

The Last Voyage of the USS *Monitor*

Anna Holloway, The Mariners' Museum

December 2012

On Christmas Eve 1862, orders came in for the USS *Monitor* to proceed to Beaufort, North Carolina, then presumably to Charleston, though it was not stated in the orders.¹ On Christmas Day, both officers and crew observed the holiday with both work and festive food and drink. Some of the crew had leave to go ashore and encountered the crew of several British vessels that were in port. The men mingled together “on the best of terms till the parties got too much whiskey when a fight would have to decide who was the best man of the two.” William Keeler, who was ashore and witness to the brawl said that by the evening, “there seemed to be a sort of general mass, black eyes, bloody noses, & battered faces seeming to predominate.”²

The next few days, while the crew waited for the weather to clear, they placed oakum between the turret and its brass deck ring, though they did not seal it with pitch. They bolted and caulked the gun-port shutters, caulked the pilothouse slits, and secured iron covers over the deck lights. George Geer wrote to his wife that he sealed the hatches with “Red Lead putty, and the Port Holes I made Rubber Gaskets one inch thick and in fact had every thing about the ship in the way of an opening water tight.” They needed to be cautious, for they were about to enter the Graveyard of the Atlantic. In the midst of the

¹ ORN, Series I, Volume 7, 341.

² Keeler letter to Anna, December 25, 1862 in *Aboard the USS Monitor*, 250.

preparations, Albert Campbell, Second Assistant Engineer, was injured while working on the engine and was removed from the ship. He would not make the trip south.³

On December 29, two massive hawsers were passed from the *Monitor* to the vessel assigned for the ocean tow—the USS *Rhode Island*. The *Monitor*'s small boats were transferred to the consort vessel where they could be kept safe.⁴ At 2:30 p.m. John Bean, a local pilot, came on board the *Rhode Island* and the two vessels got underway. The weather was clear and pleasant, and John Bankhead wrote that there was “every prospect of its continuation.” As the *Monitor* was leaving Hampton Roads, her former commander, John Worden, was entering the roadstead in another monitor, the USS *Montauk*. The *Monitor* and *Rhode Island* passed Cape Henry at 6 p.m. and thus entered the Atlantic Ocean.

Just before dawn on December 30, the USS *Monitor*, in tow of the USS *Rhode Island*, began to “experience a swell from the southward” and as the day progressed the clouds increased “till the sun was obscured by their cold grey mantle.” Officers and crew amused themselves by watching three sharks swim alongside the ship. Soon, however, the sea began to break over the vessel, the waves white with foam. As the weather grew worse the men were forced to go below decks. At 5:00 p.m. the officers sat down to dinner in the wardroom, joking about being free from their “monotonous inactive life.”

As the *Monitor* prepared to round Cape Hatteras, waves hit the turret so hard it trembled. But the crew was elated: “Hurrah for the first iron-clad that ever rounded Cape Hatteras!” they cried. “Hurrah for the little boat that is first in everything!”⁵ By 7:30 p.m. one of the

³ Geer letter to Martha, December 28, 1862, George Geer Papers, MS10, The Mariners' Museum Library and Archives, Newport News, VA.

⁴ Copy of USS *Rhode Island* Log, Ernest Peterkin Collection, MS390, Series 6, subseries 3, The Mariners' Museum Library and Archives, Newport News, VA.

⁵ Grenville Weeks, “The Last Cruise of the *Monitor*,” *Atlantic Monthly*, XI, March 1863, 366-372.

hawsers snapped and the *Monitor* began rolling wildly. The increased motion forced out some of the oakum under the turret and water started pouring in through the gaps.

