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“This Is War”: The Construction of the Laird Rams

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“This Is War”: The Construction of the Laird Rams

Abstract

By the spring of 1863, American ambassador to England Charles Francis Adams had a much bigger problem than the activities of British-built Confederate raiders on his hands: the construction of two 230-foot long ironclad rams in the Laird shipyard at Birkenhead that evidence suggested were destined for the Confederacy. At 230 feet long and 40 feet wide, with 6-7 foot iron spears at the front, rotating turret batteries, full iron plating, and a top speed of 10 knots, these ships were the Americans' worst nightmare. Lincoln's cabinet even considered blatantly ignoring Britain's "neutrality" and sending a U.S. Navy squadron to destroy the rams, which had been under construction since the previous summer.

Keywords

Britain, Hannah Christensen, International Relations, Navy

Disciplines

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Comments

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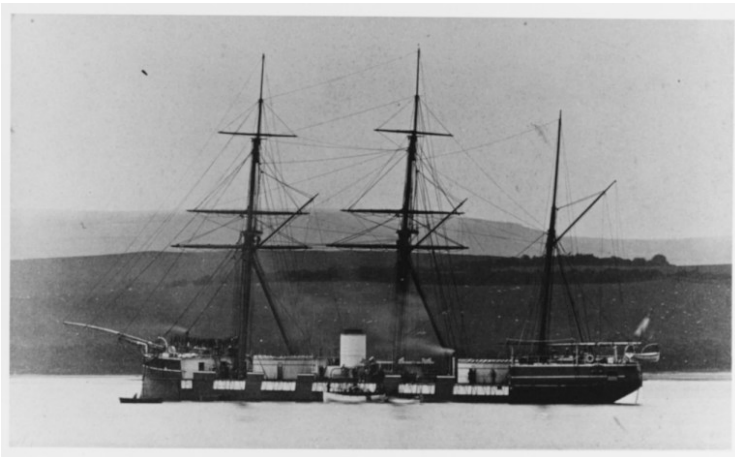
ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

“This Is War”: The Construction of the Laird Rams

By [Hannah Christensen '17](#)

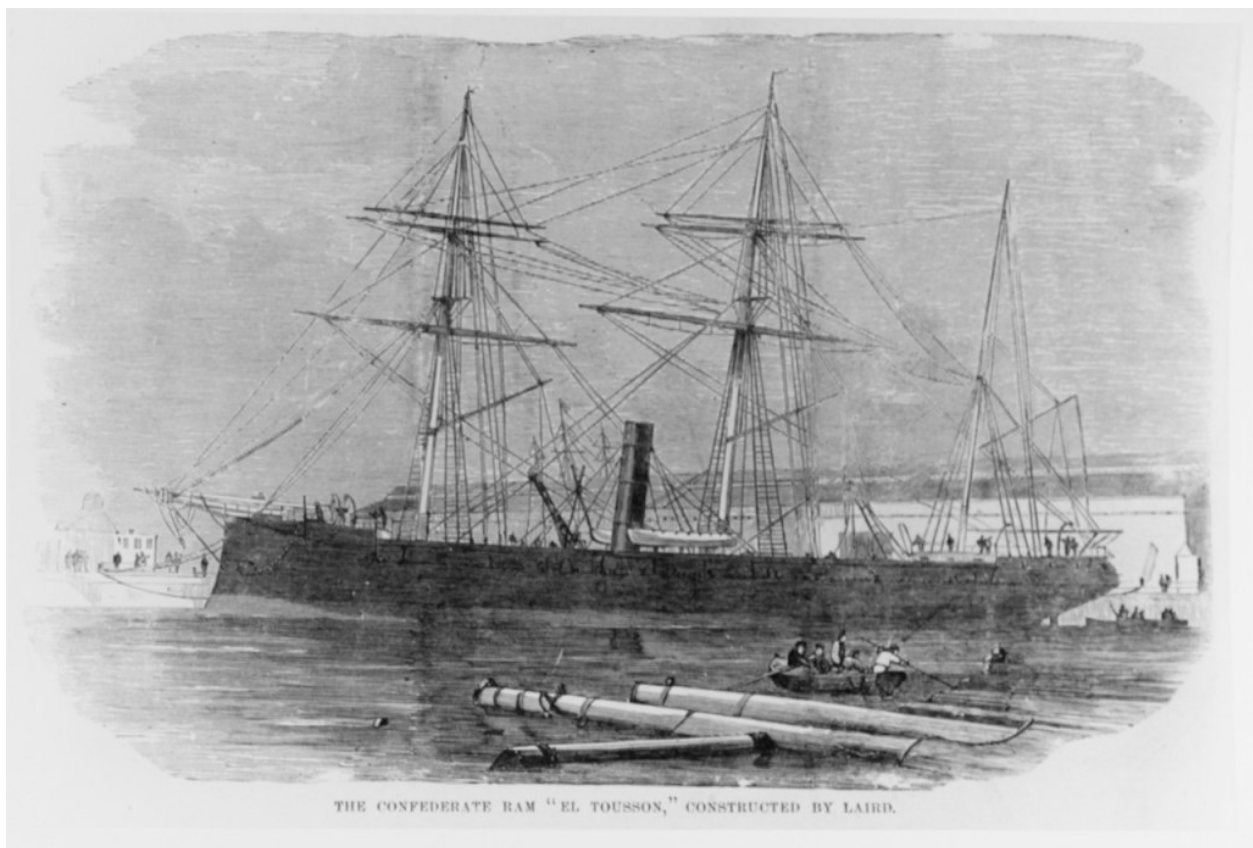
By the spring of 1863, American ambassador to England Charles Francis Adams had a much bigger problem than the activities of British-built Confederate raiders on his hands: the construction of two 230-foot long ironclad rams in the Laird shipyard at Birkenhead that evidence suggested were destined for the Confederacy. At 230 feet long and 40 feet wide, with 6-7 foot iron spears at the front, rotating turret batteries, full iron plating, and a top speed of 10 knots, these ships were the Americans' worst nightmare. Lincoln's cabinet even considered blatantly ignoring Britain's "neutrality" and sending a U.S. Navy squadron to destroy the rams, which had been under construction since the previous summer.

