

Faceoff at Hampton Roads

The Weekend That Changed Naval Warfare Witnessed by Three Curtis Men

Compiled & Written by George Curtis



The morning of Saturday, March 8th, 1862, broke clear and calm over the waters of Hampton Roads and the city of Norfolk; however, the storm clouds of the American Civil War had already gathered over eastern Virginia. The U.S. Navy had blockaded the Hampton Roads entrance into the Chesapeake Bay and the mouth of the James River at Newport News Point to bottle up Confederate forces and prevent them from defending their capitol of Richmond with additional forces.¹

Richard W. Curtis, a native waterman of the Hampton area, *came* aboard the CSS *Virginia* to assist in the preparation of the vessel's initial test cruise scheduled for that Saturday afternoon. The *Virginia*, previously the U.S. Navy frigate, USS *Merrimac*, had been salvaged and reconfigured as an ironclad by the Confederates after being scuttled and burned at Norfolk's Gosport shipyard by retreating Union forces in late 1861.

Richard Wallace Curtis (1839-1926) was the son of William Hiram Curtis (abt. 1792-1878) and Tabitha White (abt. 1799-1849) of Hampton, Gloucester Co, VA and a descendant of Thomas (immigrant 1621) and Avarilla Curtis of Elizabeth City, VA. Curtis had been a private in the 32nd Virginia Infantry (Wythe Rifles), along with his older brother John A. Curtis (1834-1913), both veterans of the Battle of Big Bethel, and Richard was transferred to the *Merrimac*, along with others, by the order of Confederate General Magruder.^{2,3,8,9}

Charles Samuel Curtis was born in Virginia about 1825 and was recruited into the Confederate States Marine Corp on August 7, 1861 in Mobile, Alabama. He had been living in Tuskegee, Macon Co, Alabama in 1860. Charles served aboard the *Merrimac* as a guard and assisted the gun crews.^{4,5}

All was made ready aboard the *Merrimac* as she fired up her engine and steamed from Gosport up the Elizabeth River where she rendezvoused with two gunboat escorts. The *Merrimac* was under the command of Captain Franklin Buchanan, an accomplished former USN officer. It was only after they got underway that Buchanan announced to his officers and crew that his mission was to attack two of the blockading Union ships, the USS *Cumberland* and the USS *Congress*.



CSS *Virginia* (*Merrimac*) outbound to Hampton Roads, March 8, 1862

By 1:30 in the afternoon, the *Merrimac* entered Hampton Roads at high tide. The crew could see the entire Federal fleet arrayed in a line from Newport News to Fort Monroe. The Confederates could see clothes hanging from the rigging of the Federal frigates and for a long time, no apparent notice or action was taken to the *Merrimac*. Buchanan steamed his ironclad in the direction of Fort Monroe and then turned toward his two targets, the sloop-of-war *Cumberland* and the frigate *Congress*, anchored off Newport News Point.

Richard Curtis was assigned as a gunner to the *Merrimac*'s bow gun, a 7-inch Brooke rifle, which gave him a good view of the impending encounters. He published a pamphlet in 1899 describing the events of March 8th and 9th onward until his tour aboard the *Merrimac* ended when she was scuttled on May 11, 1862.⁷



Private Richard Curtis, Wythe Rifles, photograph, 1861. Courtesy of the Hampton History Museum, Hampton, Virginia.

As the *Merrimac* left the Elizabeth River, all eyes in Hampton Roads were fixed on her. Among those watching was a young lieutenant named Thomas McKean Buchanan, the *Congress*'s paymaster and brother of the *Merrimac*'s captain—a terrible little irony so typical of civil war. Curiosity, awe, and dread seemed to be the prevailing emotions among the onlookers.¹ Seaman Frederick Curtis, captain of No. 8 gun in the *Congress*, later recalled that "not a word was spoken, and the silence that prevailed was awful." Those who watched the iron monster come out of its

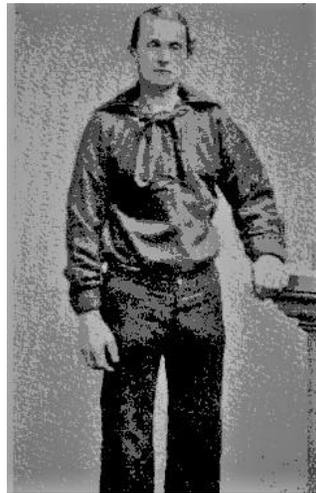
lair remembered it as looking like a "barracks building on water," "a long, low barn," a "crocodile," and "an iron-plated coffin."⁶

