IRONCLAD AMBUSH

Confederates Strike Lincoln's Mississippi River Blockade at the Head of Passes, October 12, 1861

Neil P. Chatelain

Unedited Excerpt

SB
Savas Beatie
California

First edition, first printing

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Chatelain, Neil P. author
Title: Ironclad Ambush: Confederates Strike Lincoln's Mississippi River Blockade at the Head of Passes, October 12, 1861 / by Neil P. Chatelain.
Description: El Dorado Hills, CA : Savas Beatie, [2026] | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "In early October 1861, United States warships entered the Head of Passes, where the Mississippi River's multiple entrances converge into a single channel. The Battle of the Head of Passes on October 12 marked the Civil War's first major fleet engagement. The clash represented the Confederacy's first major naval victory, the first use of an ironclad in North American waters, and the first direct challenge to Abraham Lincoln's blockade. Award-winning historian Neil P. Chatelain's latest title scrutinizes every previous account of the battle, firsthand archival material, and period newspapers. Drawing on voices from all sides-including ship captains, junior officers, enlisted sailors, lighthouse keepers, and civilians across southeastern Louisiana-he unravels the complexities and contradictions of early Civil War coastal and riverine naval operations. Everyone with an interest in naval warfare will find this book invaluable"-- Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2026009035 | ISBN 9781611217957 hardcover | ISBN 9781611217964 ebook
Subjects: LCSH: United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Blockades | United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865--Naval operations | Confederate States of America. Navy--History | Manassas (Ship) | Richmond (Ship : 1860-1919)
Classification: LCC E600 .C43 2026 | DDC 973.7/5--dc23/eng/20260402
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2026009035

SB
Savas Beatie
989 Governor Drive, Suite 101
El Dorado Hills, CA 95762
916-941-6896 / sales@savasbeatie.com / www.savasbeatie.com

All of our titles are available at special discount rates for bulk purchases in the United States. Contact us for information.

For my wife Brittany. Thanks for your continued support in all that I do.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF MAPS

Photos have been placed throughout the text for the convenience of the reader.

ABBREVIATIONS

Area File: Area File of the Naval Records Collection, 1775–1910, M625, RG 45, U.S. National Archives.

Batcheller Letters: Oliver Ambrose Batcheller Letters, MS 264, Special Collections & Archives Department, Nimitz Library, United States Naval Academy.

Clara Solomon Diary: Clara E. Solomon Diaries and Photograph, MSSH:17, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi River Valley Collection, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA.

C.S. Subject File: Subject File of the Confederate States Navy (Record Group 45), National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

John Horry Dent Jr. Letters: John Horry Dent Jr. Letters, The University of Alabama Libraries Special Collections.

Edward W. Bacon Diary: *Bacon, Edward Woolsey Papers*, 1861–1865, Manuscript Collections, American Antiquarian Society.

Hart Letters: John E. Hart Letters, Special Collections and Archives, United States Naval Academy.

Joseph Shively Journal: Journal of Surgeon Joseph Warren Shively Spared & Shared, https://sparedshared22.wordpress.com/2021/10/11/the-civil-war-journal-of-dr-joseph-warren-shively/.

Joshua Blake Journal: *Joshua Blake Civil War Naval Journal*, MS-225, Collections and College Archives, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College.

LOC: Library of Congress.

NHHC: Naval History and Heritage Command

OR: *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*.

ORN: *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*.

Muster Roll: Muster Rolls of Naval Ships, 1/1/1860–6/9/1900, Record Group 24, U.S. National Archives.

SHC, UNC: Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Squadron Letters: Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Commanding Officers of Squadrons, 1841–1886, Publication Number M89, Record Group 45, U.S. National Archives.

US Subject File: Record Group 45, Subject File of the United States Navy, 1924–1946, NAID 594070.

USS *X* Logbook: Logbooks of U.S. Naval Ships, 1801–1940, Record Group 24: Records of the Bureau of Naval Personnel, 1798–2007. U.S. National Archives.

Acknowledgments

I may be the author of this work, but many others have assisted me in this endeavor. I have been researching this project, in one fashion or another, for fifteen years. The research process is a group effort. Without the help of librarians, archivists, and researchers across the country, I would not have been able to complete my work. There are far too many to list here, but I would like to thank all researchers and librarians who assisted in tracking down documents, information, leads, and critical thoughts.

