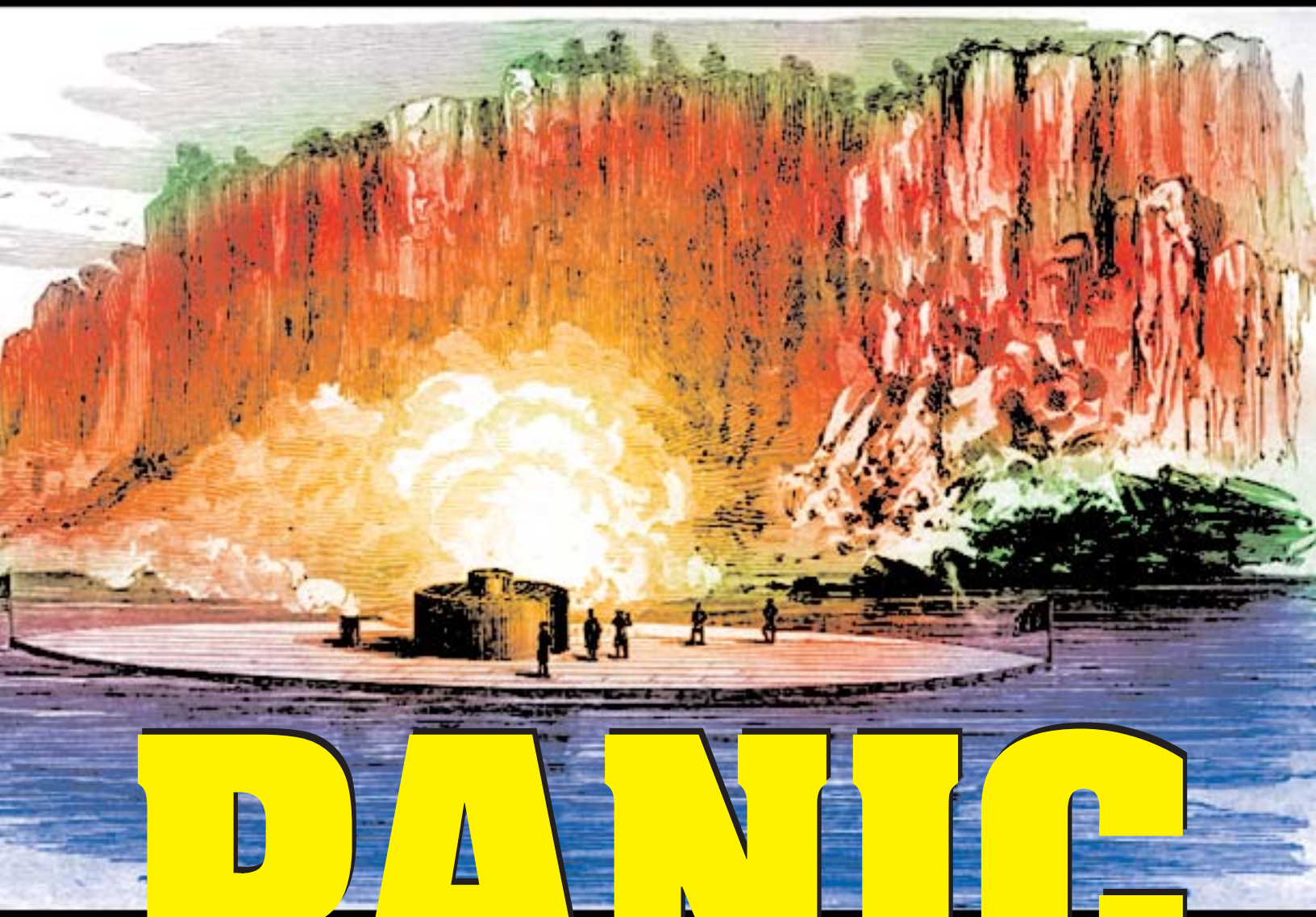