Frederick Hiram Curtis (1838-1900) was the son of Hiram Curtis (1809-1895) and Lucinda Wilder (c.1816-1896) of Hanover, MA. Frederick was my sixth cousin, our common ancestor, the immigrant William Curtis of Scituate, MA 1638.³

At the age of 15, Frederick went to sea on a sailing ship and journeyed the world. So it was just natural for him to enlist in the U.S. Navy in Boston in 1861. He saw his first action during the blockade of Wilmington, NC. Thereafter, he was assigned to the flagship of the Hampton Roads federal fleet, the ill-fated U.S.S. *Congress*.

Young Curtis had been busy with his duties all that Saturday morning, when he was summoned to the cabin of the captain of the *Congress*, Lt. Joseph Smith, for some repair work. While engaged in his work, Smith began to talk to him and asked who he was, and where he came from. In being told he came from Hanover, Massachusetts, Lt. Smith became interested and said his father was also a native of that town. After a pleasant conversation of the captain, Curtis return to the deck, little realizing that this was the last time that he would see his captain alive. Once on the main deck, he heard shouts that the *Merrimac* was coming. Pipes were sounded and orders given to clear the decks for action.¹

"The *Merrimac* was steaming slowly toward us," recounted Curtis, "and every eye was on her. Not a word was spoken, and the silence that prevailed was awful. The *Merrimac* steamed along by the *Cumberland*, the latter opening fire as soon as she got broadside." ⁶



Frederick H. Curtis, 1862

Attack on the Cumberland and the Congress

As the *Merrimac* approached the line of Federal warships, Buchanan ordered the bow rifle to open fire on the *Cumberland* at a range of 1500 yards. Richard Curtis and his crew responded with two shots, the first hitting the *Cumberland* on the starboard rail, showering splinters across the deck and numbing several Marines while the second disabled the *Cumberland's* heaviest gun and its crew. ¹

The *Merrimac* steamed past the *Cumberland* and toward the *Congress* on which Frederick Curtis and his No. 8 gun crew readied for the impending exchange. "She came within fifty yards and demanded that we surrender, but our captain replied that he would see them in Hades first," recounted Frederick Curtis.⁶

Looking out his gun port on the *Merrimac*, Lt. Eggleston remembered, "... the *Congress* was only about a hundred yards distant. But for an instant was she visible, for suddenly there leaped from her sides the flash of thirty-five guns, [including the No. 8 gun of Frederick Curtis] and as many shot and shell were hurled against our armor only to be thrown from it high in the air." A soldier on the nearby shore could hear the great blast of the guns but was amazed when the shower of projectiles "rattled on the armored *Merrimac* without the least injury."¹

The sound of the *Congress'* broadside "was a terrible noise," remembered by Richard Curtis of the forward Brooke gun, "and most of men gave a start when our gun captain, Charles Simms said, 'Be quiet, men, I have received as heavy a fire in open air.'" Simms' comments steadied Curtis and his crew and the "broadside had no effect on the iron sides of our ship."⁷

As the Confederate ironclad passed the hapless frigate, she unleashed her starboard broadside of four guns at the *Congress* with a devastating effect. One of the *Merrimac's* shells made a direct hit on the *Congress'* gun No. 7. Frederick Curtis, at his station at gun No. 8, "felt something warm, and the next instant I found myself lying on the deck beside a number of my shipmates." The cannon next to him had been blown off its carriage, "sweeping the men about it back into a heap, bruised and bleeding. The shell struck right in back of me and took my left hand-man."⁶

The Confederate ironclad moved away, and the men on the *Congress'* deck began to cheer, believing the *Merrimac* had given up. But the Confederate vessel was only heading back for the *USS Cumberland*, with her 30-guns. What those cheering men did not yet realize was that the *Congress* was burning in her main hold, sickbay, and below the wardroom, dangerously close to her aft powder magazine.¹



