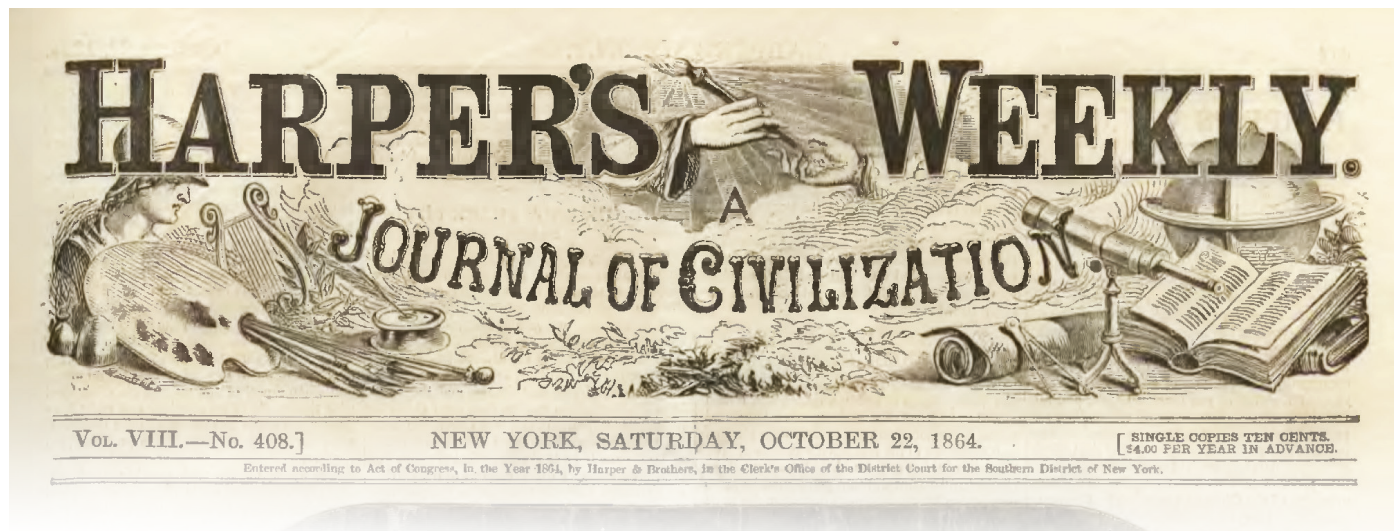


# Naval Illustrators



## Robert Fulton Weir: Sailor-‘Artist’ for Harper’s

By Gary McQuarrie

**ROBERT FULTON WEIR (1836-1905)** was the son of Robert Walter Weir, a well-recognized professional painter of the Hudson River school of American art and a professor of drawing at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York, for over 40 years. Robert F. Weir was born January 12, 1836 in West Point, New York, the second son born to his father’s first wife, Louisa Ferguson Weir. Throughout his life, he self-identified simply as ‘Robert Weir;’ further, he should not be confused with the prominent New York surgeon and author, Robert Fulton Weir (1838-1927), of the same era.

At the age of 19, Robert F. Weir (Weir hereafter) ran away to sea and, under the pseudonym of Robert Wallace, sailed aboard the whaling bark *Clara Bell* from 1855-1858. The young Weir kept a journal of his whaling experience and, having been raised in a home of artistic talent, made numerous detailed drawings of life aboard whaling vessels. His journal descriptions and drawings are still used as representations of the whaling life of his era. After completing the *Clara Bell* voyage, Weir joined another whaling cruise in progress on the bark *Helen Mar*, eventually returning to the New England area in

1861. After his final whaling cruise aboard the schooner *Palmyra* was completed in 1862, he enlisted in the Union Navy on August 25, 1862, as a third assistant engineer assigned to the *Hartford*-class screw sloop-of-war USS *Richmond*. The *Richmond* participated in some of the Union Navy’s most significant naval actions, including the passage of New Orleans’ forts, passage of batteries at Vicksburg, the attempted passage of Port Hudson, the Battle of Mobile Bay, bombardment of Fort Morgan, and engagement of the CSS *Webb* below New Orleans, providing Weir with many opportunities to produce drawings of his experiences, a number of which were the basis for line engravings published in *Harper’s Weekly*. Weir was one of only a handful of *Harper’s Weekly* ‘Artists’ recognized by name in a short tribute to its artists immediately following the end of the Civil War.