The situation below deck was serious. The water level had risen to one inch in the engine room, and Captain Bankhead ordered Engineer Watters to put the Worthington bilge pumps to work. Water had also reached the coal bunkers and the coal was growing wet to keep up the steam in the engines. The pressure, which normally ran at 80 pounds, had dropped to 20 pounds—dangerously low. The Captain ordered the large centrifugal water pump into action. Mountainous waves crashed over the *Monitor's* deck as the storm intensified. The pilothouse was almost continuously under water. Many of the men were on top of the turret. Bankhead “signalized several times to the *Rhode Island* to stop.”⁶The engineers reported that the pumps were having no effect.

At 8:45 p.m., the *Rhode Island* stopped. For a moment the *Monitor* seemed to ride more easily. But the wind kept picking up. The waves now began “...burying her completely for an instant, while for a few seconds nothing could be seen of her from the *Rhode Island* but the upper part of her turret surrounded by foam.”⁷

At 10 p.m. the engineers told Bankhead that the water was more than a foot deep in the engine room—so deep that the blowers were spitting water. Surgeon Weeks wrote “...the vessel's doom was sealed; for with [the fires'] extinction the pumps must cease, and all hope of keeping the *Monitor* above water...”⁸ The men organized a bucket brigade, but it

⁶ ORN, Series I, Volume 8, 347.

⁷ “The Wreck of the *Monitor*,” *Harper's Weekly*, January 24, 1863, 60.

⁸ Grenville Weeks, “The Last Cruise of the *Monitor*,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Volume XI, March 1863, 369.

did no good except to lessen the crew's panic. Weeks recalled, "Some sang as they worked, and... the voices, mingling with the roar of the waters, sounded like a defiance to Ocean."⁹

At 10:30 p.m. Bankhead gave the order for the red distress lantern to be hoisted. The engines were slowed to preserve steam for the pumps. But the decrease in speed made the hawser taut, and the ironclad became unmanageable. Bankhead called for volunteers to cut the towline. Master Louis Stodder, Boatswain's Mate John Stocking (the alias of Wells Wentz), and Quarter Gunner James Fenwick climbed down the turret, but eyewitnesses said that Fenwick and Stocking were swept overboard and drowned. Stodder managed to hang on to the safety lines around the deck and cut through the hawser with a hatchet.

At 11:00 p.m. Bankhead sent the signal to the *Rhode Island*, "Send your boats immediately, we are sinking!" Commander Trenchard called for the *Rhode Island's* engines to be stopped and her boats "away to the rescue!" The first boat, a launch, was commanded by Ensign A.O. Taylor. The second, a cutter, was commanded by Master's Mate Rodney Browne. Bankhead had the *Monitor's* engines stopped as well. Two boats from the *Rhode Island* reached the *Monitor* and Bankhead ordered Lt. Greene "to put as many men into them as they would safely carry."¹⁰

Their power cut, the *Monitor* and the *Rhode Island* were drifting dangerously close together. One of the launches was caught between them and suffered damage, but remained afloat as sixteen men climbed in. The *Rhode Island* tried to pull away, but the hawser Stodder had cut had become entangled in the paddlewheel and was pulling the ships closer together. Sailors from the *Rhode Island* worked to cut the ships loose as they

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ ORN, Series I, Volume 8, 348.

rolled heavily on the waves. Finally, the lines were freed and the *Rhode Island* began to drift away.

To get to the rescue boats, the men had to cross the rolling, storm-swept deck. Keeler described “Mountains of water ... rushing across our decks...the howling of the tempest, ... the bubbling cry of the strong swimmer in his agony and the whole panorama of horror which time can never efface from my memory.”¹¹ At midnight, Ensign William Rodgers launched the third boat from the *Rhode Island*. The distance between the two ships had increased considerably, and Browne’s cutter was almost unmanageable. As it approached the *Monitor*, it collided with Taylor’s overloaded launch trying to make its way to the *Rhode Island*. Surgeon Weeks, in the launch, reached out to the oncoming boat. The two boats scraped heavily as they passed, catching Weeks’ right hand between the two, crushing three fingers and wrenching his arm “from its socket...”¹²

Shortly after midnight the water overcame the engine and the *Monitor*’s pumps stopped, and with them any hope of saving the ship. Bankhead reportedly said, “It is madness to remain here any longer ... let each man save himself.”¹³ The boats from the *Rhode Island* were still coming to rescue the *Monitor*’s half-drowned crew, but it was clear that not everyone would make it in one trip. Desperate men had to cling to the top of the turret until the lifeboats returned.