The Merrimac takes on the USS Congress

The *Merrimac* continued toward the sloop-of-war while the *Cumberland* kept up her fire against the onrushing ironclad, but her shot "struck and glanced off, having no more effect than peas from a pop gun." Richard Curtis remembered, "We were getting close to the *Cumberland* and all the ships battering hard; when I heard the voice of Capt. Buchanan, shout, "Look out men, I am going to ram that ship!" Just before the ironclad reached her target, Richard Curtis peered out of a gun port and "saw a sight that has been ever since indelibly stamped on my mind: all on the

starboard side of the *Cumberland* was lined with officers and men with rifles and boarding pikes, all ready to repel us, thinking we intended to board her. I saw an officer, hat off, and his sword raised cheering on his men; this was the sight of a moment. Then came the terrible crash and at the same time our gun was fired, adding to the terrible hole in her side, as the gun recoiled back the captain of the gun, Lt. Simms, cried "Sponge!" and then Charles Dunbar, one of our gun crew and a good friend of mine, jumped over the gun breech, threw his head partly out of the port and was instantly killed by being shot in the head from the deck of the *Cumberland*. He fell at my feet and was our first man killed. Our ship swung away from the *Cumberland* and with the flood tide went some little distance up James River, although the *Cumberland* was rapidly sinking, yet her officers and men kept up the fight until she sank beneath the water of James River.¹

The crew of the *Congress* began cheering as the *Merrimac* steamed toward the James River thinking the ironclad was giving up the fight. "They were soon sadly undeceived," Buchanan wrote, "for a few minutes after we opened up on her again." The *Merrimac's* stern pivot gun, also a 7-inch Brooke rifle, had not fired a shot during the *Cumberland* encounter, but the *Congress* entered their sights as the ironclad maneuvered upriver. The first three shots from the stern gun hit the *Congress* with deadly effect. The frigate, seriously damaged, endeavored to escape the approaching ironclad. Fearing she would be rammed, her captain, Lt. Joseph Smith, ran her up on a shoal under the supposed protection of Federal shore gun batteries. The *Congress* was unable to position herself parallel to shore in order to protect herself from the ironclad but ran aground with her bow facing shore and only her stern guns available to return fire.¹

While the *Merrimac* was making her turn and heading back into Hampton Roads, her two escort gunboats began firing on the grounded *Congress*. They felt confident doing so because the three other Union capital ships in the Hampton Roads, the USS *Minnesota*, USS *Roanoke* and USS *St. Lawrence*, had all run aground rushing to aid Federal forces at Newport News Point.

Just before 4 PM, the *Merrimac* came within two hundred yards of the *Congress* and began shelling the helpless frigate. By this stage the two ships were so close that Frederick Curtis, the gun captain on one of the *Congress's* 32-pound cannons, thought that the *Merrimac* was about to send over a boarding party.

Her commander, Lt. Joseph Smith, struggled to keep his ship in action. At 4:20 PM, Smith was mortally wounded by a shell fragment. Command transferred to Lt. Austin Pendergrast, and with multiple fires raging on the ship and over a quarter of her crew killed or wounded, decided to raise the white flag of surrender.

Richard Curtis recalled this moment, "About this time our cutter was called away--this was a small boat belonging to our ship: the writer was a member of her crew and went on deck to get in with others of the crew to row an officer to the *Congress* to take her surrender, as she had hoisted a white flag; but we found that a canon ball had passed through the bottom of our cutter and she was of no use, consequently we did not have the pleasure of going to the *Congress*. After being housed up for some hours, it was quite refreshing to stand on the upper deck of our ship, and the writer fully appreciated it; he saw the *Cumberland* at the bottom of James River, men up on her rigging and small boats from both sides taking them off; we saw the enemy on shore running in all directions; the *Congress* had slipped her cable and gone ashore with her bow on."