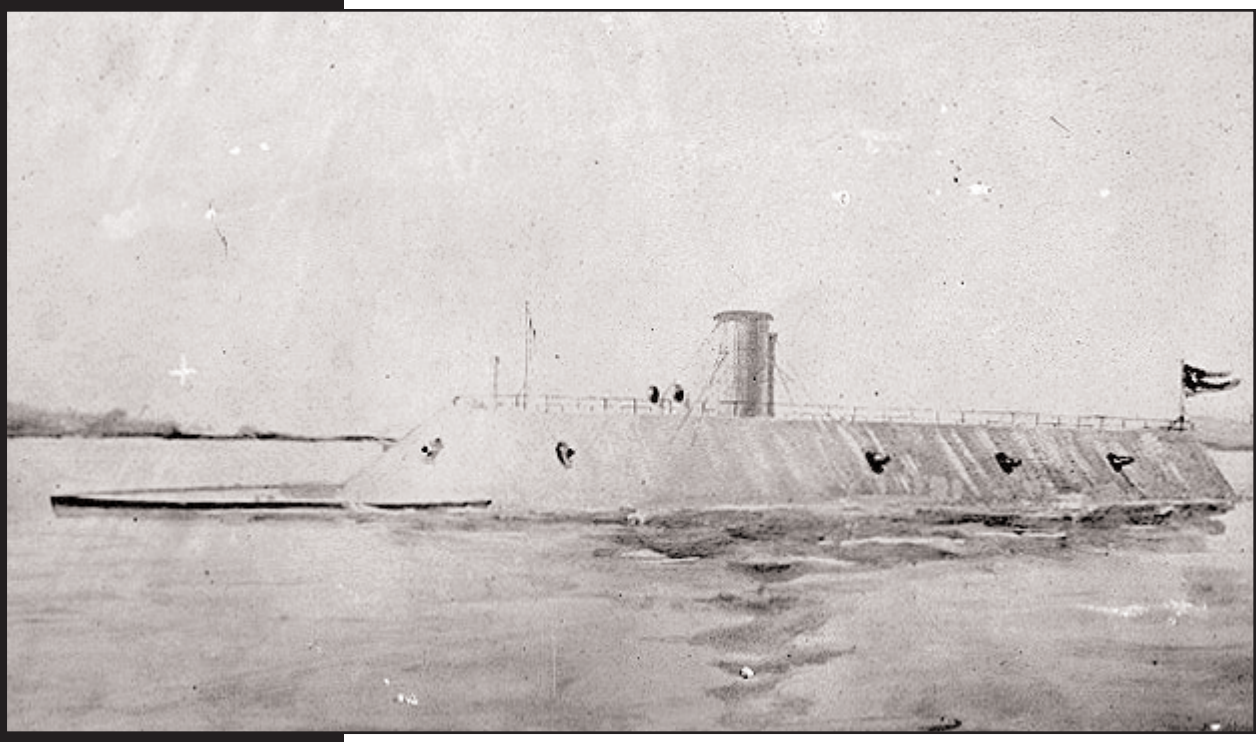