The *Richmond* joined the West Gulf Blockading Squadron on March 5, 1862, under command of Flag Officer David G. Farragut as preparations were made to seize New Orleans. By the time Weir came aboard after enlisting, the *Richmond* had already been in the thick of

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‘Pikemen-away!’ Ink on bond paper drawing by Weir depicting crew of USS *Richmond* with pikes repelling boarders. Archive No. MS0007/-#1.15.01. Courtesy of The Mariners’ Museum and Park.

actions capturing New Orleans, passing batteries at Vicksburg, and other actions on the Mississippi River. On March 14, 1863, Farragut’s squadron attempted to pass Confederate fortifications at Port Hudson, upriver from Baton Rouge. Lashed alongside the *Galena*, the *Richmond* could make no headway against the strong current and came under fire from shore batteries; her executive officer was mortally wounded and she was struck by a 42-pounder shell that ruptured her steam lines, filling the engine room and berth deck with live steam. Weir was wounded, struck by a piece of shell in the epigastric region of his abdomen. The wound caused him chronic health issues, including gastralgia; inflammation resulting in diarrhea; dyspepsia; and febris intermittens (distinct attacks of fever followed by freedom from fever in the intervals). In September 1897, Weir wrote in detail ‘some war remembrances’ of this experience (Collection 245, Manuscripts Collection, G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc.):

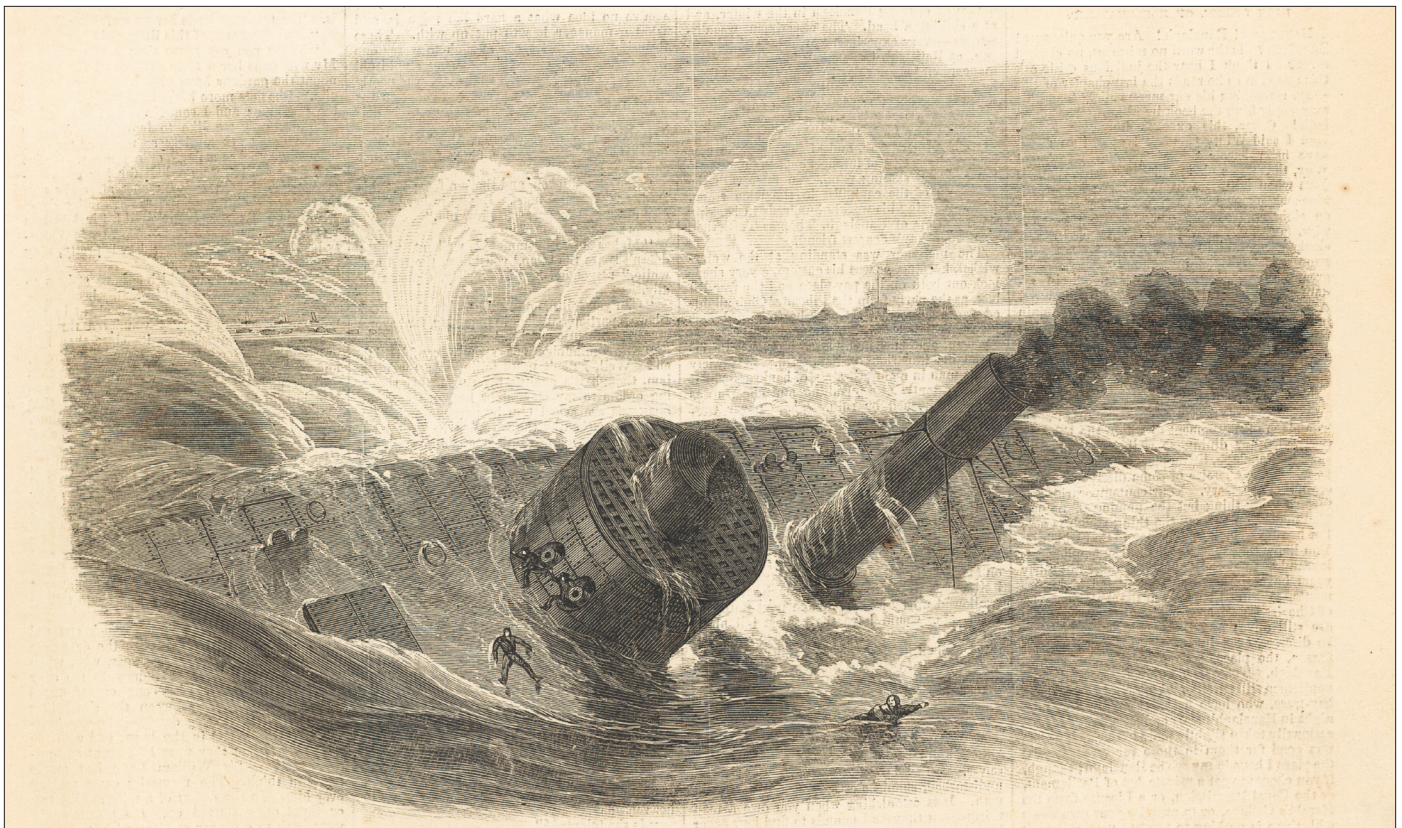
“...My position as junior assistant engineer was on the bridge that crossed the deck just forward of the Mainmast where Captain James Alden and Lieut. Cummings our executive officer had a commanding view of the decks. It was my duty to signal to the Engine from such orders as might be required by those in command... This was my first experience to be placed under fire, but with Farragut ahead and as silent prayer for protection we felt all would come out right... a solid shot penetrated the bulwarks and struck down three marines at the first gun aft... The fire of small arms was not noticed now, we seemed to stand motionless, a target in easy range. I was knocked down by splinters and a small piece of shell. Capt. Alden caught me up asking if I was hurt much but finding me little hurt we continued in our positions...”

