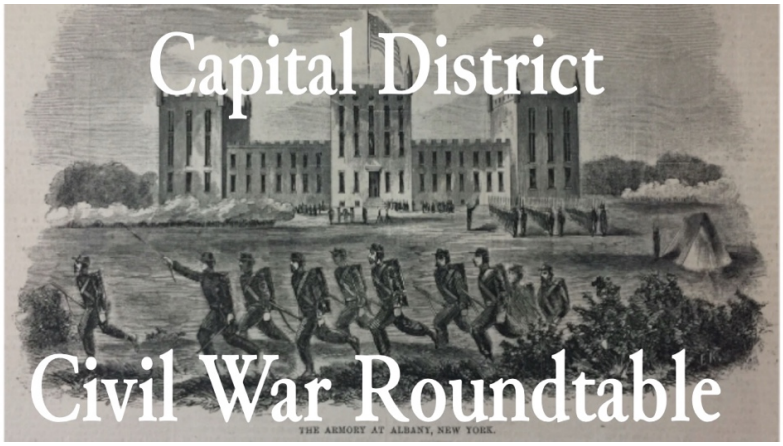
The Dispatch

Volume 42, Number 9 **September 2025**



P.O. Box 11493 Loudonville, New York 12211
www.capitaldistrictcivilwar.com

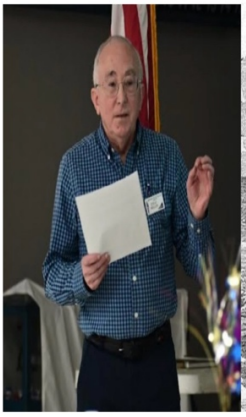
CAPITAL DISTRICT
CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE

SEPTEMBER MEETING
SATURDAY SEPT 13. 2025

WATERVLIET SENIOR CENTER

1501 BROADWAY
WATERVLIET, NEW YORK

SOCIAL HOUR 10:30AM
BUSINESS MTG 11:00AM
Presentation Begins After The Conclusion of the Business Meeting



presented by CDCWRT Treasurer

STEVE MULLER

Steve Muller's upcoming presentation on the Union ironclad USS Monitor focuses on the innovative technology incorporated in the ship's design, the challenges that had to be overcome to complete the ship within the US Navy's incredibly tight 100-day deadline, and the actual performance of the ship. Steve has been researching the Monitor using primary and secondary sources for more than 15 years. Copies of his book, Troy, New York, and the Building of the USS Monitor, published by the Hudson Mohawk Industrial Gateway, will be on sale for $5.

Steve Muller was an economist with the US Department of State Foreign Service for 27 years. After retiring and moving to Troy, he has been an active member of the Capital District Civil War Round Table and the Hudson Mohawk Industrial Gateway for nearly 20 years. Besides his book on the USS *Monitor*, he has published *Washington Park, Troy, New York: A Social History.* He is a graduate of Dartmouth College.

CAPITAL DISTRICT CIVIL WAR
ROUNDTABLE SPEAKERS

SAT. OCTOBER 11, 2025 @ 11am
What Did the Watervliet Arsenal Make During The Civil War
presented by
Mark Koziol

Ron Tunison's Bronze Statuary
presented by
Rosemary Nichols

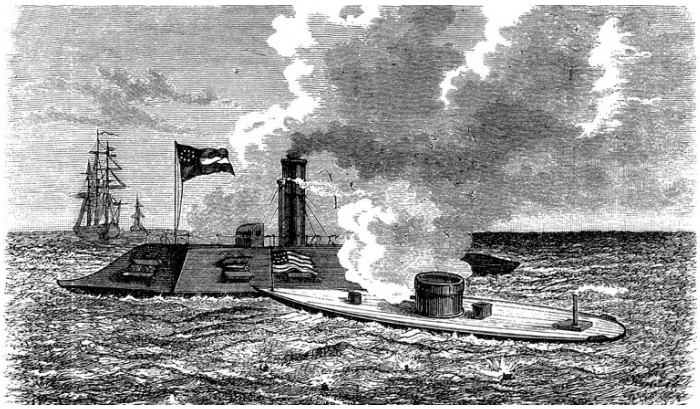
Private Edward Richards
NYS 16th Light Artillery
presented by
Shawn Connery