In the summer of 1862, Confederate Navy Secretary Stephen Russell Mallory sent orders to one of the Confederacy's agents in England, James Bulloch, to go ahead with plans to have two large ironclads built for the Confederate Navy. Identified as Nos. 294 and 295, the ships were supposed to be completed by the Laird firm by March and April of 1863, respectively, and delivered to Liverpool for pickup. Bulloch had originally decided that both ships should be built in the same yard to cut cost, decrease potential Union interest in their construction, and hopefully speed up production. However, any hope of reduced Union interest disappeared quickly. Union spies, informants, and agents were everywhere, and their activities only increased, particularly in spring 1863, as the ships were nearing completion.



The HMS Wivern, originally built for the Confederate Navy. Courtesy of U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command.

By this point, the spies, informants, and agents were doing everything from bothering workers at the shipyard, to following Bulloch around, to asking questions of anyone and everyone even remotely connected to the construction. Bulloch was certain that the situation would only get worse. American diplomats were getting frantic notes from Washington to seize the ships, and the British government itself seemed like it was on the verge of making such projects all but impossible. However, Bulloch came up with a plan: have the Laird firm “sell” the rams to a French group called Bravay and Company and make it look like they were taking the ships in the name of the Pasha of Egypt. That way, if the British government was to try to seize the rams its case would fall apart because there would be evidence that the ships were going to Egypt via France instead of to the Confederacy. Confederate legal officials went out of their way to make the entire plan look as legitimate as they could, since getting the rams out of the country depended on them looking like they were going somewhere other than the Confederacy.



One of the Confederate rams, first called El Tousson while masquerading as a ship being built for Egypt. Later the HMS Scorpion. Courtesy of U.S. Naval History and Heritage Command.

Meanwhile, U.S. Ambassador Charles Francis Adams was getting increasingly nervous about the rams. On July 11, 1863, two days after one of the rams (No. 294) was launched, Adams sent a frantic note to the British Foreign Office requesting that the vessels be detained on the grounds that they were likely being equipped and armed for Confederate service against the United States, in violation of Britain’s supposed neutrality. John Russell, the British Foreign Minister, responded that Adams’s request had been forwarded to the appropriate authorities, and left it at that. While everyone

knew the rams' destination, neither the United States nor Britain had legally acceptable proof, so the likelihood of anything happening was small. The Bravay and Company contract looked legitimate and Russell was reluctant to act before he had more concrete proof, or else he would look like he was caving to foreign pressure.

While the British government held off on doing anything and American diplomats continued trying to gather proof, rumors were flying everywhere. The Confederacy heard rumors that the rams would be seized while the Union heard rumors that they would be allowed to leave. In addition, a Confederate naval officer turned up in Liverpool in mid-August, sparking rumors that he was there to take command of the rams, and the presence of a Confederate vessel off the British coast sparked rumors that it was there to escort the rams to the Confederacy. Meanwhile, more reliable, informed sources thought the British government would eventually seize the ships. With multiple customs officials visiting the Laird shipyard as part of the British investigation and rumors flying everywhere, no one was entirely sure what would happen.

For all of August, nothing happened. However, on September 1st, Russell announced that the British government would not be taking action on the rams. The U.S. ambassador returned from his vacation two days later, saw that the British had done nothing, and sent a rather mild-mannered note to the Foreign Office reminding them that it was obvious what the rams were for. The next day, Adams sent a stronger note, only to finally receive Russell's September 1st response. At this point, Adams's nerves and temper got the better of him, and he fired off a note on September 5th declaring that "It would be superfluous in me to point out to your Lordship that this is war." Instead of starting a war, however, the note started a diplomatic feud between Adams and Russell, with Russell insulting Adams's abilities as a diplomat and understanding of the situation and Adams claiming that Russell and the Foreign Office regarded their international obligations as worthless and Britain's neutrality as "little more than a shadow."

What happened next was a little unclear. Russell later claimed that he had already decided to have the rams seized by September 1st and that the diplomatic back-and-forth was merely an attempt to buy time for the government to prepare a case against the rams. However, some historians have argued that it was more likely he had received Adams's September 5th note, realized he had gone too far, and decided to back-date several letters and memorandums to support his claim. Either way, after much back-and-forth within the British government, both rams were seized on October 9th and put under the guard of the HMS *Majestic* on October 28th.

Between the end of October 1863 and May 1864, Bulloch, the Confederate agent, went from hoping that the Bravay contract would hold to realizing the Confederates would probably never get the rams. Meanwhile, the British government was trying to figure out what to do with them. They believed that their case would fall apart in court, but they also wanted to keep the rams from the Confederacy. Finally, they decided that, since France already had ironclads like these and the British did not, the rams would be purchased for the Royal Navy. After Bulloch authorized the Laird shipyard to make the

sale, the British government paid £220,000 total for the rams. Named the HMS *Scorpion* and the HMS *Wivern*, the rams performed relatively well in British service, seeing five and ten years of active service, respectively. War between the U.S. and England, though still unlikely, had been avoided, and the British government had acquired two ironclads in the process.

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