After the Port Hudson action, the *Richmond* performed duties along the Mississippi, subsequently returning to

the New York Navy Yard for repairs. She rejoined Farragut's squadron on November 1, 1863, and two weeks later was on blockade duty off Mobile, Alabama. Weir was promoted to second assistant engineer on February 20, 1864 and was onboard the *Richmond* for the epic naval assault against the port on August 5, 1864. Lashed to the starboard side of the *Port Royal*, the *Richmond* was second in line as the fleet crossed the bar into Mobile Bay. Just before the Union monitors prepared to engage the Confederate casemate ram *Tennessee*, the *Tecumseh* struck a torpedo and sank rapidly. As she moved into the bay, the *Richmond* fired on the Confederate steamers present, and the gunboat *Metacomet*, cast off of the *Hartford*, captured the Confederate steamer *Selma*. The *Richmond* then participated in heavy firing on the *Tennessee* and the fierce fighting that followed and resulted in the ram's surrender. On August 16, Weir's watercolor drawing of the battle was submitted by Farragut with the commander's official survey of the captured *Tennessee*. Weir's remarkable eyewitness drawings of the battle were submitted to *Harper's Weekly* and published shortly

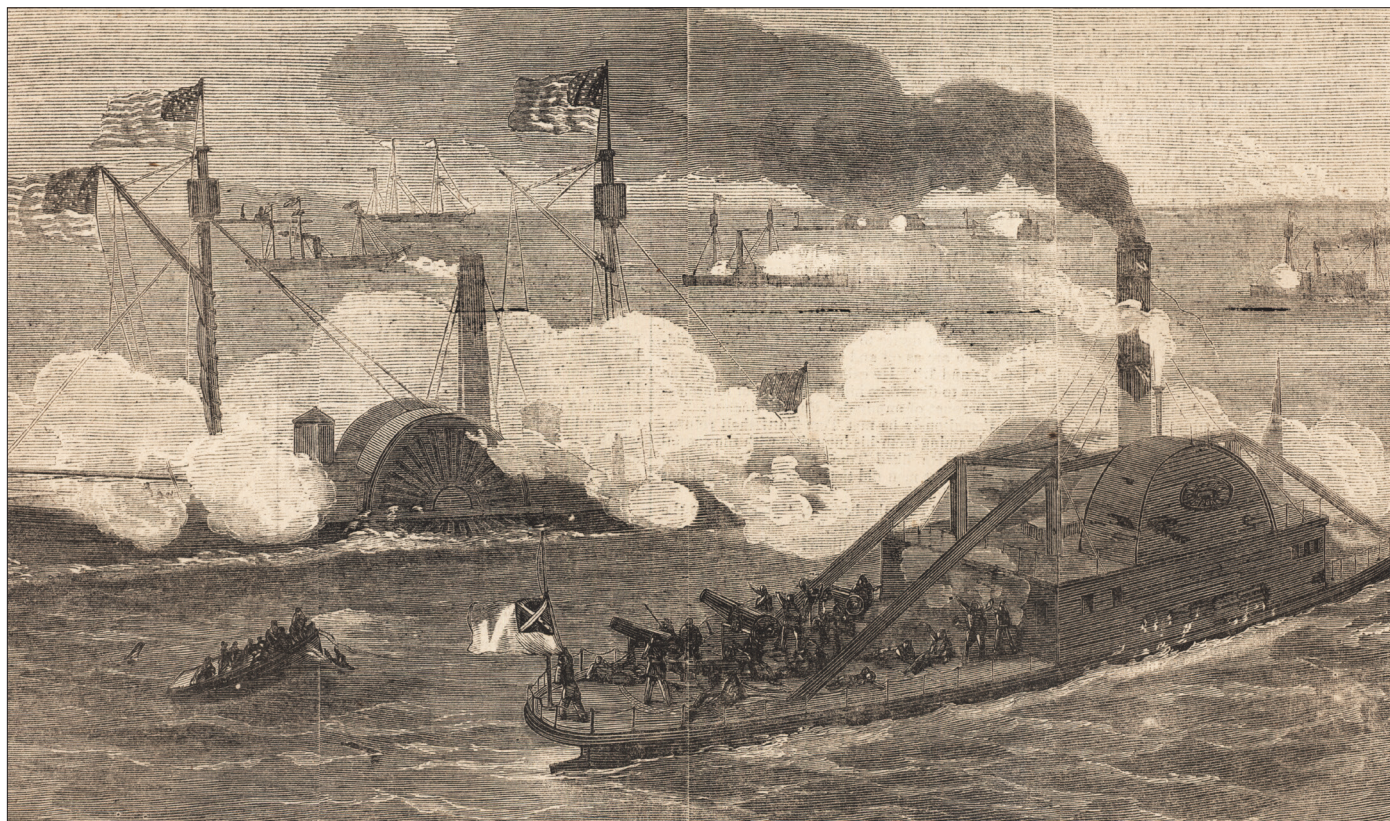
thereafter. Weir also later in life wrote some detailed personal remembrances of the battle, 'Recollections of Mobile Bay' (Collection 245, Manuscripts Collection, G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport Museum, Inc.):

“...Several vessels had dropped their anchors, ourselves among the number, when we noticed the Ram [CSS *Tennessee*] starting out from her berth, clouds of black smoke issuing from her stack, and occasionally a glimpse given of her flag. I saw this through the smoke and felt that it could only be a white flag—else why would Buchanan rush out to a sure destruction, did he think his vessel could cope with our monitors? While these thoughts were passing in our minds we saw the signals flying from the *Hartford's* mizzen to “Run Down the Enemy” This was emphasized by a shot from the bow gun of the Ram, point blank at us, but I have thought that their shell exploded in the gun—for the result was apparent from the pieces scattering along the surface of the water to our vessels + now began the tournament of the day...The *Hartford* is now headed

