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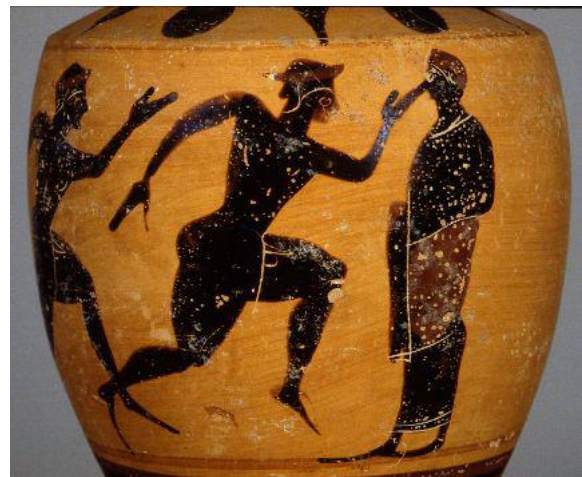


President Abraham Lincoln

This issue of the **Newsletter** of John Ericsson Society, New York commemorates the Bicentennial of the Birthday of Abraham Lincoln, 16th President of USA, born February 12 1809 in Kentucky. The reason becomes clear as the story unfolds.

From our immersion in Ericsson History emerged the question “How did news reach the White House that the *Monitor* had prevailed at Hampton Roads?” Hans Löf, communications technology historian and Morse Code expert at **Swedish Museum of Science and Technology, Stockholm** gave direction to our quest for information. Through Anna Holloway, then Chief Curator at the **USS Monitor Center** of the **Mariners Museum**, Hampton Roads, VA, we met Cynthia Verser, expert in this body of knowledge, in the facts and artifacts of the period. We thank Cynthia for consenting to prepare a summarizing chapter to capture the drama of the event and additional stories about the telegraph operators, the youthful communication technology experts of the 19th century.

/Leif G. Brisfjord
President, John Ericsson Society, New York



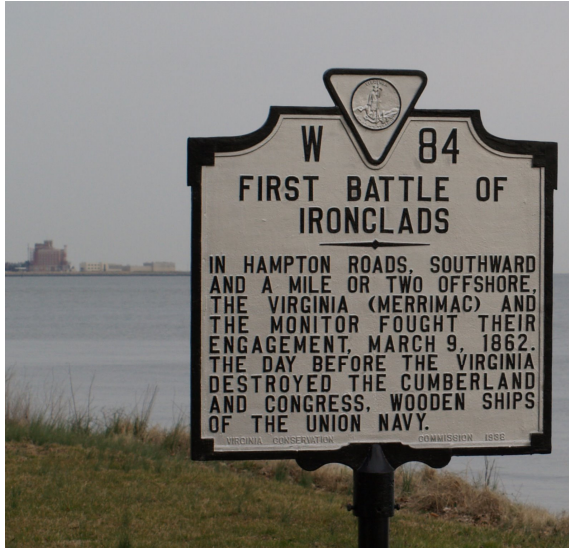
Pheidippides, Marathon

Marathon, 490 B.C. – Pheidippides, the courier, ran from Marathon to Athens bearing the good news that the combined Greek forces had prevailed in battle over numerically superior invaders – a feat still commemorated in the Olympics events and in other long distance endurance foot races.

War of 1812 – General Andrew Jackson repelled invading British forces in the “Battle of New Orleans”, a battle fought **two weeks after** the treaty ending the war had been signed at Ghent (Flanders), Belgium. – a battle fought because of slow communication at that time.

Hampton Roads, 1862 marked a turning point in the history of naval warfare and indeed in the life of the young nation. Historical accounts indicate that President Abraham Lincoln was a pivotal figure. It was he who perceived the significance of the innovations introduced by John Ericsson in the *Monitor*. He championed the construction of this ironclad warship, contrary to the opinions of many naval officers and shipping experts. Too, President Lincoln understood that the Civil War, that began in 1861, required a system of rapid communication for use by the government and armed forces. He was aware of the value of

the telegraph and encouraged its expansion throughout the northern states. Existing commercial systems cooperated; some areas of the country were covered by quickly erected poles and wires. It was a patchwork of expediency but one promising faster, more reliable communication to more places than anything that existed before.



