



Union Gunboat on the Mississippi

This is the *Tyler*, which, together with *Lexington*, played a pivotal role in both First Shiloh (1 March 1862), Second Shiloh (6-7 April 1862), and a number of other important battles. The term “gunboat” was used loosely in the Civil War to encompass everything from the specially-built true “gunboats” constructed by the North to paddlewheeled steamers like the *Tyler*, which were acquired by the Navy, armed, and sent into battle. Ships like *Tyler* and *Lexington* had only heavy wooden beams as “armor” and so were called “timberclads.” Even when iron plates were used on these converted riverboats, it was so thin that sailors referred to the ships as “tinclads.” On the Southern side, some riverboats were “armored” with bales of cotton--hence, “cotton-clads.” Even the New York harbor ferry boats were pressed into service by the Union on the rivers of Virginia and the Carolinas. What made these civilian vessels attractive to the Navies on both sides were their flat bottoms. A ship on the ocean needs a deep “keel” that curves down into the water to keep it steady in the waves, but a ship on a river needs a flat bottom to scrape past sand bars, sunken trees, and shallow water. Ships like these could manage with as little as three feet of water! The ferry boats and riverboats that survived the war returned home afterwards to once again haul freight or carry passengers.