PANIC on the Palisades

From "New Jersey's Civil War Oddyssey: An Anthology of Civil War Tales, from 1850 to 1961," edited by Joseph G. Bilbly. See a review of this book in this issue of GSL!

by
James M. Madden



The threat of attacks by the CSS *Virginia* worried the North East until the draw battle with the USS *Monitor* in the first fight between ironclads.

During the Civil War many people living in northern coastal states, including New Jersey, had a decided, if, in retrospect, seemingly unreasonable, fear of Confederate naval attacks. New Jerseyans were familiar with stories of British coastal raids during the War for Independence and the naval blockade with occasional enemy forays ashore in the state during the War of 1812, when the British also burned Washington, D.C. and attacked Baltimore's Fort McHenry. Although the Union navy dominated the high seas, the persistence of historical memory may well have been responsible for a willingness to believe the 1861 scare story that Confederate privateers were about to descend on Cape May.

By early 1862 there were other unpleasant possibilities, however. In early March, Confederate Navy Secretary Stephen R. Mallory anticipated that his new Confederate ironclad ship CSS *Virginia* might break out through the Union blockade of Hampton Roads, sail north around Sandy Hook and, "shell and burn... [New York] city and the shipping." Mallory predicted that "such an event would eclipse all the glories of the combats of the sea" and "strike a blow from which the enemy could never recover. Peace would inevitably follow." In the event, of course, the Union ironclad ship *Monitor* sailed down from New York and stifled any possible threat from *Virginia* in a drawn battle fought on March 9.

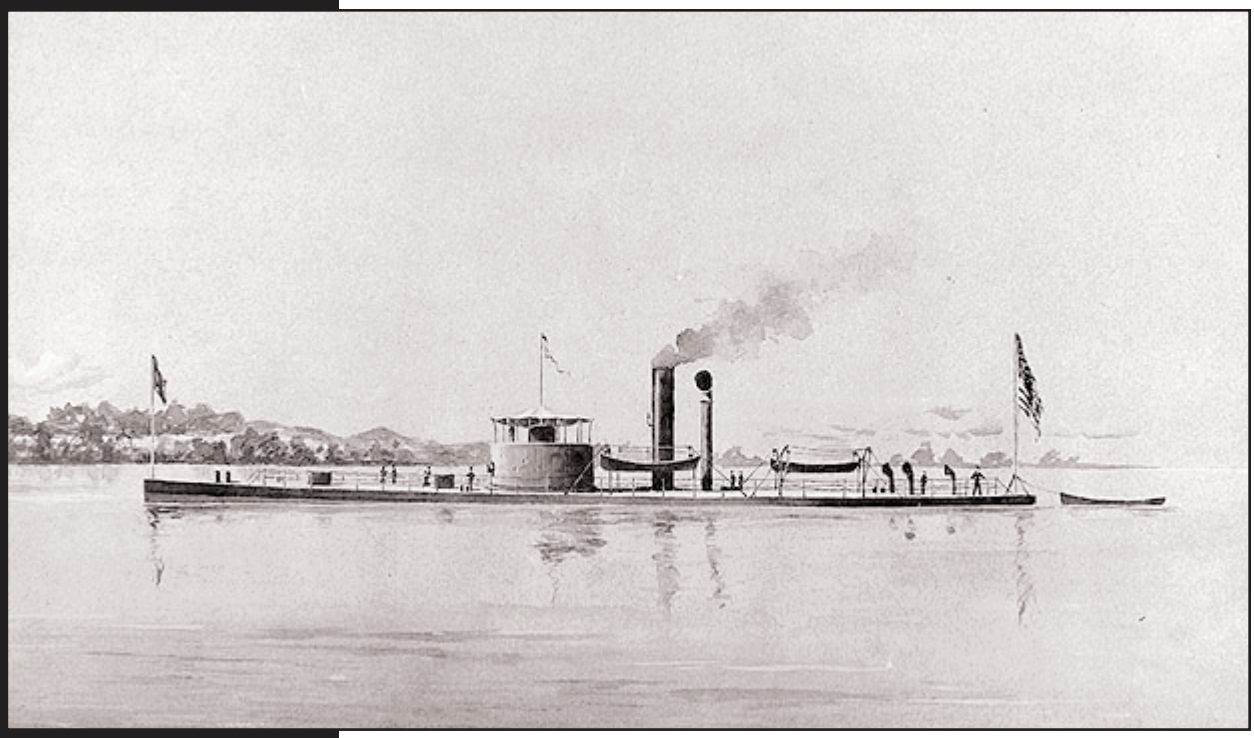
That autumn, however, another danger arose, this time clos-

The CSS *Alabama* wreaked havoc on Union shipping in the waters off New England and made threats to come into New York's harbor, guns blazing.

er to home. The heavily armed Rebel commerce raider CSS *Alabama*, secretly constructed in England, commanded by Captain Raphael Semmes and manned by southern officers and a European mercenary crew, was officially commissioned as a Confederate warship in August, 1862. *Alabama* sailed towards the New England coast and then south, wreaking havoc on Union civilian shipping along the way.