Hampton Roads

Messages and Messengers

The tapping of a telegraph key signaled the beginnings of the Battle of Hampton Roads. A simple message sent by the hand of 13-year-old John O'Brien at Fort Monroe to his fellow telegraph operator in Newport News warned of events to come. The *CSS Virginia* was headed for Hampton Roads. The hand at the other end of the thin wire was George Cowlam's. He was prepared to respond. During the hours that followed and throughout the battle that took place the next day, George sent staccato messages which told horrors that only a few could see in person. The damage was inflicted on wooden warships of the Union Navy by the *CSS Virginia*, an "ironclad beast" that had once been "the *Merrimac*" and part of the Union fleet. "The beast" still bore wood from its Union beginnings but not the fragility, as it would demonstrate in an epic battle with Ericsson's *Monitor*. The Battle of Hampton Roads signaled the end of an era of naval warfare and the beginning of another, one governed by inventions and technology. Like the technological advances onboard the *Monitor*, the telegraph, too, would change history.

Telegraphy, a fairly new invention, had been used commercially since 1846, mainly by railroad companies. The first transcontinental line was

completed in 1861. It had seen limited use in the Crimean War 1853-55, but, for the first time, the military value of this form of communication was recognized.

President Abraham Lincoln had experienced the reliability of the telegraph system during his days as a lawyer in Illinois. Military officers quickly recognized the importance of rapid communication. General George McClellan had several telegraph operators assigned to his staff and he sent frequent messages to fellow officers. But not everyone had faith in "lightning" messages sent across thin wires. The wires were vulnerable to disruptions from weather, and Confederate troops frequently disconnected and carried away segments of the precious lines. Despite knowing that cipher codes were used to conceal important messages and that telegraphed messages could arrive at their destination in hours rather than days, some officers still preferred to use the mail system or a courier.

The call for telegraph operators to work the military lines went out across the commercial wires in April 1861. The men chosen for the U.S. Military Telegraph Corps were "the best of the best": loyal, accurate in sending and receiving Morse Code, demonstrating good penmanship, and well versed in the railroad policies of confidentiality concerning the messages they handled. They were young – most were in their teens or early 20s. John O'Brien was the youngest. Yet, despite their youth, they were tasked with a man's job, a job that was physically and mentally demanding. It was a job where they could work a 12 hour shift, or as long as a few days without relief from another operator. Some were sent out to repair telegraph wires behind enemy lines, or were assigned to military units. They quickly found out that death and disease were frequent visitors. Because they were considered civilian contractors, the government provided them with no death benefits or pensions. Many suffered ill health for the rest of their lives from the stresses and injuries sustained during their service. For men like John and his brother Richard who were born in Ireland, the telegraph offered the first professional jobs available. The pay was good on the railroads but even better with the military telegraph system. The beginning salary was \$60 a month which was more than some officers received. By the end of the war, most of the operators earned \$125 monthly.

When "iron met iron" in Hampton Roads on March 9, 1862, George Cowlam at Newport News and the O'Brien brothers at Fort Monroe were the recorders of the event. But this new medium of communication almost failed them. Fort Monroe was the center of the

telegraph system on the Peninsula. One line ran from the Fort to Newport News and an additional line stretched over to Cape Charles on the Eastern Shore. This submarine telegraph wire was temperamental, and subject to failure. It had been constructed from pieces of the failed 1857 Atlantic submarine telegraph line. And fail it did on the morning of March 8. The connection between the Fort and the telegraph line running up the Eastern Shore towards Washington D.C. was inoperable until 4 pm, leaving President Lincoln and his cabinet waiting for information. The news from Confederate accounts of events that day was grim, telling of the destruction of Union vessels by the CSS *Virginia*.

