

# **CHARLOTTE'S NAVY YARD**

## **1862-1865**

As unlikely as it may now seem, during the Civil War the Confederate States Navy operated a naval facility over two hundred miles from the coast in what is now Charlotte's bustling business district. It was located near the city's present-day sports arena, transit center and an elevated, glass-enclosed light rail station.

This endeavor of extreme necessity had a brief existence of less than three years. It was the result of innovative actions on the part of former US Navy officers who had joined the Confederacy.



It all began in Portsmouth Virginia, shortly after the USS MONITOR and the CSS VIRGINIA battled to a draw in early March 1862. The year before, the Gosport Navy Yard [today the Norfolk Navy Yard] had been captured by Confederate forces and used as a base of operations until that location became militarily untenable by May of 1862. How Charlotte became a center of production for the Confederate Navy was shared in the spring of 1910 with citizens of Charlotte interested in preserving their history by one of the principal participants; former naval captain and engineer, H. Ashton Ramsay.

### **H. ASHTON RAMSAY**

Ashton Ramsay entered the US Navy's Engineering Corps in 1853, and was serving as an engineer in the USS MERRIMAC at the start of the Civil War in 1861. That year also marked his marriage to Julia Cooke, a resident of Norfolk, Virginia. He subsequently resigned his commission and joined the Confederate Navy, and then was involved in the conversion of the MERRIMAC to the Confederate iron-clad, CSS VIRGINIA. During the 1862 Battle of Hampton Roads, he was Acting Chief Engineer of the VIRGINIA. When the decision was made to abandon the Gosport Navy Yard and destroy the VIRGINIA, Ramsay was given a highly unusual assignment for a naval engineer.

As Ramsay wrote in 1910:

*"Early in May, 1862, it was determined to evacuate Norfolk, and in order to save some of the tools and machinery and to continue to manufacture ordnance for the navy, a number of the machines, tools, such as lathes, woodworking machines, and one small steam hammer, were hurriedly shipped to Charlotte, North Carolina."*

### CHARLOTTE IN 1862

The selection of what was then a small town in Mecklenburg County [**Charlotte had a population of just 2,265 in 1860**] made more sense than might appear obvious. A place where Indian trails once crossed, by the time the Civil War started, this North Carolina landlocked locale had become an important railroad junction. Four railroads converged there, providing connections with other southern cities and thereby promoting industry.

Charlotte was remote from the battlefields of the Civil War [**and survived the war untouched by the destruction suffered throughout most of the South**]. Far from the reach of Union naval forces, its rail lines made direct connections with several southern seaports and also the Confederacy capital city of Richmond, Virginia. Lastly, there was an established iron works in Charlotte, owned and operated by a former US Navy officer, John Wilkes, who had once been a shipmate of two Confederate naval officers.

The two Confederate Navy officers were dispatched from the Gosport Navy Yard to Charlotte to inspect the iron works owned by their former US Navy shipmate and friend, John Wilkes. After seeing the facilities that he readily agreed to make available for the navy's use, they recommended purchase of the property.

Another factor in the selection of Charlotte was due to a mint located there. After gold had been discovered in the region in 1799, the US States government had established the mint in Charlotte in 1835. By 1862, the mint had been commandeered by the South.



The mint was under the control of the chief ordnance officer for the Confederate Navy, who was in residence there with his family. He undoubtedly influenced the decision to establish a navy yard in Charlotte. Like the visiting naval officers and John Wilkes, he had been in the Union Navy before the war and probably knew them [**the US Navy was a small and closely knit organization in the mid-1800's**].

## JOHN & JANE WILKES

John “Jack” Wilkes was born in New York City in 1827. Following in his father’s footsteps, at age 14 he entered the US Navy. After ten years’ of service, he was selected to attend the then-newly formed Naval Academy. He graduated first in his class in 1847. In 1853 he took a leave of absence from the Navy and journeyed to Charlotte to help manage family business interests there that were principally involved with gold mining and ore milling operations.

In 1854, he married his first cousin, Jane Renwick Smedberg. Following his resignation from the Navy later that same year, he and his bride moved to a small community called St. Catherine’s Mills; located just outside of Charlotte. In 1858 he bought the Mecklenburg Flour Mills and the next year he acquired the Mecklenburg Iron Works. That latter business was located near the intersection of Trade and College streets, and immediately adjacent to a now-defunct rail line on the east side of Charlotte which ran north and south. Charlotte’s light rail system now follows that same pathway.



When North Carolina seceded from the Union in 1861, John Wilkes elected to cast his lot with the Confederacy and became a member of the Charlotte Home Guards. He assigned ownership of the iron works to the Confederacy, but the payment he had been promised by that fledgling and struggling government was never realized. At the end of the war, the US Government seized the facility and after pardoning John Wilkes, allowed him to ‘repurchase’ the iron works; an irony most likely not lost on him. Following a devastating fire in 1875, the Mecklenburg Iron Works was rebuilt on the west side of town, near another railroad line’s tracks [**which are still there and in daily use**].