SAT. NOVEMBER 8, 2025 @ 11am
Thurlow Weed:
The Birth of the GOP & Upstate Abolition
presented by
Nick Thony

SAT. DECEMBER 13 @ 11am
The Other Maine Actions At The Battle of Gettysburg
presented by
Rik Scarce
Gettysburg Licensed Battlefield Guide

SAT. JANUARY 10, 2026 @ 11am
CDCWRT Annual Board Elections
Winter Book & Memorabilia Sale
TBD Presentation by
Stuart Lehman

SAT, FEBRUARY 14, 2026 @11am
Civil War Medicine: Myth & Reality
presented via ZOOM by
Dr. Matt Farina



THE SHIP THE MONITOR FOUGHT AT HAMPTON ROADS

by
Rosemary Nichols

As New Yorkers, we tend to focus on the Union vessel in the famous March 1862 battle at Hampton Roads. This article, intended to compliment Steve Muller's in-person presentation in September, focuses on the 'other' ship in the fight. Originally known as the *USS Merrimack* (sometimes spelled 'Merrimac'), once the vessel came into Confederate hands it was renamed *CSS Virginia*.

Merrimack **was the first of six screw frigates (steam frigates powered by screw propellers) begun in 1854. Like others of her class (*Wabash*, *Roanoke*, *Niagara*, *Minnesota,* and *Colorado)*, she was named after a river. The Merrimack originates in New Hampshire and flows through the town of Merrimac, Massachusetts near where the *Merrimack* was constructed.**

As built, the *Merrimack* had gross tonnage of 3,200 tons. Her length was 275 feet with a beam of 38.5 feet and a draft of 24 feet. Her top speed was 12 knots. Her highest reported crew was 302 officers and men.

United States Naval Chief Benjamin Franklin Isherwood

When the Commonwealth of Virginia seceded from the Union in 1861, one of the important US military bases threatened was Gosport Navy Yard in Portsmouth, Virginia. Orders were sent to destroy the base rather than allow it to fall into Confederate hands. On the afternoon of 17 April, the day Virginia seceded, Engineer in Chief B. F. Isherwood managed to get the frigate's engines lit. However, the previous night secessionists had sunk light boats between Craney Island and Sewell's Point, blocking the channel. On 20 April, before evacuating the Navy Yard, the U.S. Navy burned *Merrimack* to the waterline and sank her to preclude capture.

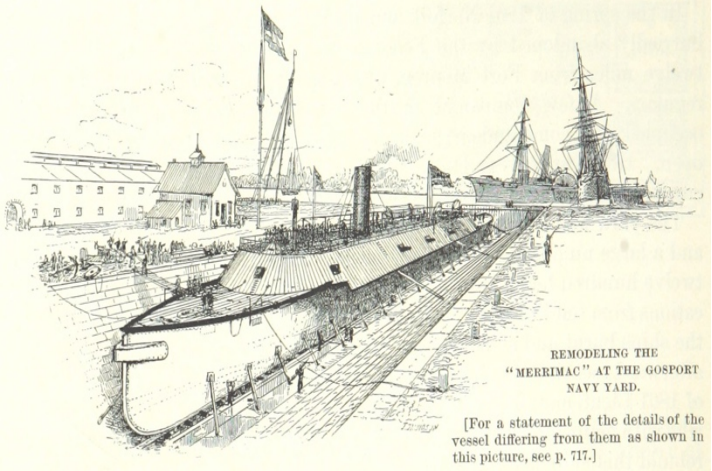
THE BURNING OF THE FRIGATE "MERRIMAC" AND OF THE GOSPORT NAVY-YARD.

