

# Today in History - April 11

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## Under the Sea

On **April 11**, 1900, the U.S. Navy acquired its first submarine, designed by Irish immigrant [John P. Holland](#). Propelled by gasoline while on the surface and by electricity when submerged, the *Holland* served as a model for modern submarine design. By the eve of World War I, the *Holland* and *Holland*-inspired vessels were a part of large naval fleets throughout the world.



The Holland Submarine, Paterson, Passaic County, NJ. Nathaniel R. Ewan, photographer, July 17, 1936. [Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record/Historic American Landscapes Survey](#). Prints & Photographs Division

Proposals for underwater boats date back to the late 1500s. The first submarine actually constructed was probably a vessel created and tested in the early seventeenth century by Dutch inventor Cornelis Drebbel. Over the next two centuries, various inventors continued to work out design problems.

Submarines became more common in the nineteenth century, with a period of intense development occurring at the end of the century as nations strived to establish their sea power. A submersible craft, the *Turtle* was used briefly during the American Revolution. In the early years of the nineteenth century, U.S. inventor [Robert Fulton](#) also experimented with [submarine designs](#).

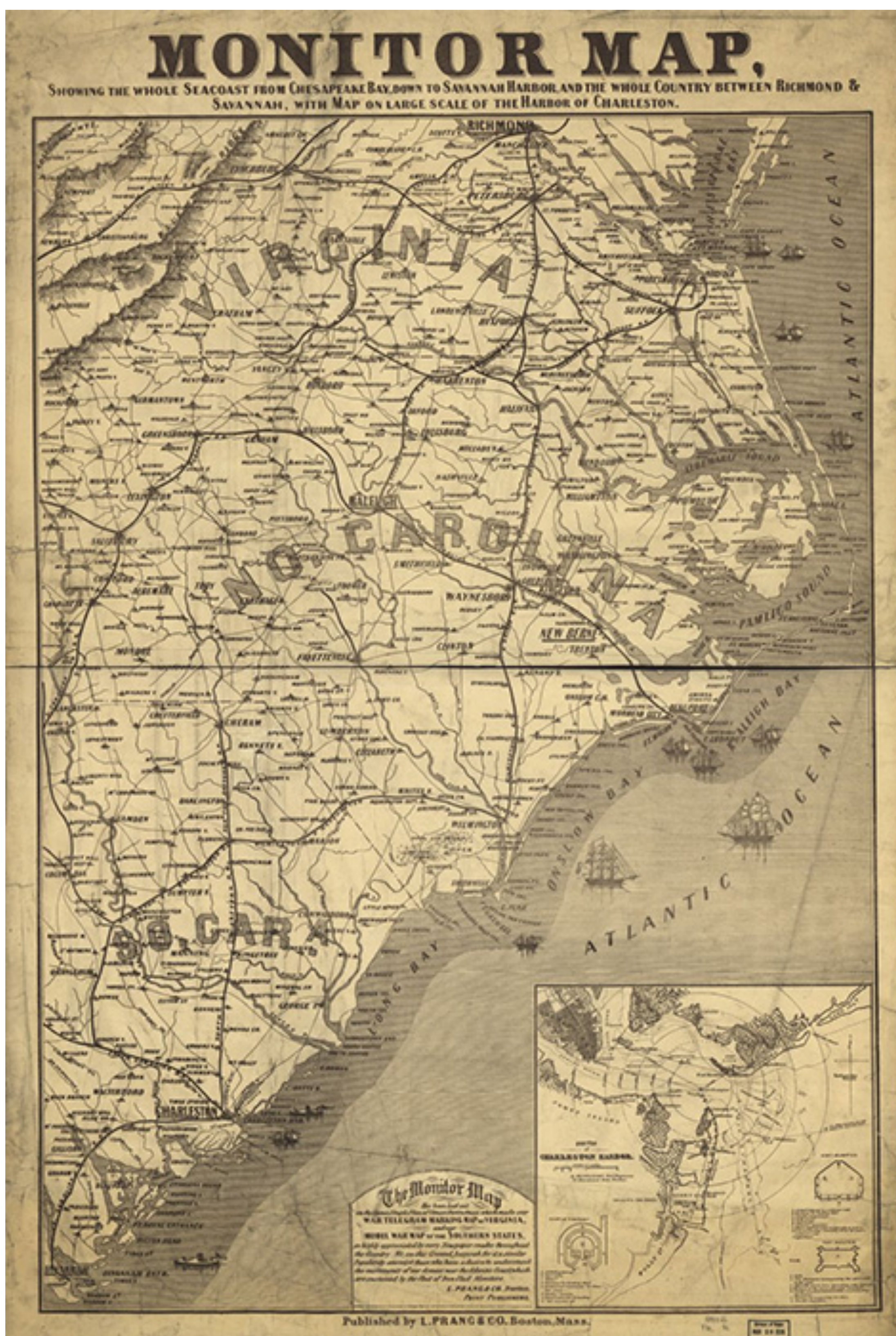
Submarines were used in the United States in both the War of 1812 and the Civil War, but it was not until [World War I](#) that submarines became accepted military vessels.



The *Detroit News Timely Topics*. *Uncle Sam's Largest Submarine*. Pacific and Atlantic Photos, Inc., photographer, [between 1915-1930]. [Detroit Publishing Company](#). Prints & Photographs Division

## The First Submarine to Sink a Battleship

Horace Lawson Hunley (1823-63) of New Orleans was one of the developers of the Confederate submarine known as the *H.L. Hunley*. Four feet wide and about forty feet long, with a hull height of four feet and three inches, the *H.L. Hunley* was the first sub to sink a ship in battle.



Monitor Map...with Map on Large Scale of the Harbor of Charleston. Boston: Louis Prang and Company, c1863. [Civil War Maps](#). Geography & Map Division

Just outside the [Charleston](#), South Carolina, harbor, while the city was under siege, the *H.L. Hunley* pushed a metal spar into the stern of the Union's largest warship on February 17, 1864. Within minutes the 1,240-ton *U.S.S. Housatonic* sank. The nine-man crew of the *H.L. Hunley* signaled, but never returned to its Sullivan Island destination. It was not until 136 years later (August 8, 2000) that the submarine was raised from the floor of Charleston Harbor.

## Learn More

- Read the [1904 Congressional debates](#) over the purchase of torpedo boats found in [African American Perspectives: Materials Selected from the Rare Book Collection](#) for a fascinating account of the competition staged by the U.S. government to evaluate the submarines the *Protector* and the *Holland*. This document offers detailed descriptions of both vessels as well as Congressional opinions on the importance of submarine warfare. (John Holland's rival, inventor Simon Lake, launched the *Protector* in 1902.)
- For more images related to submarines, [search](#) the photo collections on *submarine*. Among the materials available is a 1946 series of photographs documenting the U.S. Naval Submarine Base in New London, Connecticut.
- View inventor Robert Fulton's [submarine designs](#) from 1806 featured in the online exhibition [American Treasures of the Library of Congress](#).

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