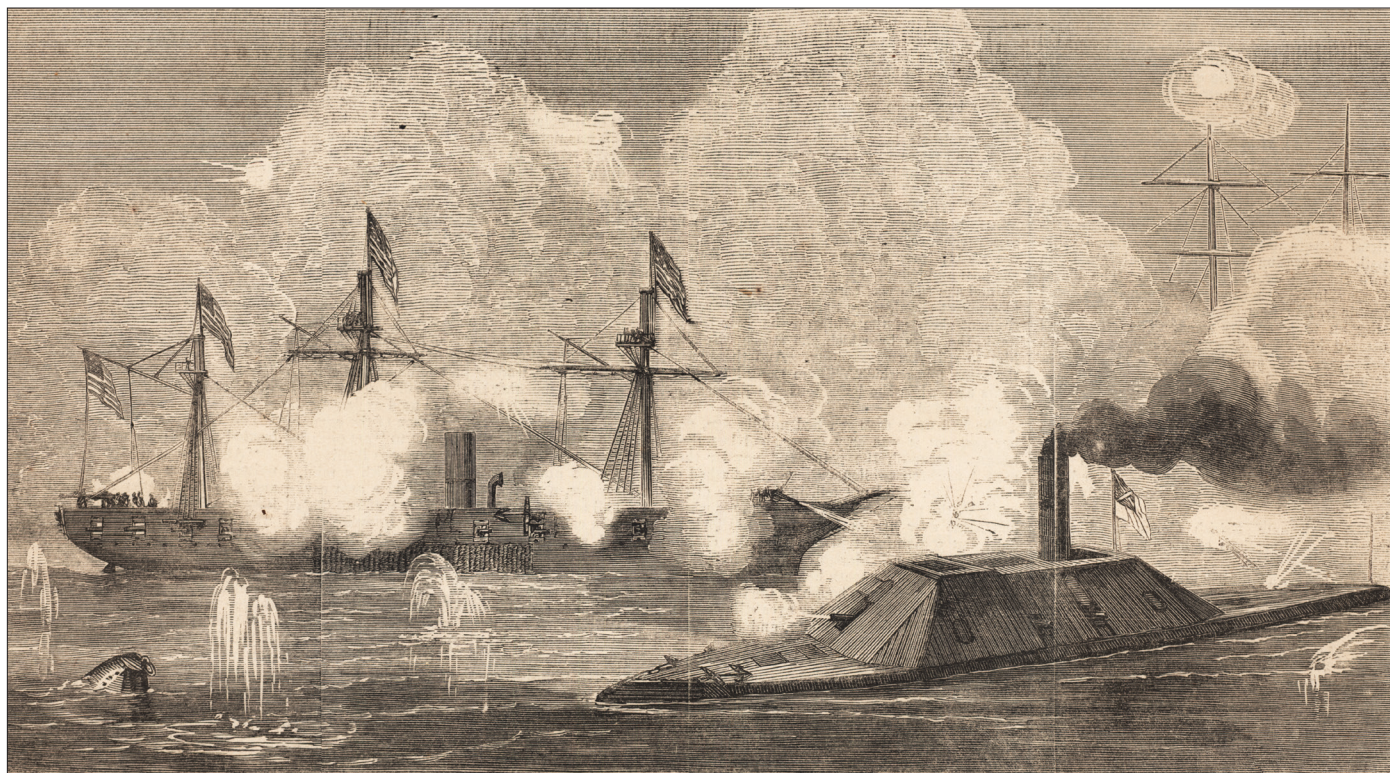


Destruction of the Monitor 'Tecumseh' By a Rebel Torpedo, in Mobile Bay, August 5, 1864. Line engraving based on sketch by Weir published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume VIII, No. 402, p 581, September 10, 1864.