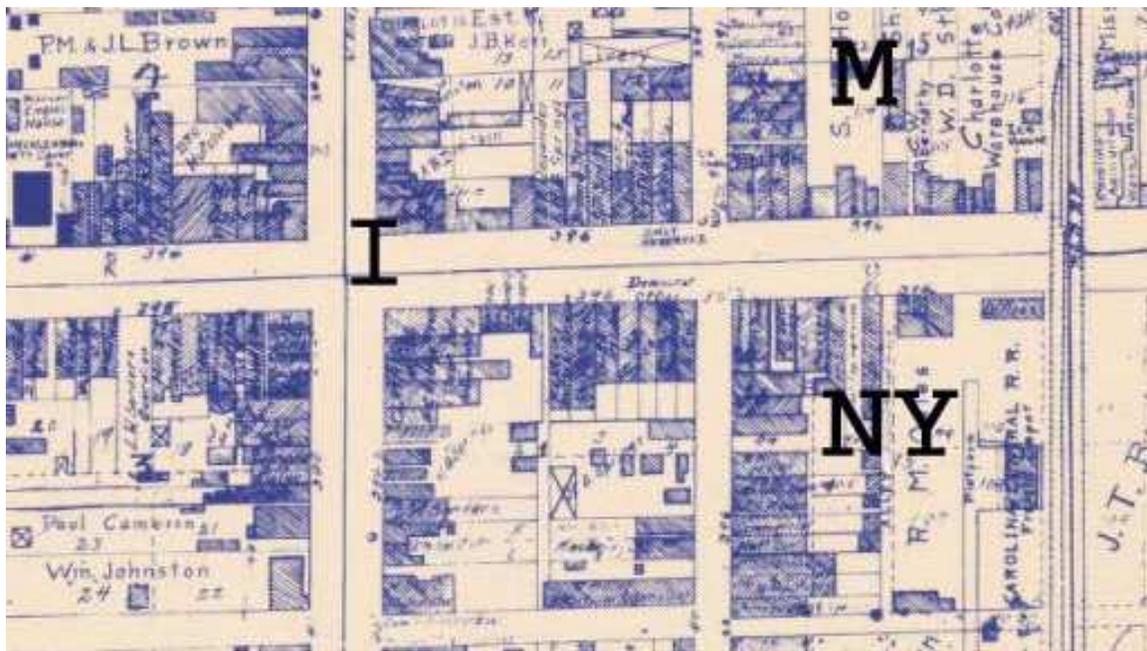
Ashton Ramsay’s 1910 recollections include the following descriptive material:

*“Shortly after the Gosport shipyard machinery had been forwarded to Charlotte, and following the destruction of the ‘Merrimac-Virginia’, together with other Confederate property at Norfolk, Captain Catesby Jones [**second and last commanding officer of the short-lived CSS VIRGINIA**] and I were ordered to Charlotte in connection with constructing the ordnance works. The Navy captain in charge of the mint was transferred to the army, to command a fort in Alabama. Captain Jones was ordered to an ordnance works in Alabama, leaving me in command of the naval station at Charlotte.*”

*“A number of large, frame structures were erected on the property acquired, including a gun-carriage shop, a laboratory, a torpedo [torpedo was a Confederate term for underwater mine] shop and a large forge shop, where the largest steam hammer in the South was built, and where propeller shafting was forged for a number of Confederate iron-clads. In fact, none of these vessels could have been constructed had it not been for the works at Charlotte. Rifles, solid shot, shell and torpedoes were manufactured at these works in Charlotte and supplied the batteries of vessels and shore fortifications manned by the Confederate Navy.”*

By mid-1862, the Charlotte Navy Yard was open for production. Ramsay had over 1,500 men working for him there at the height of operations, including a number of craftsmen experienced in ordnance work who had accompanied him from the Gosport Navy Yard in Portsmouth, Virginia, to Charlotte. While working in Charlotte, one of the former Gosport employees invented a machine that produced perfectly round spheres, thus improving the quality of cannonballs and the marksmanship of Confederate gunners.

Many of these workers, uprooted by war in Virginia were accompanied in relocation by their families and settled in an area near their wartime work place. That part of what is now called First Ward was comprised mostly of residences and was nicknamed ‘Mechanicsville’. The following segment of an 1877 map shows a small portion of Charlotte’s Center City. ‘I’ marks the intersection of Trade and Tryon Streets [currently the commercial epicenter of Charlotte]. ‘M’ indicates the area that was once known as Mechanicsville, and ‘NY’ denotes the Navy Yard location. By 1877, residences in this part of Charlotte area had already largely given way to commercial enterprises and a railroad depot had been built at the site of the Confederate Navy Yard.



