

## *The Cumberland and the Merrimac: A Song about a Civil War Battle*

### **Introduction**

This song recounts the story of the sinking of the *Cumberland*, part of the costliest battle in American naval history before World War II. The *USS Cumberland* was a heavily armed wooden ship being used as a blockade (along with the *USS Congress* and *USS Roanoke*) near the James River, at Hampton Roads, Virginia. The *Merrimac* was a frigate that had been sunk by the U.S. Navy to prevent her capture by the secessionist forces in 1861.

However, the frigate was raised by the Confederates, fitted with thick iron siding as well as a massive ram, and renamed the *Virginia*. When the *Virginia (Merrimac)* attacked on March 8, 1862, the *Cumberland* was positioned such that the men were unable to use their guns effectively. Of the 376 officers and men aboard, only 255 survived.

During study of the Civil War, this song can help students to understand the human toll of the war. The text succinctly tells of the battle from the point of view of one of the men on the *Cumberland*.

### **Activity**

Play the recording of “The Cumberland and the Merrimac” (without showing the score)

<https://kodalycollection.org/song.cfm?id=2374>

- Where does the song take place? (at sea, in the harbor)
- What’s happening? (battle)
- Did you hear the names of the ships?

This battle took place during the Civil War, in 1862, and was the most deadly battle in American naval history before World War II. Project the score and listen again for which ship wins.

<https://kodalycollection.org/song.cfm?id=2374>

- Which ship won the battle (*Merrimac*)
- Why did it win? (its iron cladding repelled the shots, it rammed the *Cumberland*)

Provide background from above: The *Cumberland* was a wooden ship serving as a blockade in the harbor of the James River. The *Merrimac* had belonged to the Union, but the U.S. Navy had sunk it to prevent it being captured by the Confederates. However, the *Merrimac* was raised by the Confederates, fitted with thick iron siding as well as a massive ram. (See Further Resources, below, for an article on the Union use of naval blockades during the war.)

Share civil war map of area at Hampton Roads, VA

<https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/museums/hrnm/education/hampton-roads-heritage-hunt/Introduction.html>

Share Civil War drawings of the *Cumberland*

Waud, Alfred R., Artist. U.S. Ship *Cumberland*. United States, None. [Between 1860 and 1865]

<https://www.loc.gov/resource/cph.3a17411/>

The sinking of the "Cumberland" by the iron clad "Merrimac," off Newport News, Va. March 8th 1862 / sketched by F. Newman, Newport News, Va.

<https://www.loc.gov/item/2001705847/>

Listen to another song about the battle of the Cumberland and the Merrimac.

Project the score and listen to "Cumberland's Crew".

<https://kodalycollection.org/song.cfm?id=2379>

- What are some similarities between these two accounts? (view point of the narrator, Cumberland is being attacked, the other ship is ironclad, rebel flag, Cumberland's crew will fight to the death, the other ship's prow pierced the Cumberland, Cumberland flag kept waving even after it sank)
- What is different? (Another ship [*Columbia*] appears in the last verse)
- What can we surmise about this ship from the text?

Students can research the ship *Columbia* to confirm why the song ends with this reference.

### **Extension**

A full narrative of the battle, for high school students, is available at:

<https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1922/june/engagement-between-cumberland-and-merrimack>

### **Further Resources**

The Union Blockade of the Southern States, Robert M. Browning, Jr.

<https://www.essentialcivilwarcurriculum.com/the-union-blockade-of-the-southern-states.html>