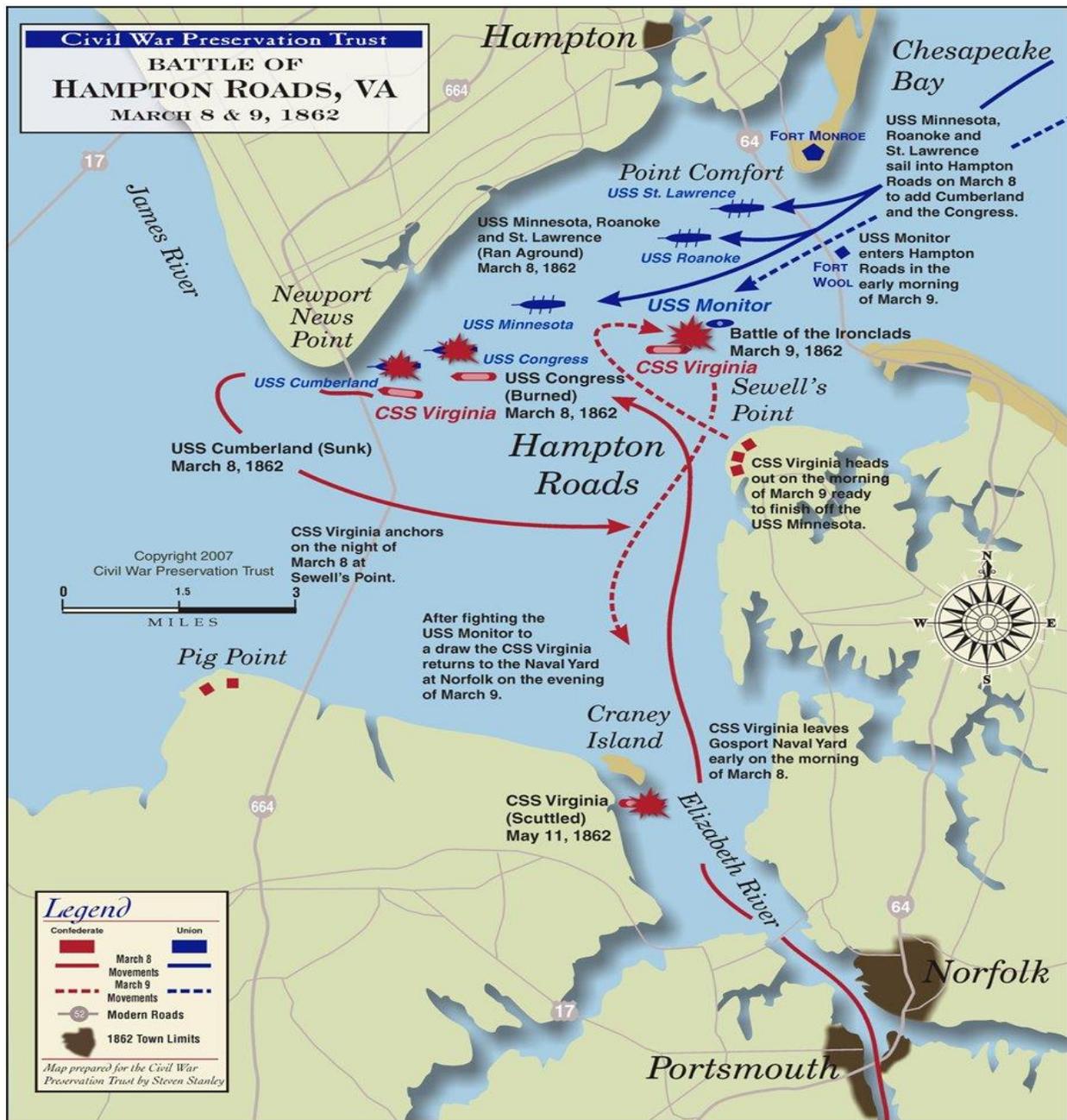
One of the Confederate gunboats, the CSS *Beaufort*, pulled up alongside the *Congress* and its commander, Lt. Parker, went aboard to accept the surrender and assist evacuation of the

wounded and crew of the frigate. He ordered another gunboat, the CSS *Jamestown*, to the other side of the *Congress* to speed up the evacuation. Parker recalled, "I had scarcely given the order, when a tremendous fire was opened on us from the shore. At the first discharge, every man on the deck of the *Beaufort* was either killed or wounded. The *Beaufort*, suffering more than ten casualties, backed away from the *Congress* and steamed toward the Elizabeth River with 30 prisoners." ⁷

It was at this point that the Union Army had entered the fray. Brigadier General Joseph Mansfield, a forty-year army veteran and West Point graduate, ordered shore artillery detachments to open fire on the Confederate warships. Mansfield, who was questioned about the propriety of firing on the Confederates, reportedly snapped, "I know the damned ship has surrendered, but we haven't!" ^{1,5}

Franklin Buchanan was enraged by the Union cannonade from shore. He dispatched a small boat with a white flag to the *Congress* but it was also fired upon from shore cannons and by small arms fire from the frigate and sunk. This indeed set his battle blood boiling as he yelled, "Destroy that ship! She's firing on our white flag!"¹