Numerous libraries and institutions assisted in providing information and access to resources, especially those which provided materials amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Without the help of many state organizations and libraries, this work would not have been possible. I would like to especially thank the librarians at the United States Naval Academy, the National Archives, the Library of Congress, and Gettysburg College; the historians and archivists at Naval History and Heritage Command; librarians at the University of Alabama; and librarians and archivists at the University of North Carolina. Thanks are also due to the many members of CivilWarTalk. Their online discussion board has numerous forums dedicated to the Mississippi River, the ironclad *Manassas*, and naval aspects of the war. Their thoughts, debates, and insights helped confirm my own thoughts numerous times.

I would also like to thank Theodore P. Savas and his fantastic team at Savas Beatie. Their efforts have collectively made my manuscript better, helping it reach its final form. David Snyder's work editing the manuscript helped clarify things and make the book a better version of itself. Ed Alexander did a fantastic job producing the maps. Veronica Kane and Sarah Keeney made the process smooth, and it was great to work with them

once again. Also, special thanks to Ed Cotham, Sam Cavell, and Sean Michael Chick for providing advance praise and taking early looks at the manuscript.

Finally, and most importantly, I would have accomplished nothing if it were not for the continued assistance, persistence, and support from my wife Brittany. As with my previous works, without your help, this book would never have been completed and I am truly grateful for your support. Thank you for putting up with my conversations, questions, and the many long hours researching, writing, and editing.

Preface

Fought in the morning hours of October 12, 1861, the Battle of the Head of Passes was a naval engagement for control over the Mississippi River Delta. Any book exploring a specific battle cannot however, in its nature, only cover the time of the battle itself. It must also look at where the battle was fought geographically, why it was fought at that specific location, when it occurred, what led up to the conflict occurring, and what the engagement's implications were. Thus, this work, while primarily focused on the October 12 battle, the first major fleet engagement in the United States Civil War, devotes significant effort and space to setting the stage to explain why this battle occurred, as well as unpacking its effects.

The Battle of the Head of Passes was the first attempt by the Confederacy to break Abraham Lincoln's coastal blockade, meant to deprive the Confederacy of critically needed international supplies. Most of the attention circling the engagement gravitates to the Confederate ironclad-privateer *Manassas*. Its ramming of the U.S. steam-sloop *Richmond* began the battle and captured national attention. Thus, understanding the blockade, its organization at the Mississippi River Delta, and how the ironclad *Manassas* was envisioned and prepared are all critical to understanding the engagement's course. Deconstructing these elements also offers a lens into the state-of-mind of the officers, sailors, and Marines involved. Thus, the first major element of the book, chapters one through five, is devoted to unpacking these concepts. These chapters shift back and forth between blockaders arriving in the Gulf of Mexico and Confederates in New Orleans as both sides attempted to establish and deploy naval forces.

Topics explored in detail in this first part include the initial thoughts about why New Orleans and the Mississippi River Delta were crucial locations, both as an industrial

urban center and focal point to control access to the entire Mississippi River Valley. Chapters explore early Confederate attempts to create a naval force at New Orleans, including exploration of the first concepts of employing a steam-ram. Also detailed are the establishment of the U.S. blockade of the Mississippi River, what ships were available and employed in that blockade, and how the Confederacy initially responded. Finally, the purchase of the tug *Enoch Train* and its conversion into the steam-ram *Manassas* is documented.

The second major section of the book encompasses chapters seven and eight. These explore the immediate leadup to the Battle of the Head of Passes. Topics explored include why the United States blockaders wanted to occupy the Head of Passes, how they did so, and how Confederate Captain George N. Hollins assembled naval forces to strike these blockaders. Also explored is how the ironclad-privateer *Manassas* ultimately came under the Confederate Navy's jurisdiction.

The third major section of the book, encompassing chapters eight through eleven, explores the October 12 battle itself. Chapter eight details the start of this engagement, where *Manassas* rammed *Richmond* before dawn on October 12, 1861. Chapter nine explores how the blockading ships retreated out of the Head of Passes and down Southwest Pass as Confederate reinforcements entered the battle space. Chapter 10 documents the second phase of the battle, when Confederate ships and blockaders battled one another in Southwest Pass, with two U.S. ships running aground in the mud. Chapter eleven examines the end of the battle, exploring the most controversial actions taken by blockading officers and why the Confederate naval squadron ultimately retreated.