Browne’s cutter arrived soon after Bankhead’s call to abandon ship. He recalled, “We had now got in my boat all of the *Monitor*’s crew that could be persuaded to come down from the turret for they had seen some of their shipmates who had left the turret for

¹¹ Keeler letter to Anna, January 6, 1863, in *Aboard the USS Monitor*, 258.

¹² Grenville Weeks, “The Last Cruise of the *Monitor*,” *Atlantic Monthly*, Volume XI, March 1863, 370.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 371.

the deck washed overboard and sink in their sight.” Many of the men who did leave the foundering ship threw shoes, clothing and possessions back into the turret so they would be able to swim if they needed to.¹⁴ Those same possessions were found by conservators and archaeologists following the recovery of the turret in August, 2002.

Paymaster William Keeler later gave a moment-by-moment account of his escape from the *Monitor*: “...I divested myself of the greater portion of my clothing to afford me greater facilities for swimming ... & attempted to descend the ladder leading down the outside of the turret, but found it full of men hesitating but desiring to make the perilous passage of the deck.” Keeler’s saga continued: “I found a rope hanging from one of the awning stanchions over my head & slid down it to the deck. A huge wave passed over me tearing me from my footing...I was carried ...ten or twelve yards from the vessel when ... the wave threw me against the vessel’s side near one of the iron stanchions which supported the life line; this I grasped with all the energy of desperation & ...was hauled into the boat....”¹⁵

John Bankhead returned to his cabin for his coat, and other small personal possessions. He took “one lingering look and ... left the *Monitor*’s cabin forever.” Master’s Mate George Fredrickson returned a watch he had borrowed from another officer, saying, “Here, this is yours; I may be lost.” Some of the men refused to leave—or simply couldn’t. Francis Butts recalled that Engineer Samuel A. Lewis was too seasick to leave his berth.¹⁶

¹⁴ Keeler letter to Anna, January 6, 1863 in *Aboard the USS Monitor*, 258-259.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Francis Butts, “The Loss of the *Monitor*” in *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, Volume XXXI, New Series Volume IX, 300.

On board the *Rhode Island*, Surgeon Samuel Gilbert Webber reset Weeks's arm and amputated parts of three fingers.¹⁷ Weeks came back to stand on deck with his *Monitor* shipmates, watching the sad drama unfold: "we watched from the deck of the *Rhode Island* the lonely light upon the *Monitor*'s turret – a hundred times we thought it had gone forever, – a hundred times it reappeared, till at last...it sank and we saw it no more."¹⁸

Browne and his men in the cutter were making "but slow progress" when the *Monitor*'s light disappeared for good. Then, turning back to the *Rhode Island*, they were horrified to see her "...steaming away from us, throwing up rockets and burning blue lights – leaving us behind." Captain Trenchard searched for them all night and into the next day, when the search was abandoned and the *Rhode Island* steamed for Beaufort. Picked up by the schooner *A. Colby* the following day, Browne and his crew returned to the *Rhode Island* to be greeted by "hearty cheers."¹⁹

Forty-seven men were rescued from the USS *Monitor* before she slipped beneath the waves. Sixteen were lost—either washed overboard while trying to reach the rescue boats or trapped inside the foundering vessel. Upon mustering the crew upon the *Rhode Island*, John Bankhead found the following men missing:

Landsman William Allen

Acting Ensign Norman Knox Attwater

Yeoman William Bryan

1st Class Boy Robert Cook

Landsman William H. Eagan

¹⁷ Grenville Weeks, *The Last Cruise of the Monitor*, "Atlantic Monthly, Volume XI, March 1863, 372.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ ORN, Series I, Volume 8, 348.