Outraged, Buchanan ordered the *Merrimac* gunners to rake the *Congress* with heated shot and rifled shell until she was blazing from stem to stern. Buchanan, known for his excitable nature, climbed up to the top of the *Merrimac* to get a better view of the action, called for a rifle and began firing at the troops on shore. Such an obvious target, Buchanan was shot in the thigh. Lt. Catesby Jones, Buchanan's executive officer, assumed command. ¹



“We were kept pretty busy shelling the *Merrimac*,” Frederick Curtis continued, “and after she had destroyed the *Cumberland*, she turned her attention to us. About this time, our vessel took fire in the wardroom from a shell exploding there. It was very near the aft ordinance magazine, and it became necessary to flood the magazine at once to prevent our being blown up. It was a pretty busy time aboard just then, and the men were much excited. The order was then passed for us to cease firing, and our colors were struck. My gun was loaded at the time, and, although we had been told to cease fire, I pulled the lanyard and fired what proved to be the last shot from the fated *Congress*.⁶ This may have been the action that so upset Captain Buchanan.

At 5 PM with the sun settling over the Virginia peninsula, the *Merrimac* ceased firing on the doomed frigate and set a course toward the grounded *Minnesota* which she shelled for awhile before time and tide ended the battle for the ironclad. She turned and headed back to Craney Island at the mouth of the Elizabeth River. Her crew emerged sweat-soaked after spending most of the day below deck in temperatures reaching 140 degrees. They were black with coal dust mixed with cannon ash and jumped into the river to bath before a most welcomed late supper.

Gun captain Frederick Curtis remained at his No. 8 gun station throughout the whole engagement. He assisted a number of crew members escape the burning ship and was one of the last to depart, jumping into the water from the gun port and swimming ashore. He was met on the beach by survivors of his ship and that of the *Cumberland*. He found dry clothes and returned to the beach to watch the continuing action. He recounted, "A party of us started down the beach and found a boat, which was partly filled with water. Our plan was to row out to the *Congress*, recover our clothes and belongings and bring back survivors. As we were tipping the water out of the boat, the *Merrimac* fired two rounds of grapeshot at us. The shot hit the water a few feet from us and we were forced to abandon the idea of using that boat. We did find another small boat on the beach out of sight of the ironclad. It was getting quite dark as we approached the burning *Congress*. The *Merrimac* was getting under way to return to Norfolk and the firing was about over. We found about twenty men and a few officers still on our ship. They wanted us to take the captain's body onboard our little boat which was done. A number of wounded were taken onboard also and we rowed back to shore. A number of soldiers from nearby camps lined the shore and invited the sailors of the *Congress* to spend the night with them. I went with a party of the 5th Indiana and shall never forget their kindness to us poor stranded sailors."⁶

During the ensuing darkness after the battle, the ironclad's crew and Confederate defenders watch the *Congress* burn across Hampton Roads. At about 11 PM, one of the *Merrimac*'s pilots happened to looking in the direction of the *Congress*, when, according to Lt. Catesby Jones, "...there passed a strange-looking craft, brought out in bold relief by the brilliant light of the burning ship, which he at once proclaimed to be the *Ericsson*." The Union ironclad, the *Monitor*, had finally arrived from New York, but it was a day late.¹

The *Congress* burned throughout the evening, a spectacle viewed by many on both sides. Around midnight, the powder room of the frigate erupted in several powerful explosions heard and seen far up the James River and felt throughout the area.

So ended a long day for both Confederate soldier turned navy seaman Richard Curtis and Union seaman Frederick Curtis, both somehow surviving a most historical battle. Naval warfare would never be the same. Wooden ships were now the dinosaurs of the seas.

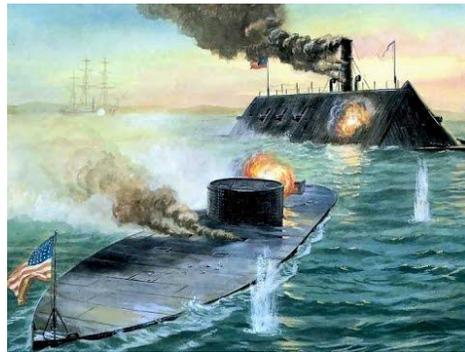
Encounter with the Monitor

The USS *Monitor* was the creation of Swedish-American inventor John Ericsson and was commonly referred to as the *Ericsson Battery*. Richard Curtis provides a running narrative of the *Merrimac*'s encounter with the *Monitor* on that infamous Sunday morning.