The book's fourth and final major section encompasses chapters 12 through 15. These focus on the aftermath of the battle. Chapter 12 covers the rest of October 12, 1861, analyzing how blockaders struggled to free their grounded ships, called for reinforcements, and prepared for a potential renewed attack. It also explores Confederate naval forces moving up the Mississippi River to spread word of their victory to New Orleans. Chapter 13 continues this analysis over the several days after the battle, showing how U.S. sailors freed their grounded ships and maintained their blockade of the Mississippi River Delta while Confederates celebrated the battle and repaired their own vessels. Chapter 14 explores immediate lessons learned from the battle itself, how the United States maintained its blockade, and how people in New Orleans, on the blockading ships, and across the continent interpreted the battle. It also documents how Confederate ships maintained their presence in the Head of Passes in the months after the battle, as well as the political fallout amongst blockading leadership for its poor performance.

The final chapter unpacks the engagement's long-term implications. This includes issues related to the local area, such as how blockading sailors in 1862 enacted safeguards during their advance to New Orleans to prevent a repeat Confederate attack. It also

explores larger impacts to the war, such as how the battle inspired expanded use of ships designed to ram enemies, and how designs and principles tested at the Head of Passes inspired continued experimentation with naval weapons.

The cast of characters is widespread, encompassing as many voices as possible. Significant attention is paid to the vessel and squadron commanders of both sides' naval forces, as these men conceived the plans and commanded the sailors fighting in the battle. Where records and documentation exist, voices from junior officers and enlisted sailors are also used. These were the men who realized the orders from their captains. Efforts were made to include voices from junior officers from many backgrounds and ships, including line and staff officers, engineers, professional career sailors, and new volunteers. Also included is information about junior enlisted sailors and their contributions to the battle, including numerous African American sailors assigned to the blockading steam-sloop *Richmond*.

Civilians are also included in the story. These range from people within New Orleans to those on Louisiana's coastline and are meant to highlight the diversity of New Orleans regarding race, gender, background, language, and religion. Included among them are an Afro-Creole man who rose from enslaved laborer to business owner and militia officer, a middle-class Jewish teenager who documented changes in the Crescent City, a lightkeeper on Louisiana's coastline caught between both sides, and the doctor for the Mississippi River bar pilots who found himself speaking with leaders on both sides. These voices demonstrate the complexities of life in New Orleans as the Civil War began and showcase how the blockade and Confederate naval responses impacted the people of the Crescent City directly.

A final note on terminology is warranted. I decided to not use the term Union, instead using the United States of America when referring to loyal Federal forces of the United States. I have undertaken to use location terminology as used in the Civil War era. Today's pilot station, known as Pilottown, generally had its name split into two words as Pilot Town in the Civil War. I used the 19th century nomenclature. There are a host of distinct spellings for the eastern pass of the Mississippi River Delta; I used Pass à l'Outre as this maintains the French capitalization and accents. I referred to the body of water below the modern United States as the Gulf of Mexico, as did people of the 19th century. With these terms, and others however, I leave quotations spelled exactly as written originally.

Introduction

The Battle at the Head of Passes is one of numerous firsts. It was the first major fleet engagement of the U.S. Civil War, where two squadrons of ships fought one another. It was the first attempt by U.S. naval forces to advance up the Mississippi River, starting a series of campaigns that ultimately resulted in a split Confederacy two years later. It was the first major wartime case of one ship deliberately ramming another. The first ironclad in North America made its debut in the Confederacy's first test of the blockade. It was also the first large-scale Civil War battle in which Black men fought, doing so as sailors on U.S. warships. Despite this, Civil War scholars remain largely ignorant of the engagement, with even those who study naval elements of the conflict downplaying the events of that October 12 morning. Those who have looked at what occurred at the Head of Passes often mark it as merely a prelude to David Farragut's 1862 advances up the Mississippi to capture New Orleans, even though those events were six months apart and Farragut was not yet present off Louisiana's coast when the initial Confederate ironclad ambush occurred.

