July 13, 1864, New York

Eleven page letter from John Ericsson to the editor of the New York *Herald*. Through the letter, Ericsson responds to criticisms of the "Monitor" type ironclad ships published in the New York *Herald*. He defends the USS *Monitor* and the entire fleet of Passaic class Monitors on from these criticisms: large sums have been wasted in experiments; the high cost of the ships are depleting the national treasury; monitors type ships are proven to be un-seaworthy; these ships cannot fire their guns at

sea; they are incapable of carrying enough coal for an Atlantic passage; they lack proper means of ventilation; and that the me monitor type ship is criticized and condemned in Europe.

MATERIALS REMOVED

None

SUBJECTS

Ericsson, John

Monitor (Ironclad ; 1862)

United States -- History -- Civil War, 1861-1865.