"About 9 o'clock on the morning of the 9th everything being ready, we weighed anchor and steamed towards the *Minnesota* [which was still grounded] and at range of 1,000 yards we opened up the fight; the enemy was quick to respond, and then commenced a fine artillery duel between the two ships. Every shot we fired struck the *Minnesota*. The first shot passed through her side,

exploding on the inside of the ship, causing considerable destruction and setting the ship on fire; the next shot went through the boiler of the tugboat *Dragon* and exploded her boiler. The tug was lying alongside of the *Minnesota*.⁷

The *Minnesota* had fine gunners and many of her shots struck our ship, one of them struck the edge of our bow port and part of it came inside of our ship and badly wounded one of the men at my bow gun. Right abaft the bow gun the galley pipe ran through the upper deck; this pipe had been taken down and a man could get his head through, whereby getting a full view of the enemy; this position was occupied by Lieutenant Davidson, our new gun captain, with a pair of marine glasses he could see and report every shot from our ship and its effect on the enemy. This duel had been going on some time when I heard Lt. Davidson say that they were leaving the *Minnesota* on a raft; this caused me to look through the bow port and I saw something like a raft coming from the starboard side of the *Minnesota* and crossing her bow; after she had gotten in full view, Davidson came down from his position and said to the men, 'by George, it is the Ericsson Battery, look out for her hot work,' which soon came."^{7,1}



"The *Monitor* steamed slowly towards us and soon opened fire; she lay flat with the water and looked exactly like a cheese box on a flat table; nothing could be seen except her turret. The fight between the two ironclads became general; they drew very near together, in fact our bow struck the *Monitor* just a little forward of her turret, just before this happened Lieutenant Davidson, the commander of our division, said to me "take one of those guns and shoot the first man that you see on board of that ship, meaning the *Monitor*. The quarter gunner had placed all along the side of our ship loaded Springfield rifles and the writer took one of these, and a quarter gunner by the name of Sheriff, from Baltimore, Maryland, another and we both took our positions at the bow port, the writer on the starboard side and Sheriff on the port side, both on our knees, but not in prayer. By this time we had struck the *Monitor* and I was looking right into port of the *Monitor* for that man, Sheriff kept saying to me, "Look out, Curtis! Look out, Curtis!" which I was doing with all my might; while looking for that man, I saw one of her guns coming slowly out of her ports and looking me squarely in the face. Sheriff and I thought it was time to move, which we did quickly. Saw no man, fired no gun; the *Monitor* fired her gun and the ball came very near coming in our port. After this she fell along our port side, then the writer and everyone else in the forward part of our ship lost sight of the *Monitor*."⁷

"Now our port side battery had full sway, and the terrible firing went on; we stood waiting for further developments, the *Monitor* having worked herself down our port side, rounding the stern of the Merrimac came up along her starboard side, both ships fighting hard, it was then that the

writer looked once more through the port and saw the *Monitor* going as fast as she could toward Fortress Monroe; she had given up the fight. Our Old Fighter remained still ready for battle but all her boats had been stove in, her smoke stack riddled with shot and shell. One of her shots struck our port side forcing in the iron and knocking splinters from the woodwork on the inside of our ship, slightly wounding a Signal Quarter Master named Rice, from Richmond, Virginia. She looked somewhat dilapidated but still able to successfully combat with all of the U. S. Government War Fleet lying around Fortress Monroe. Soon the Old Fighter turned her bow towards Norfolk and triumphantly steamed away, thus ended the second day fight.”⁷

Frederick Curtis reported the fight from a different perspective. He was on the beach and saw the *Monitor* steam around the grounded *Minnesota* to engage the *Merrimac*. “I watched the fight from the top of a tree, and, although I could not tell who the victor would be, I saw that the *Monitor* was holding her own and that the *Merrimac* would not have her own way in the work of destroying the rest of our fleet in Hampton Roads. About noon the *Merrimac* seemed crippled, and she started back slowly toward Norfolk. We soon learned she was in sinking condition and our joy knew no bounds. All on shore cheered the brave little *Monitor* until they were hoarse, and many hugged one another for joy to know that the hated rebel ram was whipped. So closed two of the most anxious and thrilling days of my experience in the war.”⁶