Between May of 1862 and November of 1864, the Charlotte Navy Yard was in full production, turning out a wide variety of weaponry and parts for ships of the Confederacy. Located adjacent to the railroad line that ran directly to Richmond and points east and south, finished products were efficiently shipped to the Confederate army and to shipbuilding facilities in the Carolinas, Georgia and along the Gulf Coast.

But by the end of 1864, raw materials for war production were in short supply. Experienced Navy Yard employees that had become incapacitated or had joined the fighting forces were difficult to replace. As a consequence, production suffered. In parallel, in early 1865, Union forces, for the first time, were advancing on the Charlotte region. Captain Ramsay, CSN was transferred to the army, given a new assignment and a new rank; Lieutenant-Colonel, CSA. His memories of those trying times continue:

*“I was furnished with 300 muskets and directed to form a battalion of three companies from the employees of the naval works and to ship as many of the naval stores and smaller tools to Lincolnton, North Carolina as possible, and to hold the battalion in readiness to receive orders from General Beauregard.*

The war ended before naval production could commence in Lincolnton. The machinery sent there, including the machine for casting perfect cannon balls was captured by the Union army. Turned over to the Union Navy, it was put to good use until cannon balls became obsolete. Most of Ramsay’s battalion, including their leader remained in Charlotte until the war’s end, prepared to defend the city. One company of Ramsay’s battalion, however, was detailed to accompany Confederate President Jefferson Davis further southward, after fleeing Richmond.

Ramsay can perhaps be forgiven the following small boast that comprised the final paragraph of his 1910 recollections:

*“Charlotte, although several times menaced by hostile forces, and at one time the central focus of the Confederacy, was never actually captured by the enemy, their forces not coming into Charlotte until after the surrender at Greensboro.”*

**[Following Lee’s surrender at Appomatox on April 9, 1865 and Davis’ subsequent order to cease hostilities, other Confederate units surrendered over the course of the next several weeks. The surrender at Greensboro which Ramsay refers to took place April 26, 1865.]**



## POSTWAR CHARLOTTE

In the closing months of the war, over 1,300 refugees flooded the small town of Charlotte. Many of them stayed on, as did a sizable number of the Navy Yard's skilled workers. The population of Charlotte was further increased by the return of local citizens who had gone off to serve in the war. By 1870, Charlotte's population had grown to 4,500; more than double the number of residents there in 1860.

Because Charlotte was a railroad hub and largely undamaged by the war, business in the Queen City boomed after the war. The gold mines in, around and even under the center of Charlotte provided a great deal of employment. Other businesses resumed normal peacetime operations, including John Wilkes' Mecklenburg Iron Works. Many of the skilled workers who had come from Virginia during the war were employed by the iron works; some for as many as four decades following the war's end.

**[Contrary to some reports, no guns were ever manufactured at Charlotte's Navy Yard. However, one small cannon had been brought from Virginia in 1862, which was used in celebrations and parades for several years. Until, fearing it might burst and injure someone, Wilkes had it broken up late in the nineteenth century.]**

After an 1875 fire destroyed the iron works, John Wilkes had it rebuilt about eight blocks west of its original location. This much larger industrial complex flourished well into the twentieth century, until it was sold and later demolished. Today, its site is several parking lots...



As Charlotte prospered, so did the Wilkes family. John Wilkes procured a charter for the First National Bank of Charlotte in 1865; the first national bank established in the South and the humble beginning of the banking industry that now dominates the city of Charlotte. He was also engaged in a wide variety of other businesses in the Charlotte area following the war, and had extensive holdings of land at the time of his passing in 1908 at age 81.

John Wilkes' wife, Jane, bore him nine children in all. She also worked as a nurse at two Confederate hospitals established in Charlotte during the Civil War. Later she was instrumental in helping to found the state's first civilian hospital and one of the nation's first hospitals built for African-Americans; both located in Charlotte. Following her death in 1913, she was buried beside John in Charlotte's Elmwood Cemetery. That burial ground is within a few hundred yards of the second Mecklenburg Iron Works' site.

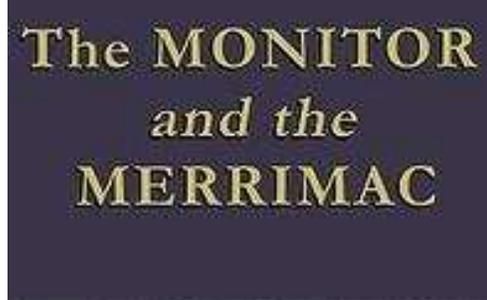
A few years before she passed away, Jane Wilkes and other members of the Charlotte Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy arranged for a cast iron marker to be placed on the brickwork of the railroad depot that then stood on the site of the Navy Yard. The marker was unveiled in an elaborate ceremony on June 3, 1910.