One of *Alabama*'s victims, the old sailing ship *Baron De Castine*, had little actual value, but became a Confederate propaganda vehicle when Semmes dispatched it back to Boston along with 45 hapless prisoners from three destroyed merchantmen and a message to the New York Chamber of Commerce. Semmes advised the New Yorkers that he would soon be "prowling off the coast awaiting to pounce on Union shipping." He knew the story would spread rapidly through the northern press, and, if the local media needed any more prodding, *Alabama*'s crewmen had boasted to the prisoners that they were going to sail into New York harbor with guns blazing. Semmes captured and burned several merchant ships some 80 miles off the coast of New York and New Jersey in late October, and then, satisfied he had struck a moral blow at the commercial capital of the Union, the Confederate captain sailed off to the south, seeking more easy prey.

No one in New York knew Semmes had departed the area, however, and on November 7 *The New York Times*, responding

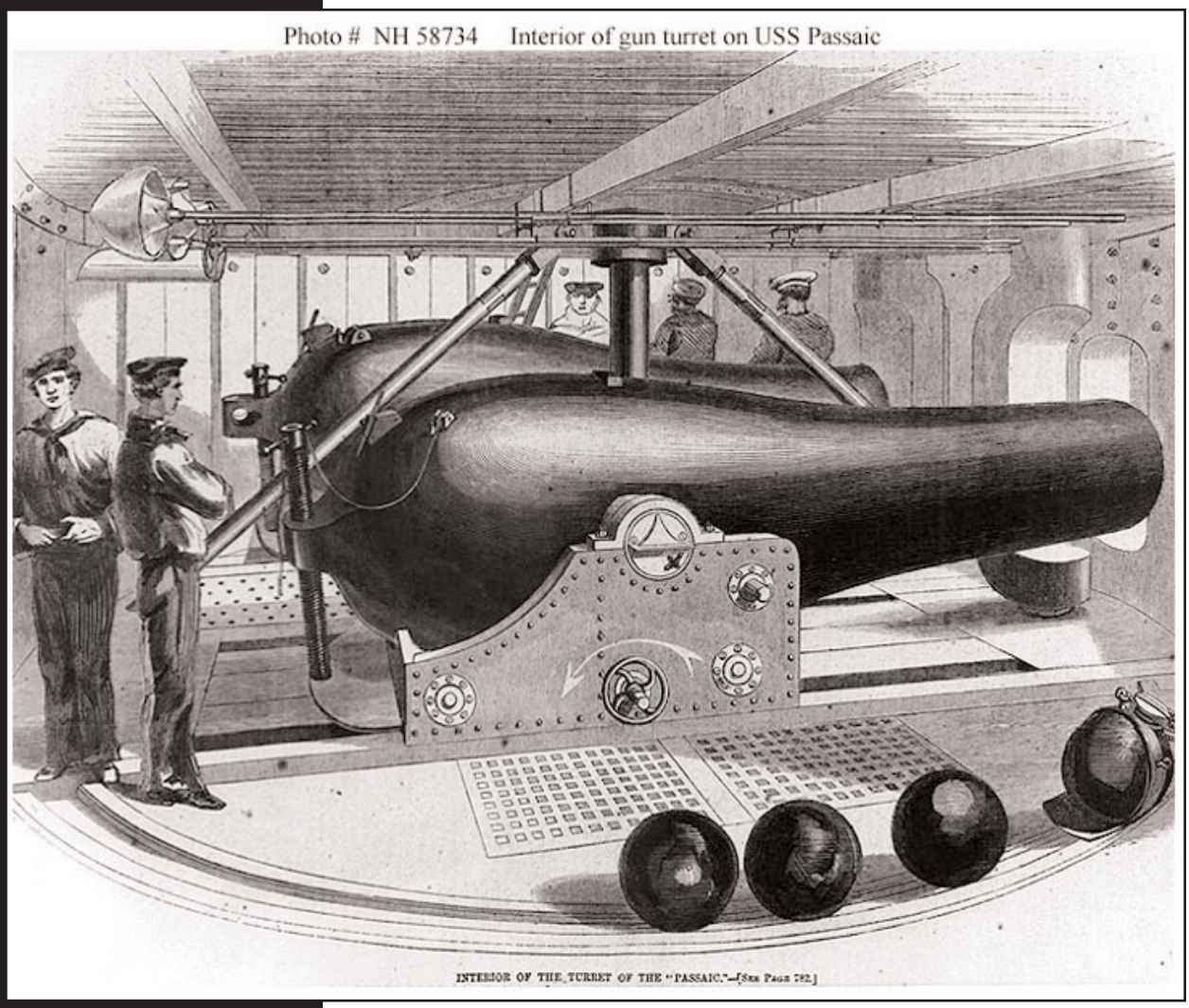


The USS *Passaic* depicted in a painting by R.G. Skerret.

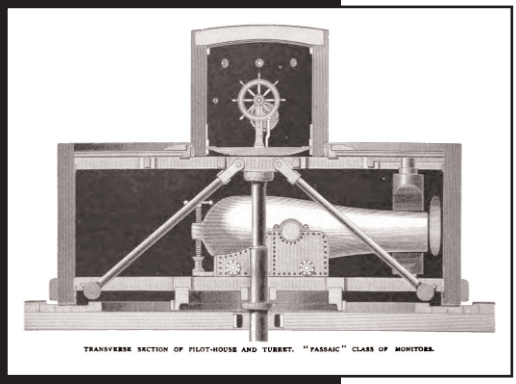
to the perceived *Alabama* menace, complained about the decrepit condition of New York's harbor fortifications, noting that "the City was comparatively unprotected from the assaults of the enemy by sea." The existing forts, according to the paper, "would prove at best an uncertain and inefficient defense against swift-moving vessels." *Alabama*'s threats seemed genuine and the press continued to promote the idea that a Confederate seaborne attack could occur at any moment, which did nothing to calm public anxiety.

The harbor forts may have been in poor shape, but shipyard workers in Jersey City, Hoboken and Brooklyn were assiduously constructing warships which might actually provide a more effective response to an enemy naval assault. The most imposing of these, the "Stevens Battery," a massive 420 foot long and 40 foot wide ironclad ship designed by the Stevens family of Hoboken, had been an off-again on-again work in progress for over two decades, but was, unfortunately, nowhere near ready to defend the harbor.

But the USS *Passaic* might be. The *Passaic*, a Brooklyn-built ironclad, was seaworthy and ready to test its cannons that fall, and the New Jersey Palisades cliffs seemed to provide the most convenient location for gun trials, as there was no danger of shot and shell caroming off into a densely populated local countryside. The navy picked November 15 as the test date, and on that crisp and cold autumn morning, the *Passaic* steamed out of



Illustrations of the *Passaic*'s two Dahlghren guns from *Harper's Weekly.*



Brooklyn and up the Hudson at a speed of seven knots, bucking a strong ebb tide and a heavy northerly wind. At noon the ironclad anchored opposite Fort Lee, the highest point of the Palisades, some 200 yards from the shoreline.