Quarter Gunner James R. Fenwick

Acting Ensign George Fredrickson

2nd Assistant Engineer Robinson Hands

Officer's Cook Robert H. Howard

1st Class Fireman Thomas Joyce

3rd Assistant Engineer Samuel Augee Lewis

Coal Heaver George Littlefield

Landsman Daniel Moore

Seaman Jacob Nicklis

Boatswain's Mate Wells Wentz, aka John Stocking

1st Class Fireman Robert Williams²⁰

NOAA archaeologists and Mariners' Museum conservators have found within the turret artifacts specifically associated with four of the sixteen men who perished. All are pieces of silver or silver-plated tableware, and all are of different patterns, indicating that they had likely been brought from home by the individual officers or crewmen. Among them is a spoon bearing the initials "NKA." Norman Knox Attwater, Acting Ensign, came on board the *Monitor* in November of 1862. He originally hailed from New Haven Connecticut and was acquainted with William Keeler's father in-law. There is also a fork with the name "G.Frederickson" engraved upon it. George Frederickson, Acting Ensign was on the *Monitor* from the very beginning. Initially rated as Master's Mate, he had been promoted to Acting Ensign in November of 1862. Frederickson's hand was one of several to record entries in

²⁰ William Keeler in *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy*, (Washington: D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1863), 27.

the log of the *Monitor* and his young face peers out from several photos of officers taken by James Gibson in the summer of 1862.

Three pieces of tableware recovered to date bear the initials “SAL” as well as the letters “USN. Samuel Augee (or Auge) Lewis, was the 3rd Assistant Engineer, arriving to take up his commission in November 1862. Paymaster William Keeler wrote on November 17th of the new officers on board, “Then in the place of Mr. White we have a Mr. Lewis from Baltimore, a mere boy, nearly a cypher in our little society.”²¹ Recalling the events of December 30/31 1862, Francis Butts wrote

I think I was the last person who saw Engineer S.A. Lewis as he lay seasick in his bunk, apparently watching the water as it grew deeper and deeper, and aware what his fate must be. He called me as I passed his door, and asked if the pumps were working. I replied that they were. "Is there any hope?" he asked; and feeling a little moved at the scene, and knowing certainly what must be his end, and the darkness that stared at us all, I replied, "As long as there is life there is hope."²²

A large silver spoon bears the initials “JN.” This spoon is more than likely the property of Jacob Nicklis, a 21 year-old sailor from Buffalo, New York. Nicklis came on board the USS *Monitor* as Ship’s Number 61 on November 7, 1862 when the *Monitor* was undergoing repairs at the Washington Navy Yard. Standing at 5’7”, Nicklis had grey eyes, light colored hair and a “ruddy complexion” according to his enlistment record. The son of a Buffalo tailor, Nicklis had enlisted in the Navy at age 16, but re-enlisted in 1862 for a one-year term. Nicklis wrote a letter to his father on December 28, 1862. It was a brief letter, with the promise that a longer one would follow once the *Monitor* had arrived safely at her

²¹ Keeler letter to Anna, November 17, 1862 in *Aboard the USS Monitor*, 272.