Several participants of the battle recorded accounts of the engagement, but such narratives are scarce. The only steady and accessible source of firsthand information written by veterans are the reports published in the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion*. Very few U.S. sailors present left postwar accounts, likely because of the ridicule they may have felt at being involved in an embarrassing defeat. Instead, most published firsthand accounts of the battle center around Confederate officers, including Capt. George N. Hollins, one of his captains, and a few junior officers. A couple were printed in the 1870s, but most were not published until the twentieth century. These firsthand accounts are short, generally because the

parts involving the Head of Passes are one small part of a greater autobiography. The average number of pages each veteran wrote about the battle was just over six. Many others left letters and diaries that were not published and did not become generally accessible until much later.

Historians have done a slightly better job of documenting the battle. The first was William Robinson, who devoted a chapter of his 1928 work *The Confederate Privateers* to the ironclad *Manassas*. That was the only major work to look at the Head of Passes until the Civil War's centennial. Charles Dufour's *The Night the War Was Lost* (1960) devoted one chapter to the Head of Passes, using it to introduce naval elements that would later contextualize the April 1862 campaigns for the Crescent City. Renowned historian Edward Bearss published an article in *Louisiana History* in 1963 about the battle and William Still devoted part of a chapter to *Manassas* and its first battle in his 1971 *Iron Afloat: The Story of the Confederate Armorclads*. Study of the engagement then remained dormant for 25 years, but in 1996 several works briefly examined it. The most in-depth of these was Chester Hearn's *The Capture of New Orleans 1862*, which devotes a single chapter to the Head of Passes. Other works that year, including Raimondo Luraghi's *A History of the Confederate Navy* and R. Thomas Campbell's *Gray Thunder*, devote considerably less space to exploring the ironclad *Manassas* that October morning.

There have been many works in the early twenty-first century that continue this trend of chapter-length or cursory analysis. R. Thomas Campbell published two other books, *Confederate Naval Forces on Western Waters* and *Confederate Ironclads Afloat*, that continue the chapter analysis of the ironclad *Manassas* and battle. My own works, *Fought Like Devils: The Confederate Gunboat McRae* and *Defending the Arteries of Rebellion: Confederate Naval Operations in the Mississippi River Valley, 1861–1865*, likewise only offer a chapter-length treatment of the battle. Robert Browning's excellent history of the West Gulf Blockading squadron, *Lincoln's Trident*, devotes a scant six pages to the battle. The most recent book to cover the battle was Mark Bielski's *A Mortal Blow to the Confederacy*, which devotes two pages to the battle in the context of analyzing the 1862 New Orleans campaign. In total, the fifteen major secondary works that include the Battle of the Head of Passes have devoted an average of just over eight pages each on the subject.

Amongst all these sources, the basic story of the battle is generally acknowledged as one in which a handful of blockaders under Capt. John Pope enter the Head of Passes, where the numerous passes of the Mississippi River Delta converge into a single river channel. Captain George Hollins, recently appointed to command the Confederacy's naval forces at New Orleans, determined to strike Pope's blockaders. Hollins gathered a makeshift "mosquito fleet" of converted tugs and river steamers to face Pope's purpose-built warships. Just before the battle Hollins commandeered the civilian ironclad-privateer *Manassas*, a strange-looking ship outfitted with a single cannon and a ram.

In the pre-dawn hours of October 12, 1861, *Manassas* led Hollins's force downriver and rammed USS *Richmond*. Pope's ships chaotically retreated in haste down Southwest Pass for the Gulf of Mexico while the Confederates released several fire rafts downriver. Two U.S. warships, *Richmond* and *Vincennes*, ran aground in the withdrawal and became stuck in the river's mud. Hollins advanced his river gunboats and fired on the stuck blockaders for a time, all while sailors on the grounded *Vincennes*, abandoned their ship after misinterpreting a signal from Pope as an order to do so. With the blockaders stuck, Hollins mysteriously withdrew upriver, declaring victory and announcing a broken blockade. No ships were sunk and no casualties reported in what quickly became an embarrassment for the U.S. Navy.

