



4-25-2018

A Radical Idea: Charles Ellet's Rams

Savannah Labbe
Gettysburg College

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Labbe, Savannah, "A Radical Idea: Charles Ellet's Rams" (2018). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 287.
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A Radical Idea: Charles Ellet's Rams

Abstract

The political cartoon above shows an engineer named Charles Ellet attempting to get a meeting with General George McClellan. Ellet contacted many government officials and important men to try to get his ideas recognized and implemented. Ellet was born in Pennsylvania in 1810 and was inspired to become an engineer when he watched the opening of the Erie Canal. At age 20, he went to Paris to learn his craft, attending lectures for civil engineers and examining bridges, railroads, and other structures. He returned to the United States afterwards and in 1835 went to work as an assistant engineer for the James River and Kanawha Canal Company. This company was working to connect the Virginia tidewater region to the Ohio River. In 1854, his family went on a vacation touring Europe. The Crimean War was going on at that time, and Ellet witnessed two warships collide accidentally, causing immense damage to one of the ships. This was when Ellet's passion was born. Because of this event, he came up with the idea of building a steam-powered ship to be used specially for ramming. He would promote this idea to anyone who would listen, which is how he came to be knocking on McClellan's door. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Charles Ellet, Ironclads, Navy, Technology

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

A Radical Idea: Charles Ellet's Rams

By Savannah Labbe '19



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The political cartoon above shows an engineer named Charles Ellet attempting to get a meeting with General George McClellan. Ellet contacted many government officials and important men to try to get his ideas recognized and implemented. Ellet was born in Pennsylvania in 1810 and was inspired to become an engineer when he watched the opening of the Erie Canal. At age 20, he went to Paris to learn his craft, attending lectures for civil engineers and examining bridges, railroads, and other structures. He returned to the United States afterwards and in 1835 went to work as an assistant engineer for the James River and Kanawha Canal Company. This company was working to connect the Virginia tidewater region to the Ohio River. In 1854, his family went on a vacation touring Europe. The Crimean War was going on at that time, and Ellet witnessed two warships collide accidentally, causing immense damage to one of the ships. This was when Ellet's passion was born. Because of this event, he came up with the idea of building a steam-powered ship to be used specially for ramming. He would promote this idea to anyone who would listen, which is how he came to be knocking on McClellan's door.

Ellet was fairly well known before the war, as he had done congressional surveys of the Mississippi and Ohio River Valleys and had built the first suspension bridges in the United States. At the beginning of the war, he wrote to President Abraham Lincoln to ask if he could raise a corps of civil engineers to make a survey of the terrain of the border states to help familiarize the army with them. Lincoln approved of the idea, but said it was ultimately up to McClellan, which is why Ellet sent dozens of requests for an interview with McClellan. They were all ignored, which angered Ellet, so he decided to publish a pamphlet criticizing McClellan, saying that he was too busy with parades to actually fight the war and that he never knew where the enemy was or what they were doing. The political cartoon above is about Ellet's quest to get McClellan to listen to him.

One thing the cartoon portrays very accurately is Ellet's persistence. In the pamphlet about McClellan's leadership, he also took the chance to advertise his idea about steam rams, even though it was quite off topic. He sent letters to various members of Congress, the President, and Cabinet members to convince them to buy into his steam ram idea. No one really listened or took him seriously until March 9, 1862 when, for the first time, two ironclads faced off. The contest between the *CSS Virginia* and the *USS Monitor* showed Secretary of War Edwin Stanton that something needed to be done to stop the Confederate ironclads. While the Union also had ironclads, it was clear from the battle between the *Virginia* and the *Monitor* that ended in a draw that just one ironclad would not be able to defeat another. So, either a fleet of ironclads was needed to go up against one enemy ironclad, which would be expensive and time consuming to create, or a fleet of rams that could accomplish the same goal much quicker and by using less money. And, of course, right after this happened, Ellet sent another pamphlet on his steam rams to Stanton, which led Stanton to invite the eager engineer to his office. Stanton had Ellet go to Hampton Roads and figure out how to stop the *Virginia*. As it turned out, the Federal commander there, John Wool, had already figured out how to defeat the *Virginia*, and Ellet was not really needed there. Wool's idea was much the same as Ellet's. He commissioned a fleet of fast steamboats that could ram the *Virginia*.

Instead, Stanton sent Ellet to the Mississippi River Valley to convert river steamers into rams.

Ellet left for the valley immediately and began working on his project. He was commissioned as a Colonel and given money to buy the necessary ships and equipment. He was also given the authority to recruit civilians and requisition local military units to help him and serve on his ships when they were completed. He ended up buying seven steamers. He reinforced the ships with extra timber but only put iron on the front of them to reinforce the ramming prow. He wanted the ship to be as lightweight as possible, so it could move fast enough to damage an enemy ship before the enemy could get too many shots off. He put no cannons on the ships, in the interest of keeping it light but also because he felt that naval cannons were useless and fast becoming obsolete because of iron plating and the fact that ships could now move much faster while it still took the cannons a long time to get off a shot. So, Ellet believed the future of naval warfare was in ramming. In many ways he was right at the time, as the cannons took a long time to load and were not very accurate. However, future improvements in naval armament technology, such as rifled breech-loading cannons, proved Ellet's prediction to be false.

Ellet's steamers would see their first action on June 6, 1862. Five Federal ironclads were anchored in the Mississippi near Memphis, and some Confederate "cottonclad" ships, which were reinforced with extra timber, iron rails, and lined with cotton to protect from enemy fire, had spotted them and moved to engage them. As the first shot was fired at the First Battle of Memphis, Ellet and his steamers arrived. Ellet used his rams to disable a few of the Confederate ships and helped win the battle for the Union. When used correctly, rams would move fast against an enemy ship, hit it hard and do a lot of damage and then retreat into safety. Of course, sometimes the rams would get stuck or be equally damaged by the blow. However, this did not happen to Ellet. Ellet's son, who had been an assistant surgeon in the Union Army before the war and quickly transferred to his father's unit when it was created, then went into the city of Memphis, took down the Confederate flag and raised the stars and stripes. This was one of the first steps in an important campaign to take control of the Mississippi River and divide the Confederacy in two. Unfortunately for Ellet, this would be the only time he would see his steamers at work. During the battle, he went out to inspect the front of the ram that he was on, exposing himself to the enemy. He was shot just below the knee, and while this was not a grave injury, it was complicated by the fact that he had both dysentery and measles, which prevented him from recovering adequately. He died on June 21, 1862 and was later buried with full military honors.

While Ellet's persistence is satirized in the cartoon, it was an important aspect of his character that helped him get his idea recognized. His persistence was much like that of Christopher Spencer, who worked tirelessly to get the Union to use Spencer repeating rifles. The persistence of these men was a good thing for the Union, because without it, the Union would have completely missed out on technology that could have helped win the war. Ironclads were a new technology introduced in the Civil War, and the Union

Navy had to find a way to neutralize them. Ellet's method was fit for the technology of the time. Ships could not really get off many shots before a ram could get close enough to disable them. The Mississippi River campaign was very important to the Union war effort, and Ellet helped that campaign succeed. Ellet's story also serves as a greater lesson, which is that it is important to be open to new ideas and technologies, especially in times of war. These technologies can be decisive, and while they may seem unnecessary or too radical at the time, it is better to give them a chance than to dismiss them without even hearing them out.

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