When the Confederate government took possession of the fully provisioned yard, the base's new commander contracted on May 18 to salvage the wreck of the frigate. This was completed by May 30, and she was towed into the shipyard's only dry dock where the burned structures were removed.

When converted into the *CSS Virginia,* *t*he *Merrimack* was substantially changed. She became a casement ironclad. Her displacement was 4,100 tons. Her length was still 275 feet but her beam was now 51 feet and her draft was 21 feet, increasing to 22 feet fully loaded. Her top speed was 5-6 knots. She had a crew of 320 officers and men.

From reports in Northern newspapers, *Virginia*'s designers were aware of Union plans to build an ironclad and assumed their similar ordnance would be unable to do much serious damage to such a ship. It was

decided to equip their ironclad with a ram, an anachronism on a 19th-century warship.

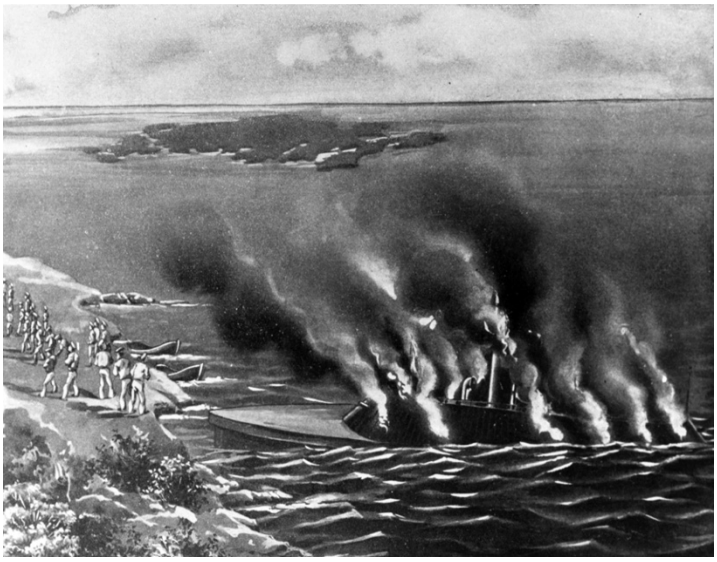

REMODELING THE "MERRIMAC" AT THE GOSPORT NAVY YARD.

[For a statement of the details of the vessel differing from them as shown in this picture, see p. 717.]

***Merrimack*'s steam engines, now part of *Virginia*, were in poor working order. They had been slated for replacement when the decision was made to abandon the Norfolk naval yard. The salty Elizabeth River water and the addition of tons of iron armor and pig iron ballast, added to the hull's unused spaces for needed stability after her initial refloat, and to submerge her unarmored lower levels, only added to her engines' propulsion issues. As completed, *Virginia* had a turning radius of about 1 mile and required 45 minutes to complete a full circle. This would later prove to be a major handicap in battle with the far nimbler *Monitor*.**

As with many early Civil War battles, each side thought they had won the engagement. Both vessels were sufficiently damaged that there was no resumption of the fighting that ceased at the end of the day on May 9, 1862. *Virginia* retired to the Gosport Naval Yard and remained in drydock for repairs until April 4, 1862.

On May 10, 1862, advancing Union troops occupied Norfolk. Since *Virginia* was now a steam-powered heavy battery and no longer an ocean-going cruiser, her pilots judged her not seaworthy enough to enter the Atlantic, even if she were able to pass the Union blockade. *Virginia* was also unable to retreat further up the James River due to her deep 22-foot draft (fully loaded). To reduce the draft, supplies and coal were dumped overboard, even though this exposed the ironclad's unarmored lower hull. This was still not enough to make a difference.