Sailors loaded the ship's 15 inch Dahlgren gun, and aimed it at New Jersey. It misfired several times, to the amusement of those officers aboard who had predicted that the ship's turret design would interfere with effective gunnery. And then, on the fourth attempt, the Dahlgren fired. That first round splintered the rock wall and produced a massive echo that witnesses likened to the explosion of a powder mill. Despite the noise, the navy was satisfied, as there was no concussion or smoke inside the ship's gun turret, despite dire predictions from critics. Three more shots produced as many more echoes and showers

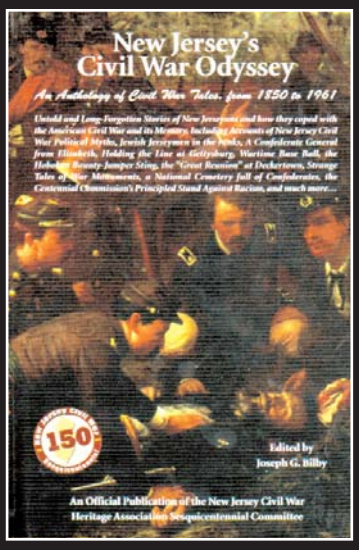
Religious services aboard the UCC *Passaic.* Note the integrated crew.
U.S. Naval Historical Center

of shattered rock. An Irishman aboard, awed by the destructive demonstration, declared the *Passaic* a "floating divil." All in all, *Passaic* turned in a spectacular performance after the initial misfires. Unfortunately, the officers in charge of the morning outing had not advised the local citizenry in advance.

Downriver, the *Passaic*'s unannounced gun drill caused public tension to percolate into panic, as rumors ran rife that the Confederate navy, perhaps in the person of Captain Semmes, had indeed breeched the defenses of New York harbor and that one or more Rebel warships were steaming up the Hudson River raking the New Jersey and New York shores with their artillery. People could hear reverberations of gunfire and the impact of solid shot and shells on stone as sound cascaded beyond the Palisades, and for some there could be no explanation other than a Rebel attack. It was some time before the truth got out and the fright subsided.

The *Passaic*, unwitting perpetrator of the panic, was Swedish-born John Ericsson's second ironclad design, a larger ship featuring heavier iron plating and bigger guns than his original *Monitor.* The new model also had better ventilation, higher smoke funnels, improved raft and hull shape, and a pilothouse atop the turret for better command and control. Even more importantly, its guns did not protrude outside the turret and were thus faster and easier to load.

This second generation Ericsson ironclad, named for a New



Jersey city, county and river, gave its name to an entire class of similar ships. The initial *Passaic*-class "improved *Monitor*," built in the Brooklyn Navy yard, was the first of ten of its type, two of which, including the USS *Weehawken*, were constructed by Zeno Secor & Company at the Jersey City shipyard of Joseph Colwell's Fulton Foundry.

Although the Confederate invasion scare was soon dispelled, the defensive weakness of New York Harbor was still a real concern for many officials. Hiram Barney, Collector of the Ports of New York, petitioned the navy to permanently station *Passaic* in the area to compensate for the lack of decent harbor defenses. The navy had different priorities, however, and wanted to get its new model ironclad ships into action as soon as possible. *Passaic*, followed by her sister ships, as fast as New York and New Jersey shipyards could crank them out, headed south to reinforce the blockading squadron. On the way, *Passaic* and her crew received a personal visit from President Lincoln while docked at the Washington Navy Yard. The *Passaic* class ironclads played a significant role in naval operations for the rest of the war, and the design proved so successful that later versions would be built for the Imperial Russian navy.

From that day in mid-November 1862 through the end of the Civil War, the Palisades at Fort Lee, New Jersey was a naval artillery target range and proving ground for the guns of all the ironclad ships built in Jersey City and Brooklyn. The local citizenry got used to the noise, and took it in stride, as the possibility of Confederate naval action against New York City waned, even from active imaginations. Ironclad vessels changed the future of warfare at sea. Jersey City shipyards built them, and the cliffs of the Palisades played the vital role of target backstop, all as part of New Jersey's significant contribution to saving the Union.