

Book Review: *A Vast and Fiendish Plot: The Confederate Attack on New York City*. Clint Johnson, Citadel Press, New York, NY, 2010, 296 pages, softcover \$15.95. Reviewed by Thomas L. Breiner.

On November 25, 1864 six Confederate officers tried to burn the city of New York. Eight men were initially involved in the attempt that was to occur on November 8, Election Day, but the Confederates and their accomplices were covered by Benjamin Butler and 3,500 veteran Union soldiers. By the time they were ready to try again on the 25<sup>th</sup> of November, two of the original agents quit. The author, Clint Johnson, in his book *A Vast and Fiendish Plot: The Confederate Attack on New York City* gathers the slim factual documentation available concerning this event and manages to put the pieces together to produce a highly interesting work. He has done extremely well with the material available to outline the significant and relevant events that were behind the plot.

Many of the details exceed credibility. If the data is to be believed, the governor of New York, Horatio Seymour, and Congressman Fernando Wool not only were aware of the scheme, but were willing to support the plot to destroy New York City. There was supposedly an army of 20,000 New Yorkers, fully armed, ready to form a new Confederacy and willing to cooperate with the Southern Confederacy. This is hardly a believable idea in the fall of November, 1864. The war was clearly approaching its end. Why would any Democratic politician support the destruction of the one city that was instrumental in their election? How could the Governor of New York, the state that provided the largest number of soldiers to the Union armies, expect to be able to face the people of New York after allowing the Confederates to burn New York?

The Confederate officers involved in the attack proved to be extremely incompetent. They were using an unfamiliar weapon in the Greek fire. They were their own worst enemies. Their lack of knowledge and poor planning was the major contributor to the failure of the plot. Their reconnaissance of the city was inadequate. They used the Greek fire in the wrong locations and were instrumental in nullifying the effect by cutting off the supply of oxygen need to expand the blaze by closing the hotel room windows. The author's most intriguing research was in identifying all the possible locations in 1864 New York that, if attacked, would probably have achieved their goal and destroyed the City of New York. The author systematically lays out how the attack could have occurred to guarantee success.

Clint Johnson has created a most interesting and highly readable manuscript. His research is superb and the book is well written. However, he devotes the first 149 pages of the work to building the background of the Confederate secret service and the previous attempts to disrupt the Union war cause. He also links the attack on New York to the death of John Hunt Morgan. Two of the officers involved were former members of Morgan's cavalry. Most of the information does not address his primary topic. However, I still recommend this work to anyone with an interest in the Confederate's various and unique attempts to stem the tide of the war and overcome their lack of industrial might and manpower. This may have been their only means to reverse the losses on the major battlefields of the war.