It was cast in the shape of a navy shield, flanked by anchors and coils of rope. Appropriately, this marker was cast by the Mecklenburg Iron Works through the courtesy of J. Frank Wilkes, works manager and a son of John and Jane Wilkes. When the railroad depot was demolished in 1959, the marker was removed and placed on another building nearby. But that structure has since given way to progress and the marker's present whereabouts are unknown.

Ashton Ramsay left Charlotte following the end of hostilities and resumed his engineering career. In 1890 he was granted a patent for an improved model of steam locomotive. In 1910, when he penned his reminiscence at the request of the ladies in Charlotte, he was living in Baltimore and working for the American Bridge Company.

Two years later, in an unusual collaboration with former foes, he co-authored a book entitled *The MONITOR and the MERRIMAC*. John Worden and Samuel Greene, Captain and Executive Officer, respectively, of the USS MONITOR merged their memories fifty years later of the 1862 Battle of Hampton Roads with those of Ramsay, acting chief engineer of the CSS VIRGINIA. The book's title and contents refer to the VIRGINIA as the MERRIMAC (sic). **[When that ship was a US naval vessel, her name was MERRIMACK.]** Their choice of titles has helped muddy the waters of historical accuracy.

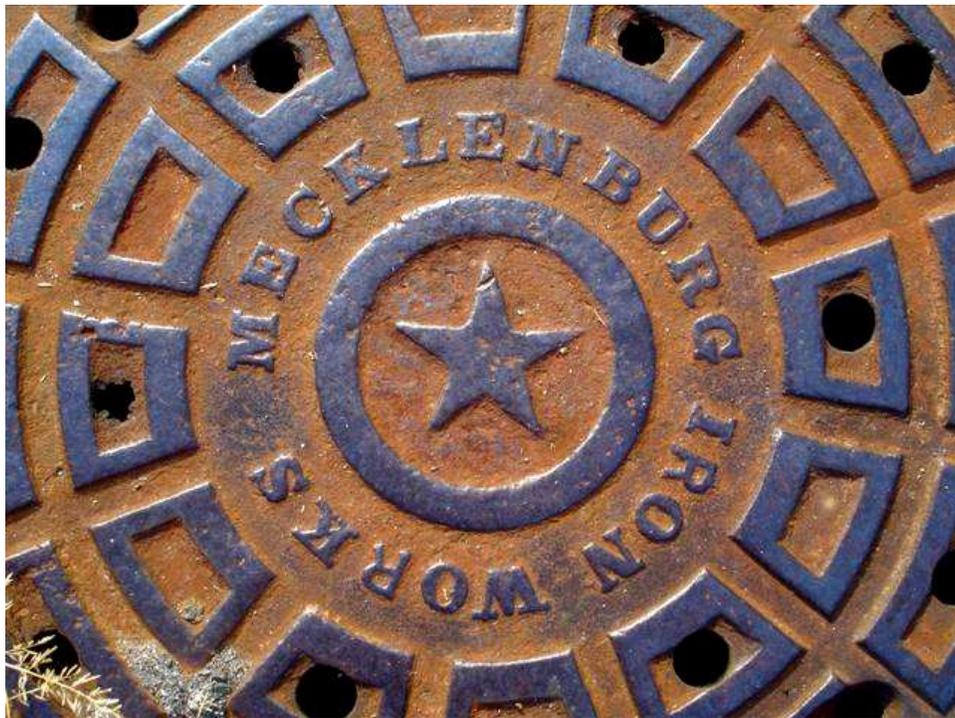


Ashton Ramsay passed away at his Baltimore home in the spring of 1916, the victim of pneumonia. Referred to as Colonel Ramsay in his obit, he was interred in a family plot belonging to his wife's prominent family in a cemetery in Norfolk, Virginia, less than a mile from where he had helped create and then operate the world's first iron-clad; the CSS VIRGINIA. Coincidentally, that burial ground bears the same name...Elmwood Cemetery...as the one in Charlotte where John and Jane Wilkes rest.

### CHARLOTTE TODAY

Aside from the historical marker in Charlotte, little remains there that was ever associated with the Navy Yard, the Mecklenburg Iron Works, or the several other enterprises that John Wilkes created. The US Mint building was moved from its original location in 1936 to a site three miles from the center of the city, where it became the Mint Museum, albeit greatly expanded in later years.

However, if one looks **[down]** in just the right places on the older streets of Charlotte, a few enduring products of Wilkes' iron works can still be found.



*Bill Lee*  
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