One message making its way to the Capitol after the line was repaired that evening was sent by Richard O'Brien. "The Monitor has arrived". The eve of the battle between the first iron ships ended with good news. The next day, Richard, John and George again sat in front of their brass keys, this time conveying messages that proclaimed that "Ericsson's Folly" had been successful against the Confederate "iron beast".

The clacking brass of the telegraph key would be heard throughout the Civil War, carrying over 1 million messages a year through the thin wires that stretched across the country. More than 1200 men and 5 women worked these wires for the military telegraph system in offices, tents, and in the midst of flying bullets and cannonballs. Their courage and dedication to the telegraph service would never be fully recognized by anyone but themselves. They acknowledged their service and the work of their fellow operators by using a familiar telegraph code "73" at the end of private messages and whenever they met. "73", Highest Regards and Best Wishes.

/Cynthia Verser



**President Abraham Lincoln,
Visiting *USS Monitor*, May 9, 1862**

John Emmet O'Brien **Telegraph Operator**

John O'Brien was born on October 7, 1848 in County Cork Ireland, and came to the United States with his family where they settled in Scranton, Pennsylvania in 1851. He was very close to his brother Richard, 9 years his senior. When Richard was training to be a telegraph operator with the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1856, John frequently visited him and quickly began to understand Morse code. Seven-year-old John was fascinated by the "dits" and "dahs" of the code which he described as a beautiful music and a fascinating mystery. He soon became a messenger boy for the railroad, delivering telegrams and collecting money from the recipients. In 1858, after one man refused to accept or pay for a telegram, during the long 5 mile walk back to the telegraph office, John made the decision to become an operator like his brother. Early the next year he became a substitute operator with the Railroad earning \$6 a week. Shortly after his 11th birthday, he was placed in charge of the telegraph office in Hollidaysburg Pennsylvania.

When the Civil War began in 1861, Richard was asked by the railroad to join the US Military Telegraph Corps and 13-year-old John followed his brother into this new enterprise. By January 1862, the brothers were stationed at Fort Monroe where they witnessed the epic battle between the ironclads *Monitor* and *Merrimac* in March of that year. During his wartime service, John was posted to numerous locations throughout Virginia and North Carolina. His skill at the telegraph key led to many opportunities to witness warfare as he worked in different military encampments, captured cities and on the front lines. The tragic effects of warfare led to an interest in medicine. He spent much of his free time watching and learning from the doctors who were willing to teach him anatomy and show him their medical skills.

When the war ended in 1865, the telegraph operators were released from government service, but John was retained for a year by the Telegraph Corps to help rebuild telegraph lines and to work as a cipher operator in Washington D.C. He was 17 years old in 1866, when he was permitted to return home.

Faced with deciding what to do with his life, John considered remaining in telegraph service. He had been offered a position with Western Union but the company would not permit him to work until his eighteenth birthday. His mother encouraged him to pursue the interest in medicine that he had developed during the war. He entered Chicago's Rush Medical

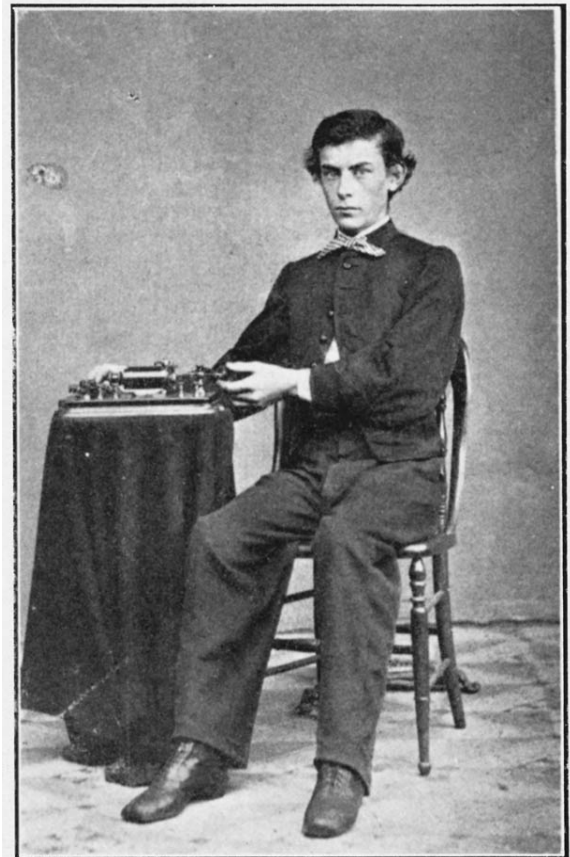
College in 1867 and graduated in 1869. He began practicing medicine in New Jersey but returned to his alma mater in 1871 after being invited to join the faculty as a lecturer in Medical Philosophy.