This general story is one of half explanations, however. A book-length study of this battle is warranted because the engagement has been overshadowed and relegated to pieces of works on other topics, and because those works often get the deeper story wrong. A fuller story needs telling to help demonstrate why New Orleans mattered to the Confederacy, why it was an important target for the United States from the conflict's first days, how Abraham Lincoln's blockade formed in the days after its declaration, and how the Confederacy tried to break that blockade. The battle's scant mentioning in books about the blockade or about the Mississippi River have instead made the Battle of the Head of Passes the Civil War's most misunderstood naval engagement. There remains significant contradictory information regarding virtually every element of the fight. Claims made by participants have often been taken at face value, even when their accounts were written 50 years after the fact or with a clear agenda. Historians writing about the battle have frequently gotten information wrong. Close analysis is warranted to sift the fact from the fiction.

Some of these inconsistencies are small in nature, but some are quite important. People at the time, and historians today, are not even exactly sure what the privateer ironclad *Manassas* looked like and cannot be certain what engineering equipment was installed on the vessel. There is agreement *Manassas* was a privateer that received a letter of marque and reprisal from the Confederate government, but everyone seems to question why privateer sailors wanted to use an ironclad ram that could not capture enemy ships and thus receive prize money. Everyone agrees the Captain Hollins took possession of *Manassas*, usurping the civilian control of the ship, but there remain disagreements over exactly where this occurred and how events transpired.

Questions remain as to why the U.S. blockaders took possession of the Head of Passes when they did. Their goals in occupying the position remain muddled. Why Hollins determined to attack is also open for debate, with questions over whether he was trying to break the blockade, test *Manassas*, or decoy blockaders to allow Confederate ships to escape the river. Eyewitness accounts and historians cannot even accurately determine what ships were involved in the battle. Some have announced that there

were U.S. warships present that were instead in Texas waters that day. Some, including myself, have previously said that there were Confederate ships at the battle that did not even exist. Almost all accounts ignore several blockading supply vessels just outside the battle space that were heavily involved in the leadup of the fight, the conduct of the battle itself, and its immediate aftereffects. All accounts mention how sailors aboard USS *Vincennes* abandoned ship in the middle of the battle, but none mention how a second ship, the supply-sloop *Nightingale*, was also ordered abandoned and destroyed moments later. It is accepted there was a mix-up in either sending or receiving the signal that ultimately resulted in *Vincennes* being abandoned, but no one has ever before tried to identify that particular signal, how it was received, and from which code book it came. There even remain contradictions about how *Vincennes* was abandoned, with some saying a fuse lit to the ship's powder magazine inadvertently failed to explode and others saying the fuse was deliberately cut. Finally, there remain questions as to why the Confederates withdrew at the very moment they observed their enemy abandoning ship and panicking.

It was a battle of many classes and types of vessels. A modern ironclad used the ancient tactic of ramming enemy ships. Fire rafts were set loose to spread havoc amongst antiquated sailing vessels. Purpose-built war-steamers using modern Dahlgren shell guns faced off against hastily armed and outfitted river tugs. Amongst the ships participating were a rented packet-ship previously used for transporting people, a formerly Mexican-flagged steamer involved in that nation's internal conflicts the decade before, and an ex-slaver captured and impressed into government service. Sailors, Marines, revenue officers, army officers, and civilians were all present at the scene and were pressed to the breaking point. Many served in the antebellum navy, but many others were freshly recruited volunteers. Within the crews were immigrants, freemen, and Creoles. Many officers set fine examples of leadership amidst the chaos of battle, others suffered mental breakdowns in front of their men, while still others took to the bottle to settle their nerves.

Many of these contradictions and errors can be better explored and corrected in a book-length format. By unpacking everything, my hope is to clear up the confusion related to this fleet engagement, why it happened, and why it matters. The Battle of the Head of Passes was the most misunderstood naval engagement of the Civil War, but hopefully much is resolved here, though admittedly there remains muddled and contradictory information that still needs more source material for a proper accounting. I encourage others to continue the search for the evidence that may one day provide a complete analysis of this first major challenge to the U.S. blockade.

