USS Monitor: America’s First Ironclad

Launched on Jan. 30, 1862, at the Continental Iron Works in Greenpoint, N.Y., the USS Monitor made history as the Union Navy’s first ironclad warship. It fought the Confederate ironclad CSS Virginia in the first-ever clash between two ironclads at the Battle of Hampton Roads on March 9 — an encounter that signaled the start of a new era of naval warfare. The Monitor’s short but historic career came to an end on Dec. 31, 1862, when it sank in a storm off Cape Hatteras, N.C., with the loss of 16 sailors.

In 1975, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) designated the USS Monitor’s wreck site as the nation’s first national marine sanctuary. Over the years, NOAA and partners have undertaken several recovery operations and retrieved artifacts for conservation.

On July 9, 1862, as the ship docked in Virginia on the James River, James F. Gibson took the only known photos of the Monitor and her crew (above). Monitor National Marine Sanctuary is located approximately 16 miles south-southeast of Cape Hatteras, N.C.

In 1973, John G. Newton of the Duke University Marine Lab in Beaufort, N.C., led an interdisciplinary team of distinguished scientists — Harold “Doc” Edgerton, Robert Sheridan and Gordon Watts — in search of the USS Monitor. Aboard the Duke University Research Vessel Eastward, they used an innovative combination of Edgerton’s new side-scan sonar, remotely operated still and video cameras, a magnetometer, and a predecessor of modern GPS technology to hunt for the lost ironclad over an area covering 96 square miles of seafloor. The survey located 22 shipwrecks, only two of which resembled the Monitor. One of these was ruled out after three days. After months of intensive research, the team announced their findings on March 7, 1974: the second wreck, resting in 230 feet of water about 16 miles off Cape Hatteras, N.C., was indeed the USS Monitor.