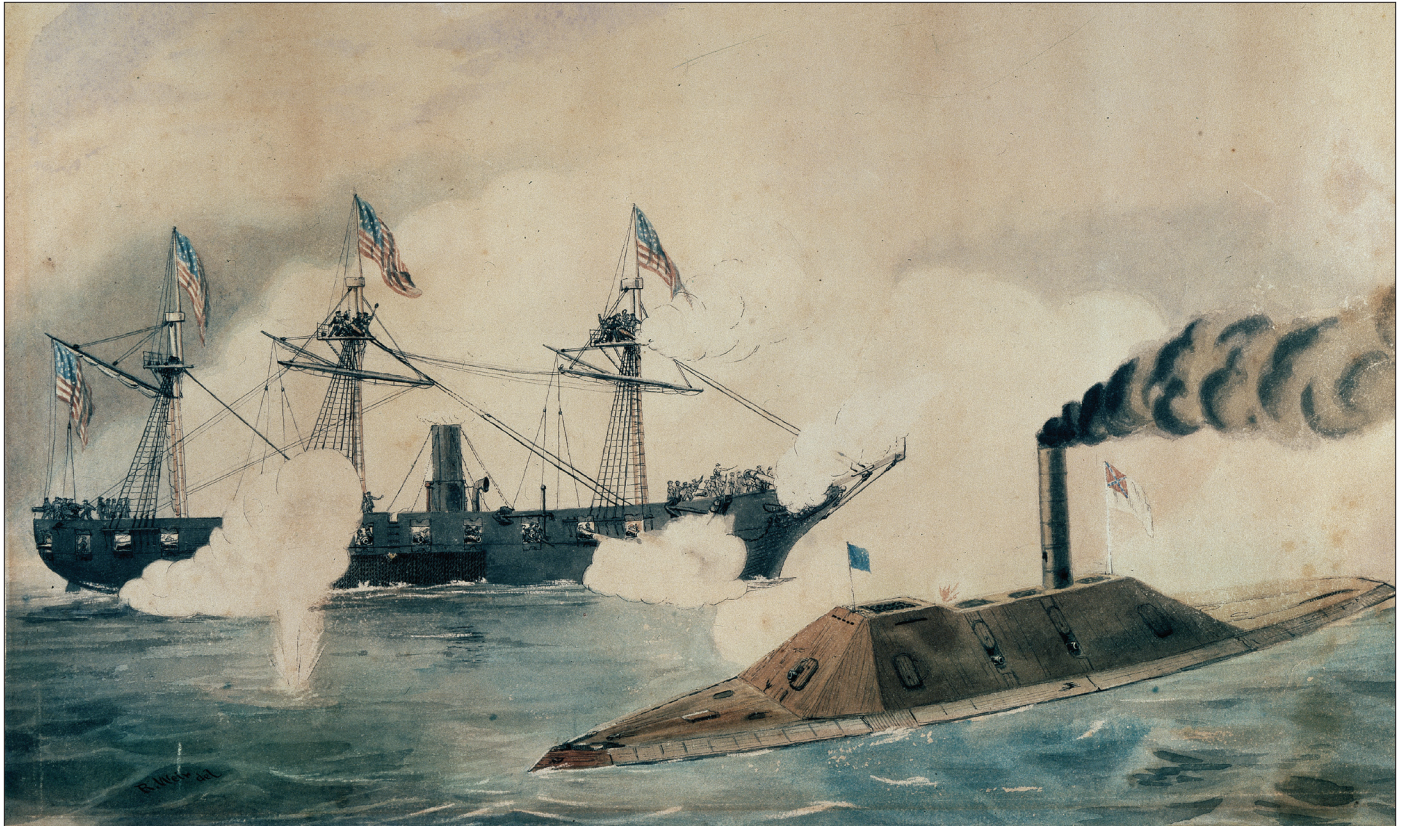
# Robert Fulton Weir: Sailor-‘Artist’ for *Harper’s*



The Rebel Gun-Boat "Selma" Surrendering to the United States Steamer "Metacomet." Line engraving based on sketch by Weir published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume VIII, No. 402, p 584, September 10, 1864.



The United States Steamer "Richmond" Engaging the Rebel Ram "Tennessee," August 5, 1864. Line engraving based on sketch by Weir published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume VIII, No. 402, p 584, September 10, 1864.

