

Raleigh, CSS ^[1]

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by Edwin L. Combs, 2006



"Ironclad CSS Raleigh." Courtesy of Cape Fear Historical Institute.

^[2]The CSS *Raleigh* was a steam-powered ironclad ram, one of two *Richmond*-class ironclads ^[3] built for the Confederate ^[4] navy in Wilmington ^[5] during the Civil War ^[6]. Six *Richmond*-class vessels were laid down in Richmond, Wilmington, Charleston, and Savannah in the spring of 1862. Naval shipbuilder John L. Porter designed these ships for harbor defense, adapting plans that he had originally conceived in 1846. On 20 Apr. 1864 the newly completed *Raleigh* steamed down the Cape Fear River ^[7] and joined the ironclad *North Carolina* ^[8], which was already in service at Smithville.

The *Raleigh* drew 13 feet of water, 6 inches less than the waterlogged *North Carolina*, and Flag Officer William F. Lynch quickly decided to take the new ironclad over the bar at New Inlet and attack the Union blockading squadron. The plan was ill conceived because the *Richmond*-class ironclads, intended for harbor defense, were unseaworthy. Nonetheless, the officers and men prepared the ship for combat. On the night of 6 May the *Raleigh*, accompanied by two small steamers, stood out into the Atlantic. The ensuing engagement was shrouded in darkness and marked by confusion. The *Raleigh* made contact with several Union vessels, but because of its slow speed, it was unable to close with them. Flares and gunfire alerted the rest of the blockading squadron, but most commanders, unaware of the ironclad's presence, assumed a blockade-runner had been cornered. For the rest of the night, the *Raleigh* steamed blindly through the blockading squadron, unnoticed by the Federals. At daybreak, the ironclad returned to New Inlet and crossed the bar at 7:15 a.m. The "battle" was over, neither side sustaining serious damage.

After entering Cape Fear ^[9], the *Raleigh* turned south and soon ran aground on a bar known as "the Rip." As the tide went out, the weight of the casemate, guns, and machinery bore down on the stern of the ship. Unable to sustain the added weight, the *Raleigh* "broke her back," resulting in a total loss. Salvage crews saved the iron plating and guns and sent the boilers to the CSS *Chattahoochee*, then being repaired at Columbus, Ga.

References:

William N. Still Jr., *Confederate Shipbuilding* (1987).

Still, *Iron Afloat: The Story of the Confederate Armorclads* (1985).

Image Credit:

"Ironclad CSS Raleigh." Courtesy of Cape Fear Historical Institute. Available from <http://www.cfhi.net/ColonelFWKerchner.php> ^[2] (accessed May 16, 2012).

Subjects:

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War ^[12]

Authors:

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Origin - location:

Coastal Plain ^[14]

From:

Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.^[15]

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