Chapter One

Stevenson's Proposal

In May 1861, Montgomery, Alabama, was the bustling new capital of the Confederate States of America. Less than five months before, in December 1860, a special convention in Charleston, South Carolina, voted for the Palmetto State to secede from the United States. Others soon followed and in February 1861, seven states sent representatives to Montgomery to organize the new Confederacy. As that political body formulated a new government, events reached a boiling point in April with the bombardment and surrender of Fort Sumter. Newly sworn-in President Abraham Lincoln responded by calling forth the militias of each state to suppress the rebellion. Lincoln also issued a proclamation declaring a blockade of all ports in rebelling states. The nascent Confederacy now needed to forge an army and a navy at the same time it was also trying to invent a government. However, the Confederacy possessed few factories, especially compared to the loyal states, few weapons, and no ships.

John Stevenson knew this and developed a plan to address it. The New Orleans native never served in an organized navy, but he knew the Confederacy's largest city and its people, resources, and capabilities. Realistically, massive warships akin to the large steam-frigates of the United States could not be built there, or anywhere else in the newly declared nation, except perhaps the Gosport Navy Yard near Norfolk, now in Virginia's hands as that state took steps to confirm its own secession. On his own account, Stevenson traveled to Montgomery and approached the Rebel government with a proposal to foil Lincoln's blockade and secure his new nation's independence in one fell swoop, using the limited resources available. To do so, he proposed, the Confederacy would need rams.

Ramming an enemy ship is a tactic born in antiquity, where oar-powered triremes and biremes rammed one another, disabling enemy craft and destroying oars to incumber maneuverability. Sailing warships made ramming unfeasible, as maneuvering to a position to smash into an enemy could be easily thwarted by winds and weather. With steam power allowing vessels to move in any direction independent of the wind, however, the concept of ram attacks reemerged during the Crimean War in the 1850s. One American, civil engineer Charles Ellet Jr., was in Switzerland during that conflict, when he learned the ship *Arctic* was sunk after a smaller ship smashed into it accidentally. Ellet quickly proposed to authorities in both Russia and the U.S. "a ram system of naval defense."[1] Though Ellet successfully built suspension bridges, no one thought his engineering credentials marked him as properly informed about naval tactics. His proposal was ignored and ram ships remained a fringe idea as the Civil War began. Stevenson knew of Ellet's failed proposals and now sought to broach the idea on his own accord with his new government.

A Kentuckian by birth, by 1860 Stevenson was a well-respected member of New Orleans social elites. That year, the Federal census listed him as a 43-year-old commercial merchant married to Lizzie Betz Stevenson, and father of three children—Austin, John Jr., and Isabelle, all attending school. Stevenson held personal wealth to the sum of $50,000, including three enslaved persons. He rose from grocer in 1849 to partner in the cotton-brokering firm of Frellson, Stevenson, and Company. His business partner, H. Frellson, was the Dutch consul in New Orleans. When the Civil War began, in recognition of his business acumen and connections, Stevenson also served as secretary of the New Orleans Pilots Benevolent Association, giving him additional shipping and riverine experience. Stevenson summed up his own expertise: "I have had a long experience as a boatman on all the rivers of the South. I also have some experience with gulf and sound navigation."[2]

In mid-May, Stevenson began pitching his idea to the fledgling government in Montgomery. "We have no time, place, or means to build an effective navy," he rightly noted. "Our ports are, or soon will be, all blockaded. On land we do not fear Lincoln, but what shall we do to cripple him at sea?" Stevenson asked Confederate leadership. He wanted to use as ramming vessels the many small tugs which the Confederacy already had at its disposal. "I have for two months past been entirely engaged in perfecting plans," Stevenson detailed, "by which I could so alter and adapt some of our heavy and powerful

1 Warren Daniel Crandall & Isaac Denison Newell, *History of the Ram Fleet and the Mississippi Marine Brigade in the War for the Union on the Mississippi and Its Tributaries*: *The Story of the Ellets and Their Men* (St. Louis, MO, 1907), 11.

2 2nd Ward, 1st District, City of New Orleans, Roll 416, 170, 1860 U.S. Federal Census–Population, M653, RG 29, U.S. National Archives; Judith F. Gentry, "John A. Stevenson: Confederate Adventurer," *Louisiana History* 35, no. 2 (Spring 1994):151; *The War of the Rebellion*: *The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Series 4, vol. 1, pt. 1, 347. Hereafter cited as *OR* Series 4 1/1:347. All references are to Series 1 unless otherwise noted.