John appears to have developed a passion for writing while still in medical school. He wrote many articles for medical journals reporting on operations performed by the instructors and later, on medical cases encountered during his private practice. He used his writing skill to publish a book on his experiences as a military telegraph operator and to write a variety of articles including one on “telegraphic teleportation” for a science fiction magazine, an essay on the history of chess for Lasker’s Chess Journal. His account of the Great Chicago Fire was published as an article in the Scranton Times. Just one day after his 23rd birthday, John witnessed the destruction of Rush Medical School along with a large portion of the city in the Great Chicago Fire on October 8, 1871. His account in the Times tells of the professors working to save their medical books and set up temporary medical facilities for the citizens. In the years that followed he helped to raise money to rebuild the College.

Finally returning to his hometown, Scranton, John enjoyed the challenges of medicine. He became a trusted and respected member of the community who had many interests. He was as an avid chess player and bicyclist, a member of the Scranton, Pennsylvania and American Medical societies, a member of the Lackawanna Institute of History and Science, one of the first surgeons to practice in the local hospital, an advocate for mine safety and school sanitation, and an elected Health Officer for the city. His dedication to Scranton was most evident during a smallpox epidemic which ravaged Pennsylvania. In an effort to prevent the spread of the disease in his beloved city, Dr. O’Brien created and implemented a plan to inoculate over 7,000 citizens. He later reported his success and shared his plan with the medical community through one of his published articles.

In 1877 John married Clara, and had two daughters and one son. John Emmet O’Brien died in 1922 at the age of 73. He was survived by his daughter, Fannie May, and by his beloved brother, Richard.

/Cynthia Verser



JOHN EMMET O'BRIEN
In 1864

Richard O'Brien

Telegraph Operator

Richard O'Brien began his telegraphic career with the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1856 and soon taught everyone in his family to understand the dits and dahs of Morse code. The entire family became so skilled at the telegraph key that the joke in their hometown was that if an O'Brien wasn't available, the family dog could take the incoming message. An Irish immigrant, he was born in 1839 and came to the United States with his family in 1851. The O'Brien family included two brothers, two sisters and a younger brother born soon after they settled in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Richard was stationed on the first Morse line extending out of Philadelphia in 1856 and soon became a senior or “chief” telegraph operator at the Harrisburg office. When the call went out for telegraph operators to assist the government with setting up the US Military Telegraph Corps in 1861, Richard was first to volunteer. He was sent to Washington DC to help with the coordination of troop trains entering and

leaving the city and then to the Washington Arsenal where he used his telegraphic skills to help distribute ordnance and ordnance stores. In November 1861, Richard was assigned to Fort Monroe. There he was joined by his younger brother, John. The brothers ran the Fort's telegraph communications office and helped to repair and extend the telegraph system connecting Hampton Roads with Washington DC.

As needed, Richard was sent to various locations away from the Fort including military encampments and the front lines of the war. The work was difficult and dangerous. On more than one occasion, he had to dodge bullets. His work frequently put him in contact with historic figures: Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Carnegie, George McClellan, General John Wool, and General Benjamin Butler. They all expressed high regard for the young man who, at age 21, volunteered his services for the Union.