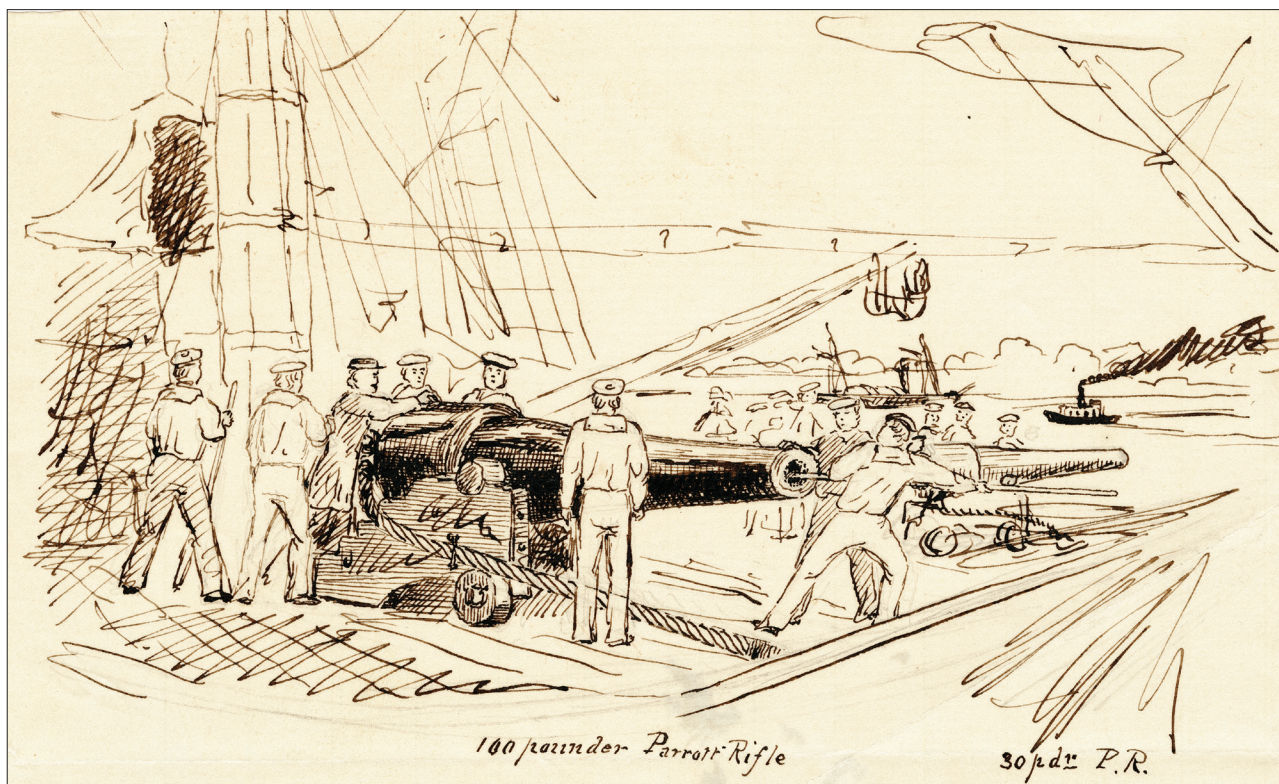


U.S. Sloop of War USS *Richmond* Engaged with Confederate Ram CSS *Tennessee* At the Battle of Mobile Bay. Watercolor drawing by Weir in 1864 (signed lower left corner). Weir appears to have provided a sketch to *Harper's Weekly* depicting nearly the identical scene and perspective as his watercolor drawing (see bottom line engraving on the previous page of this article). Accession No. 1952.0237.000001. Courtesy of The Mariners' Museum and Park.



Farragut's Victory in Mobile Bay—The Capture of the Rebel Ram "Tennessee." Line engraving based on sketch by Weir published in *Harper's Weekly*, Volume VIII, No. 402, p 585, September 10, 1864.