The official story which emerged is that the two ironclads exchanged cannon fire for about four hours, each within spitting range of the other, without inflicting any devastating damage. The *Monitor* attempted to ram the stern of the *Merrimac* to damage her propeller and rudder but missed due to a steering malfunction. At that point, the stern Brooke rifle fired at almost blank range and made a direct hit on the *Monitor's* pilot house blinding the captain, Captain Wooten. Stunned by the destruction to her pilothouse and injury to her commander, the *Monitor* broke off the action and steamed into shallower water so the *Merrimac* could not follow her.¹

Lt. Clark, *Merrimac's* commander, readied his ship to finish off the hapless *Minnesota* and then attack the remaining Federal ships. The *Merrimac's* pilots, one of whom was Thomas Clark⁸, a cousin of Richard Curtis, advised against this as the tide was dropping quickly and, with her deep draft, was in danger of running aground. Clark surveyed his officers who agreed to return to the Elizabeth River. So the infamous battle between the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac*, which, contrary to stories from both sides, ending in a virtual tie of which neither can claim victory.

The Aftermath for the Two Curtis Sailors and One Curtis Marine

Of the 450 men aboard the *Congress*, only 175 survived including the thirty taken prisoner. That Sunday night, what remained of the crew of the *Congress* was sent to Fortress Monroe, and the next day many were assigned to several ships lying off the fort. Some were put on the *Minnesota* and some on the *Roanoke*. Frederick Curtis was soon on his way to North Carolina joining the naval blockade supporting Burnside's expedition, after which he returned to the James River and supported the Army of the Potomac in the Seven Day's Battle. “We assisted the Army everyday and saw some pretty hard fighting,” remembered Curtis.^{1,7}

Frederick was discharged in August 1862 and returned to Hanover in early 1863 to marry Martha Wilder on March 30, 1863. Between 1864 and 1881 they had six children, Arthur, Fred, Jr., Paul, Ellsworth, Mabel and Amy. He learned the carpenter trade and became one of the largest contractors in Plymouth County. He settled in Norwell, just east of Hanover, where he was a

Selectman for many years. He died from a bout of pneumonia on December 2, 1900 at his home in Assinippi, Plymouth County. At the time of his death, he was receiving a \$6 a month naval pension. ³

As mentioned earlier, Frederick Hiram Curtis was the son of Hiram Curtis and Lucinda Wilder of Hanover, MA. He was the 7th generation of his line; hence, Frederick Hiram, Hiram, Job, Abner, Abner, Josiah, Joseph, William Curtis (the immigrant) 1638. ³

Richard Curtis remained on the *Merrimac* until the evacuation of Norfolk when she was run aground and scuttled near Craney Island on May 11, 1862. In his pamphlet, he expressed his displeasure at the decisions of his superiors for their strategy to defend Norfolk – he thought they should have been more aggressive against the Federal naval blockade – and the change of command on the *Merrimac* after the March 9th encounter with the *Monitor*. ⁷

Richard married Sara “Sadie” Neville on December 15, 1864 in Isle of Wright County, Virginia. They had a total of 11 children but only 6 living in 1900: Richard, Lizzie, Edwin, Clarence, William and Sadie. After the war he started R. Curtis & Co., ship broker and tugboat agent. He was a well-known figure around the Virginia tidewater area and was known to all as Captain Curtis. Captain Curtis passed away on April 22, 1926 and was buried the Oak Grove Cemetery, Portsmouth, Virginia. ^{8,9}

Charles Samuel Curtis, the Marine guard aboard the *Merrimac* throughout her short service, accompanied many of the crew on their withdrawal to Richmond after the ironclad was scuttled. He was stationed there at Camp Beall for most of the war and later served as a Marine guard on the CSS *Virginia II* in Charleston, SC in 1864. Charles was on the list of deserters for April 1865 and was subsequently held in Libby Prison as a deserter from Confederate States forces.⁵ His ancestry is not known nor was his fate after 1865.

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8. Family Bible of Robert Lee & Anne Smith Curtis (Robert Lee was brother of Richard Curtis)
9. Ann Curtis Cordner (1886-1963), niece of Richard Curtis, & Peggy Curtis Proper (great-granddaughter of Richard Curtis)