With his brother John, Richard witnessed the Battle of Hampton Roads in March 1861. The importance of the event was not lost on him. He described it in his diary and told of having an opportunity to stand on the deck of the *Monitor* when the ironclad was moored off of Fort Monroe after the battle. He wrote that it was a marvelous adventure for 13-year-old John who, fascinated by the indentations on the turret made by the Virginia's cannonballs, touched each one.

Richard's skills led to his appointment as Superintendent of the military telegraph lines in Virginia and Carolina, a position he maintained until the military telegraph corps was disbanded in December 1865. He continued his career as a telegraph operator. He was appointed a superintendent on the American Telegraph Company Lines and lived for a while in New York City. A few years after the company was purchased by Western Union in 1867 Richard returned to Scranton where he became an active member of the community.

After the war, Richard met Sarah Harrison Marks, "a gentle Southern woman" who was a descendant of the 9th President of the United States, William Henry Harrison. They married in 1867 and had three children of which only one, Richard Marks O'Brien, survived to adulthood. Sarah died in 1906.

In Scranton, Richard became known for his kindness to young people who were interested in learning telegraphy. He took in boarders at the family home to give immigrants and poor students the opportunity to develop their careers. When the local correspondence school, ICS, faced bankruptcy, he joined with other businessmen to purchase it and rebuild its reputation.

Once again, he helped to provide education to the less affluent by creating of an institution which still exists today. Richard also helped start the Dime Savings Bank and the Scranton Real Estate Office.

As technology progressed after the war, Richard may have seen changes in store for the communications industries. Upon meeting Alexander Graham Bell at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, he convinced the inventor to permit him to take two telephones back to Scranton. There, he ran what was probably the first telephone line in Pennsylvania. It stretched between his house and his brother John's house. This invention led to Richard's involvement in the newly formed Pennsylvania Telegraph and Telephone Company, an entity that later merged with Bell Telephone.

Richard O'Brien died in 1923. He was survived by his son Richard Marks O'Brien and five grandchildren, one of whom, Richard III followed his grandfather into military service. He fought in France during WWI, was wounded and awarded a Purple Heart. Richard O'Brien and other family members are buried in Cathedral Cemetery in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

/Cynthia Verser



Cynthia Verser

Cynthia “Cindi” Verser is a graduate of Thomas Nelson Community College and Old Dominion University. After serving as a volunteer at Fort Monroe’s Casemate Museum for more than 15 years, she discovered her passion – “to share a love of history and artifacts with anyone who would listen”. She is currently Collections Managements Specialist at the Mariners’ Museum in Newport News, Virginia. Her interest in all things telegraphic began four years ago while she was studying Morse code for an Amateur Radio Operators License. Like John and Richard O’Brien, and many who came before her, she discovered the music in the “dits” and “dahs” of the Code and instantly became fascinated by this “elegant language” as John so aptly named it. Cindi never turns down the opportunity to learn something new. As a result she is also a volunteer Emergency Medical Technician who recently learned to drive a fire truck; a makeup artist who specializes in disaster simulations; an instructor for emergency response volunteers; a cake decorator; a sculptor; and the really weird neighbor who practices Civil War flag signals in her back yard.

/Cynthia Verser

**Visit the USS Monitor Center
At the Mariner’s Museum
100 Museum Drive
Newport News, VA 23606**

An Ironclad Promise of Adventure

* * *

Important Memorial Events

- **March 9th, Monitor Day** - Annual Celebration.
- **July 31st, John Ericsson's Birthday** - Celebration at the John Ericsson Statue in Battery Park, New York.
- **November 23rd, John Ericsson's arrival in the US** - Celebration.

Membership

The John Ericsson Society, New York offers members the privilege of participating in the use of 21st Century technology and methods to gather and provide access to evidence of the achievements of Captain John Ericsson, thus preserving for future generations an accurate record of his historic contributions and promoting the advancement of engineering science.

Membership Dues

Payment for annual membership is due January 31st each year. Kindly send payment (\$20/year or \$200/one-time life membership).

Make your check to “John Ericsson Society” and mail to **John Ericsson Society Treasurer:**

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