# Robert Fulton Weir: Sailor-‘Artist’ for Harper’s



‘Our Two Pets.’ Ink on bond paper drawing by Weir depicting crew of USS *Richmond* loading a 100-pounder Parrott rifle (foreground) and a 30-pounder Parrott rifle (background) for firing. Archive No. MS0007/-#1.18.01. Courtesy of The Mariners’ Museum and Park.

fairly for the *Ram* and as we watch she strikes her near the forward part of her casemate, and forging ahead portside to the ram fired her broadside into her—we could see the splinters fly and a moment later the smoke stack of the ram fell and rolled over the starboard side into the water...Captain Leroy of the *Ossipee* received the surrender from Captain Johnson the Commander of the *Ram*. A boat having been sent from the *Ossipee* to attend to the same, and carry the Sword of the Rebel Buchanan on to Admiral Farragut. The *Chickasaw* took the prize in tow bringing her to the anchoring ground...”

The *Richmond* continued to operate at Mobile Bay and Pensacola Bay before sailing to the Southeast Pass of the Mississippi River on April 23, 1865. That evening, the ram CSS *Webb* was trying to escape downriver to reach the open Gulf of Mexico. About 25 miles below New Orleans, pursued by Union gunboats, the *Webb* encountered the *Richmond* blocking her passage and was run ashore, set afire, and blown up by her crew to avoid

capture (line engraving [not shown] based on sketch by Weir published in *Harper’s Weekly*, Volume IX, No. 438, p 317, May 20, 1865). The *Richmond* departed New Orleans on June 27, 1865, in transit to the Charleston Navy Yard (Boston), arriving July 10. She was decommissioned on July 14.

Weir tendered his resignation on July 10, 1865, at the Charleston Navy Yard, Massachusetts, and was promptly and honorably discharged. After the war, he continued to provide some illustrations to *Harper’s Weekly*. Weir became a civil engineer in construction; for a number of years he was associated with the Croton Water Works, and for many years was also a consulting engineer for the Union Subway Construction Company of New York. In addition to his engineering profession, Weir provided illustrations for several published books.

Shortly after joining the Union Navy, Weir married Anna Chadwick at St. John’s Church in Cohoes, New York, on September 16, 1862. Weir and his wife had no children. After the war, they lived for many years in



United States Sloop of War “Lackawanna” Ramming the “Tennessee” in Mobile Bay. Line engraving based on sketch by Weir published in *Harper’s Weekly*, Volume VIII, No. 408, p 685, October 22, 1864, six weeks after publication of his primary illustrations of the naval battle in the illustrated newspaper.

different locations in New York and finally in New Jersey. In 1897, Weir filed for a disability relating to his abdominal wound incurred during the war, but the claim was abandoned when he failed to appear for a surgeon’s examination. Weir died suddenly from heart troubles at the age of 69 on January 17, 1905, at home in Montclair, New Jersey, where he and Anna had resided for twelve years. He was interred at Oakwood Cemetery, Troy, New York. His wife, Anna, did receive a navy widow’s pension after he died until her death a few years later on February 3, 1910.

Weir’s drawings reflect a true talent for observing and artistically and accurately depicting details of Civil War vessels, shipboard lives and activities of crewmembers, and some of the naval engagements in which his vessel was involved. The portfolio of his surviving drawings also includes a few that were satirical, reflecting his sense of humor. Approximately half of the 53 drawings by Weir held in The Mariners’ Museum Library’s Robert Weir Papers, 1862-1864, 1898 Collection can be viewed online. The accurate detail reflected in these drawings underscores why he was named alongside only a handful of *Harper’s Weekly* most-recognized ‘Artists,’ including Alfred and William Waud, Theodore Davis, Andrew McCallum, and A.W. Warren, in a postwar tribute to its sketch artists published in the illustrated newspaper.

While two of Weir’s brothers became professional painters (John Ferguson Weir, Julian Alden Weir), it seems likely that Weir’s father, a famous artist himself, must have felt great pride for the significant contributions to the pictorial depiction of the war by his namesake son who ran away to the sea at an early age.

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