

**Guide to the John Ericsson Letter, 1864 July 13  
MS0312**

**The Mariners' Museum Library  
at  
Christopher Newport University**

Contact Information:  
**The Mariners' Museum Library**  
**100 Museum Drive**  
**Newport News, VA 23606**  
**Phone: (757) 591-7782**  
**Fax: (757) 591-7310**  
**Email: [Library@MarinersMuseum.org](mailto:Library@MarinersMuseum.org)**  
**URL: [www.MarinersMuseum.org/library](http://www.MarinersMuseum.org/library)**

## DESCRIPTIVE SUMMARY

**Repository:** The Mariners' Museum Library

**Title:** John Ericsson Letter

**Inclusive Dates:** 1864 July 13

**Catalog number:** MS0312

**Physical Characteristics:** 1 11-page manuscript letter

**Language:** English

**Creator:** Ericsson, John, 1803-1889

## BIOGRAPHICAL 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 1861, 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.

### **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, that the ships are not seaworthy, that 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**

Open to all researchers.

#### **Publication Rights**

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#### **Preferred Citation**

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#### **Note to Users**

Due to the fragile and rare nature of the collection, researchers are requested to handle the materials with caution and in accordance with prescribed archival practices. When using these materials, please preserve the original order of the collection.

### **RELATED MATERIALS**

The library holds several other collections of manuscript letters written and/or signed by John Ericsson: John Ericsson Letter on Engine Design, 1859 (MS0349); John Ericsson Letter on Caloric Engines, 1858 January (MS0464); John Ericsson and Samuel Taylor Letters, 1887 (MS0188). In addition to these, one other collection includes manuscript letters written by Ericsson: Isaac Newton Jr. Family Papers, 1829-1932 (MS0013).

## **FILE GUIDE**

### **BOX 1**

**Folder 1** Finding Aid

July 13, 1864: New York

Eleven page letter from John Ericsson to the editor of the New York *Herald*.

### **SUBJECTS**

Ericsson, John, 1803-1889-Correspondence

Monitor (Ironclad : 1862)

United States-History-Civil War, 1861-865

Armored vessels-Design and construction

Armored vessels-Europe

Shipbuilding-Costs