²² Francis Butts, “The Loss of the *Monitor*” in *Century Illustrated Monthly Magazine*, Volume XXXI, New Series Volume IX, 300. Butts drew from Grenville Weeks accounts published a few months after the sinking, as well as Samuel Dana Greene’s account. Butts very likely embellished his account over time, but his is the only mention of Lewis during the sinking.

next station. He told of his Christmas dinner, which he said “was a good one” and cost him a dollar. He mentioned that they had eaten “chicken stew and then stuffed turkey, mashed potatoes, plum pudding and nice fruitcake with apples for dessert.” While he did not care for his accommodations on the *Monitor’s* berth deck, he conceded that he at least had “plenty to eat and drink” including rations of sea biscuits and “what they call coffee.” He ends his letter with the admonition to his father, “Do not answer this letter until you hear from me again, which I hope will be shortly. They say we will have a pretty rough time going around Hatteras, but I hope it will not be the case.”²³

Conservators and historians are still unsure how these pieces of tableware came to be in the turret. In all there are over thirty pieces, along with the remains of a drawer and a chest. It is possible that one or more of the men were trying to bring the ship’s silver chest with them, and then thought better of it. It is also possible that the chest fell into the turret sometime after the sinking. They are, however, poignant reminders of the loss suffered by the *Monitor’s* crew.

The *Rhode Island* returned to Hampton Roads with the remaining crew from the *Monitor*, the *Rhode Island* crew sharing their warm clothing with the *Monitor* boys.²⁴ Upon arriving at Fortress Monroe, the survivors rushed to send letters home to assure their families and friends that they were safe. George Geer sent two letters, one to his wife Martha, which was brief and bereft of detail:

U.S. Steamer Rhode Island
Jany 2 1862 [sic]

Dear Wife

²³ Nicklis letter to his father, December 28, 1862, Jacob Nicklis Papers, MS363, The Mariners’ Museum Library and Archives, Newport News, VA.

²⁴ Webber letter to Nannie, January 2, 1863, Private collection.

I am sorry to have to write you that we have lost the *Monitor*, and what is worse we had 16 poor fellows drowned [sic]. I can tell you I thank God my life is spared [sic]. Besides the 16 we lost one boat that was sent from this Steamer with 11 semen [sic] in is missing. We have cruised [sic] two days for them, and have given them up for lost. I have not time to write you any more, but do not worry. I am safe and well. Write to Troy and let them know I am safe.

Your Loving
Husband
Geo S. Geer²⁵

A second, longer letter, went to Geer's brother which had more harrowing details of the sinking; details Geer wished to keep from his wife in order not to worry her.²⁶ In contrast, William Keeler spared no detail in his letter home, telling his wife that "The *Monitor* is no more...what the fire of the enemy failed to do, the elements have accomplished."²⁷

Surgeon Grenville Weeks wrote the most fitting epitaph for both the *Monitor* and her crew. In March 1863, shortly after the loss of the *Monitor*, Weeks wrote an account of the sinking for *Atlantic Monthly*. He recalled that within two days of the sinking the surviving officers and crew were back at Fortress Monroe, and the unreality of what they had been though set in, with the week "seeming...like some wild dream." He continued:

One thing only appeared real: our little vessel was lost, and we, who, in months gone by, had learned to love her, felt a strange pang go through us as we remembered that never more might we tread her deck, or gather in her little cabin at evening.

We had left her behind us, one more treasure added to the priceless store, which Ocean so jealously hides. The *Cumberland* and *Congress* went first; the little boat that avenged their loss has followed; in both noble souls have gone down. Their names are for history; and so long as we remain a people, so long will the work of the *Monitor* be remembered, and her story told to our children's children.²⁸

²⁵ Geer letter to Martha, January 2, 1863, George Geer Papers, MS10, The Mariners' Museum Library and Archives, Newport News, VA.

²⁶ Geer letter to Gilbert Geer, January 13, 1863, George Geer Papers, MS10, The Mariners' Museum Library and Archives, Newport News, VA.

²⁷ Keeler letter to Anna, January 6, 1863, in *Aboard the USS Monitor*, 253.

²⁸ Grenville Weeks, *Atlantic Monthly*, Volume XI, March 1863, 372.

That story is unfolding each day in the conservation labs, galleries and archives at The Mariners' Museum, and in the one-mile column of water, sixteen miles off Cape Hatteras that comprises the *Monitor* National Marine Sanctuary.

