



LANDSMAN RILEY POWERS



Mountain Sailor



Early in 1861, Buncombe County farmer William Riley Powers joined the Rough and Ready Guards (Co. F, 14th North Carolina Infantry). The regiment was assigned to southeastern Virginia. There, Confederate Gen. Benjamin Huger discharged Pvts. Powers and William Pleasant Craig, also of Buncombe, ordering them “to go on board the *Merrimack*” on February 18, 1862.

Merrimack was an abandoned Union frigate that the Confederates raised, refitted with four-inch-thick iron plates and a gun turret, and renamed CSS *Virginia*. Lacking qualified sailors, the Confederates transferred soldiers to the navy to man the vessel. Powers and Craig were given the rank of “landsman” as unskilled recruits assigned the dirtiest, heaviest, and most menial tasks.



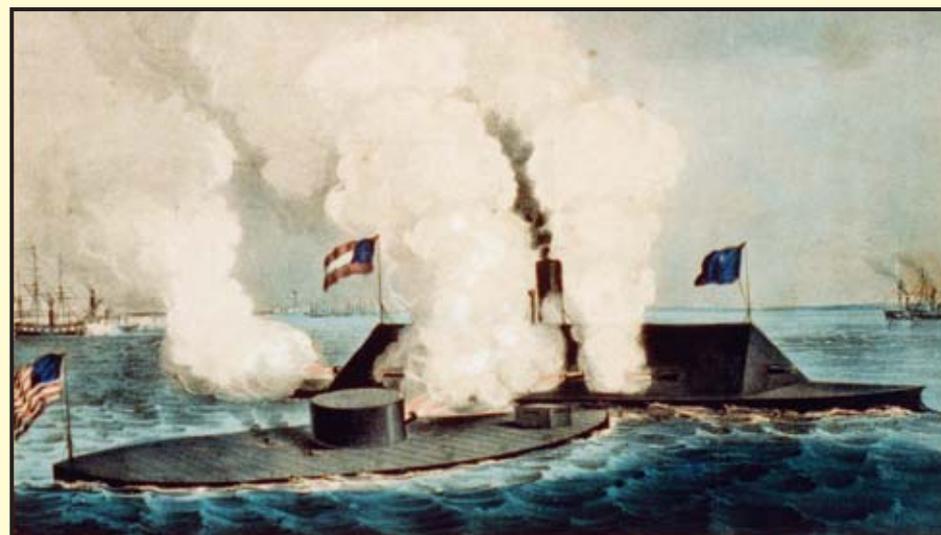
Riley Powers, back row, second from right, with Zebulon B. Vance to his right, at 1890 Confederate reunion – Courtesy North Carolina Collection, Pack Memorial Library, Asheville

Virginia was poorly ventilated and very crowded. Surgeon Dinwiddie Phillips wrote, “Most of our crew being volunteers from the army and unused to ship-life, about twenty per cent of our men were usually ashore at the hospital, and our effective force on the 8th of March was about 250 or 260 men.”

On March 7–8, 1862, *Virginia* successfully engaged the Union warships *Cumberland* and

Congress, part of the blockading force at Norfolk. The Federals, however, had also constructed an “iron-clad” ship, USS *Monitor*. On March 9, *Monitor* engaged *Virginia* at Hampton Roads, the first battle ever between armored vessels, and fought to a draw. In May, to avoid

capture, *Virginia*’s crew scuttled her. Powers had served with *Virginia* from launch to destruction. His subsequent service is not known. After the war, he returned to Buncombe County and is buried in the churchyard across the street (use crosswalks to the left and right).



Battle between CSS *Virginia* and USS *Monitor*, Hampton Roads, Va., March 9, 1862 – Courtesy Library of Congress