Confederate Navy Secretary Stephen R. Mallory ignored John Stevenson's steam-ram proposal. *National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institute*

tow-boats on the Mississippi as to make them comparatively safe against the heaviest guns afloat and by preparing their bow in a peculiar manner, as my plans and model will show, render them capable of sinking by collision the heaviest vessels ever built."[3]

Using lightly armed tugs and tow-boats to smash blockaders was an intriguing concept, but completely untested. Small craft such as tow-boats and tugs could not venture far on their own, since they lacked accommodations and space for large cruises and possessed limited bunker capacity for coal. Instead, Stevenson intended these ships to hug the Confederate coastline, cruising "on short excursions of 50 or 100 miles" from their home base.[4] A number of these converted rams could then attack an isolated blockader and quickly disable or sink it in a swarm attack.

Stevenson's proposal said he would "adapt . . . tow-boats on the Mississippi" to make them "comparatively safe against the heaviest guns afloat."[5] Experimental ironclad warships and floating batteries had been used since the Crimean War, and it is possible Stevenson envisioned some sort of armored protection for his attacking tow-boats. Over time, his concept shifted to include iron plates protecting vessels, but whether his original proposal and models included such protection remains speculation.

Stevenson dropped off plans, diagrams, and models of his proposal to the Navy Department in Montgomery, intending to personally pitch the idea to Secretary of the Navy Stephen Mallory. If the secretary could be convinced, then most certainly the Confederacy would adopt and fund the project. Mallory, however, was not in Montgomery when Stevenson visited the city. He was instead in his home state of

3 *OR* Series 4 1/1:347.

4 Ibid., 348.

5 Ibid., 347.

Florida, and would not return until May 31.[6] Dejected, Stevenson left his models with Mallory's aide, hoping they would be seen upon his return.

With Mallory out of town, Stevenson next lobbied the Provisional Confederate Congress. He spoke with Edward Sparrow, one of Louisiana's representatives in the body, and one of the wealthiest men in the Confederacy, owner of hundreds of enslaved persons working a massive cotton plantation on the shore of Lake Providence. The Irish-born Sparrow agreed to introduce Stevenson's ram proposal to the Congress, doing so in a secret session on May 18, 1861. The memorial introducing the project was immediately "referred, without being read, to the Committee on Naval Affairs."[7] There it remained, with no forthcoming legislative backing.

Three days later, on May 21, Stevenson penned a note directly to President Jefferson Davis, hoping the commander in chief of Confederate forces would take notice. Stevenson's letter indicated his intention to fit out three tow-boats, at an estimated expense of $200,000, and use them "mainly in the night, and by precipitate and silent approach" to overwhelm unsuspecting blockaders. As a final part of his pitch to Davis, Stevenson offered "to assist to prepare such boats, and to go in them when ready free of any remuneration," adding that if the Confederacy ignored his plans, he would instead "attempt it as a private enterprise."[8]

Stevenson dropped off his letter for Davis, returning to New Orleans that same evening. He hoped that with a personal entreaty to the Confederate president, lobbying in the Provisional Congress, and with diagrams and plans in Mallory's office, his ramming proposal would be quickly adopted. Such did not occur. His congressional memorial bogged down in the Committee on Naval Affairs, going nowhere; Mallory returned to Montgomery and ignored the concept; and Davis never replied to Stevenson's note. The Confederacy appeared to have shunned John Stevenson and his ramming tow-boat concept. The captain concluded that his plans would require action locally, in New Orleans, by his own patrons and supporters. If the Confederacy did not want his ramming idea, Stevenson determined to make it happen on his own.

End of Unedited Excerpt

6 Stephen R. Mallory Diary and Reminiscences, May 30, 1861, #2229, Southern Historical Center, University of North Carolina.

7 Ezra J. Warner and W. Buck Yearns, *Biographical Register of the Confederate Congress* (Baton Rouge, LA, 1975), 230; May 18, 1861, *Journal of the Congress of the Confederate States of America, 1861–1865* (Washington, D.C., 1904), 1:245.

8 *OR* Series 4 1/1:348.