

The Steam Frigate, USS Wabash

The role played by the large steam frigates is often overlooked in Civil War Naval history, but at the time, they were the pride of the Union Navy. Laid down as one of five 54 Gun Frigates in 1854 the USS Wabash was the US Navy's first attempt to bring steam propulsion to the class of ship that had been the backbone of the US fleet in previous wars. That these ships were built at all was a surprise in the financially austere 1850's. Mechanically advanced, and with fine sailing qualities these ships were considered the finest frigates in the world when launched. Spared, the Wabash was 301 feet long and 51 feet abeam. She was powered by two compound engines and four boilers, giving her 950 IHP. After the war, in the Pacific she would once make 16 knots under steam and sail. Royal Naval officers visiting the vessels when they arrived on foreign stations sent reports to the admiralty that vessels of this class should be constructed at once to maintain their superiority. The Wabash has been eclipsed in history by one famous sister, the Merrimack, which was converted into the ironclad Virginia when confederates captured her sunken remains in the Gosport Navy Yard. Her other sisters were the Minnesota, Colorado and , Roanoke. The Roanoke would also be converted into and ironclad by the Union, though an operational failure, her use of three centerline turrets holding guns of the largest size can be seen as the pattern for steam warships well beyond her timeframe. Returning from serving as the flagship of the Mediterranean SQN.

in 1859, the opening of hostilities found the mighty Wabash at Boston, where a Herculean effort returned her to service in a month. She immediately went to service on the blockade and reducing southern forts. Her broadside was one of the the largest in the Union Navy at the time and assisted in demolishing the forts at Hatteras Inlet, Port Royal, and Wilmington. Her modern battery however contributed a deep draft, and she spent most of the war as the flagship of the South Atlantic blockading SQN. Later southerners would boast that they had used their political influence to deepen the vessels so that they could not serve on southern coasts. This fails to take in to account that even the frigates in service before this time could not be based in the South, and that similar warships of foreign navies drew as much water. Their use as stationary flagships had more to do with their efficient elimination of targets early in the war. By 1862 most of the larger forts had fallen to the Union Navy, and their was little work left for these powerful ships to do except enforce the blockade and serve as administration centers. A. Hunter would visit her during his tenure on the Nahant. Suffering from the extreme heat of the cramped monitor, he was transferred to the Wabash for rest and rehabilitation. He noted her bright white interior, marked by the gloss black guns and carriages. Most of her crew was transferred to more active ships and, except for a minimal crew, she had been turned into a floating sick ward for recovering sailors. Hunter found her pleasant, but turned down a transfer offered by her officers to return to his more active monitor and the bombardment of Battery Wagner. When viewed with hindsight, wooden hulls and steam propulsion would only be used in warships for a brief period before the advances in technology allowed steel hulls. Few ships exemplify this brief period more then the 54 gun frigates, though they do not have the notoriety of other types of ships in the Civil War they served in important roles. They would never employ their battery as it was designed, on the open ocean against European warships, but their performance effected the design of ships and ordinance world wide.