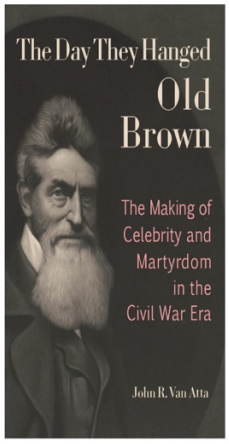


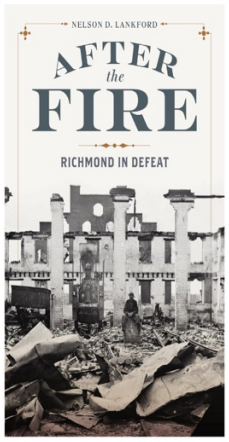
Without a home port and no place to go, *Virginia*'s captain reluctantly ordered her destruction to keep the ironclad from being captured. The ship was destroyed by setting fire to scattered gunpowder and cotton strewn across the ship's deck. Early on the morning of May 11, 1862, off Craney Island, the fire reached the ironclad's magazine, leading to a massive explosion that obliterated the ship. What remained of *Virginia* then sank to the harbor floor.

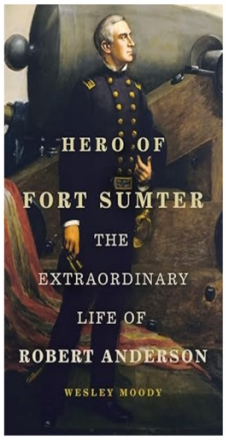
SHAWN'S CIVIL WAR BOOKSHELF

For the last few months, I have taken a sort of self-imposed sabbatical from serious Civil War reading, spending some time catching up on some much needed relaxing fiction and whittling away on my backlog of Civil War podcasts while walking the dog.

I'm excited to learn that there are several interesting titles coming over the horizons in realm of Civil War studies and wanted to share a few that will be included on my Fall 2025 To Be Read list.







The first book that caught my eye was an interesting study on the nature of celebrity in the 19th century from former Brunswick school chair John R. Van Atta entitled *The Day They Hanged Old Brown: The Making of Celebrity and Martyrdom in the Civil War Era.* The work examines perceptions of celebrity in the days before the Civil War and national ideas of heroics and martyrdom, as well as villainy.

The second title, *After the Fire: Richmond in Defeat* by Nelson D. Lankford, focuses on the last days of Richmond and the inevitable question "What happens next?" in the post-war Southern Capital. Like the previously reviewed *Ends of War* by Caroline Janney, *After the Fire* shows readers the struggles to come to terms with the aftermath of war by those left behind to make sense of the peace.

Finally, one book that I am really looking forward to is *Hero of Fort Sumter: The Extraordinary life of Robert Anderson* by Florida State College of Jacksonville professor Wesley Moody. Major Anderson is a name many of us have come across in countless works but, in my opinion, has never really been someone I knew much about outside the shadow of Fort Sumter. I cannot wait to learn more on this man.

MATT GEORGE'S DONATIONS TO THE CDCWRT

In his will, longtime member Matt George bequeathed his Civil War collection to the RT. In early summer, roundtable board members examined his collection and took what books, prints, sculptures, shirts, DVDs they could before Matt's condo went up for sale. Beginning with the September 13 meeting, we shall begin selling his books and brand new, never worn shirts for $20.00 each. Proceeds will go towards donations to charitable groups like the Battlefield Trust.

CDCWRT
P.O. BOX 11493
LOUDONVILLE, NY 12211

Created in 1984, the Capital District Civil War Round Table is an incorporated non-profit educational organization. Meetings are held monthly in various locations in the Capital District. This newsletter is published eleven times per year. Annual dues are $35. The purpose of the organization is to promote, educate, and further stimulate interest in, and discussion of, all aspects of the Civil War period.

Contact the Capital District Civil War Round Table through
our website: **www.capitaldistrictcivilwar.org**
or email: **cdcwrt@hotmail.com**

THE OFFICERS

President	Mark Koziol	Vice-President	Bruce Reed
Treasurer	Steve Muller	Secretary	Shawn Connery
At-Large	Rosemary Nichols	At-Large	Leo McGuire

THE NONCOMS

Program	
Membership	Steve Muller
Refreshments	Dean Long and Luanne Whitbeck
Webmaster	Mark Koziol
Education	
Newsletter	Rosemary Nichols and Shawn Connery