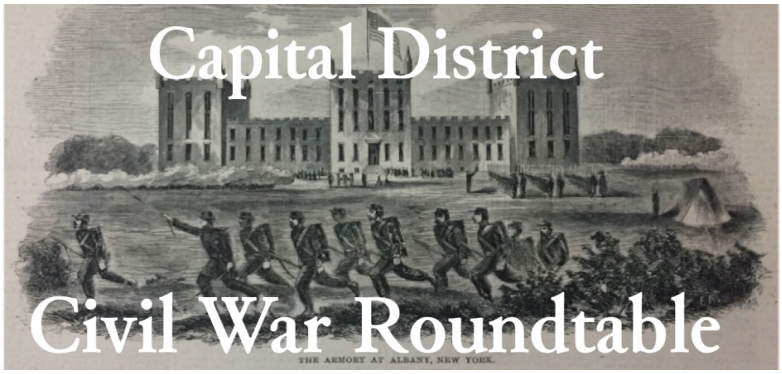
The Dispatch

Volume 43, Number 11 November 2026





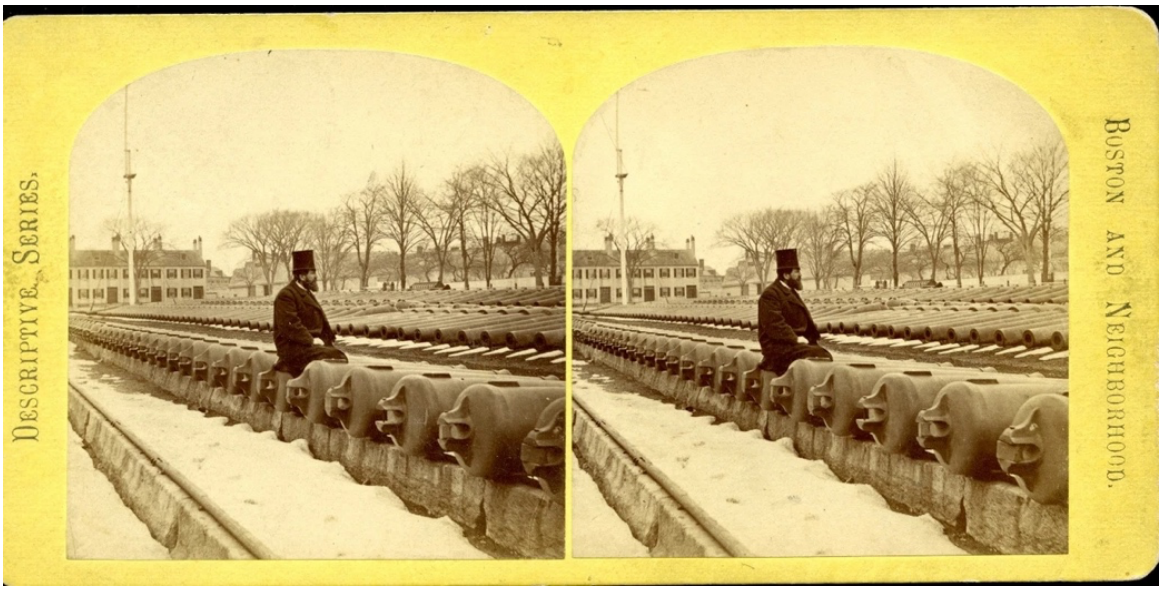


P.O. Box 11493 Loudonville, New York 12211. www.capitaldistrictcivilwar.com

Terrible Earnestness & the Reality of War:

Civil War Era Stereo Cards

presentation by Stuart Lehmann ***Saturday, November 14, 2026 11am***



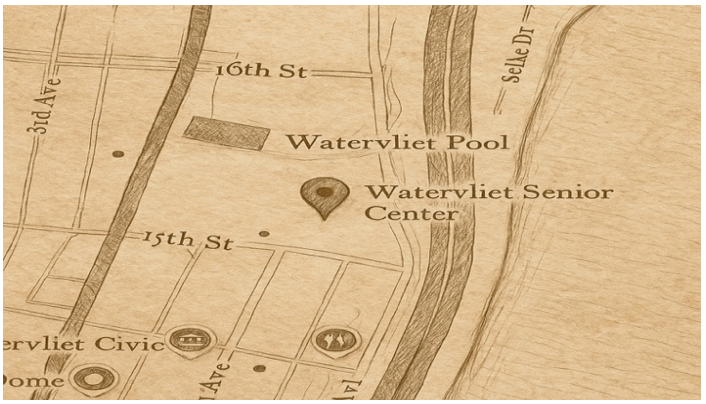
Join us for a presentation that will explore Civil War Stereo views and various other photographic techniques and how they were used to document the war, inform, influence, entertain and sometimes hoodwink the public. We will examine the roles of renowned photographers such as Brady, Gardiner, and O'Sullivan and lesser-known figures such as William Mumler and Jeremiah Gurney. Actual 19th Century stereoscopes and stereo views will be available to examine after the program.



CAPITAL DISTRICT
CIVIL WAR ROUNDTABLE

SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2026

WATERVLIET SENIOR CENTER

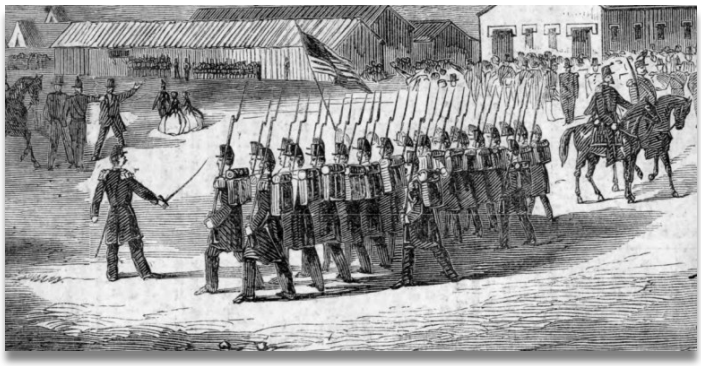


1501 BROADWAY

WATERVLIET, NEW YORK

SOCIAL HOUR 10:30AM

BUSINESS MTG 11:00AM



Stuart W. Lehman has worked in the historical field for over 30 years at a variety of historic sites such as Saratoga Battlefield National Historical Park, Schuyler Mansion State Historic Site and Senate House State Historic Site. He recently retired as a Curator for the Office of General Services at the New York State Capitol, where he still does tours and programs as a volunteer. He has done living history as a Revolutionary War period doctor and as a Civil War soldier of the Veteran's Reserve Corps. He collects stereoviews, as well as other historic artifacts and documents. He lives in Guilderland, New York with his wife Ruth and six cats.

NEWS & NOTES

Roundtable members Leo McGuire, Steve Muller, Bruce Reed, Terry Fraser, and Mark Koziol attended the Grant Cottage Civil War Encampment on October 3 and 4, where we sold books, clothing, neckties, and fine art. Sales were brisk because we priced everything at $5.00 each, except fine

art and regimental history books. The two-day event generated $545.00 in sales, including several donations for battlefield preservation. The Roundtable donated $100 to Grant Cottage as a thank-you for participation.

BACK TO THE FUTURE: RETURNING TO FRIDAYS

The roundtable recently conducted a survey asking whether to keep the meetings on Saturday morning at 11 or to choose a different day and time. By an overwhelming majority, members chose to return to the second Friday of the month. During the October 7th board meeting, members voted to move the meetings back to Fridays at 7 pm, beginning January 8, 2027. In addition, the RT will host the meetings via Zoom from January to April for members who wish to attend but do not want to drive because of inclement weather.





Illustration of New York City, ca. 1850.

PIRACY & PROSECUTING SLAVE TRADERS IN NEW YORK

by Don Fehrenbacher

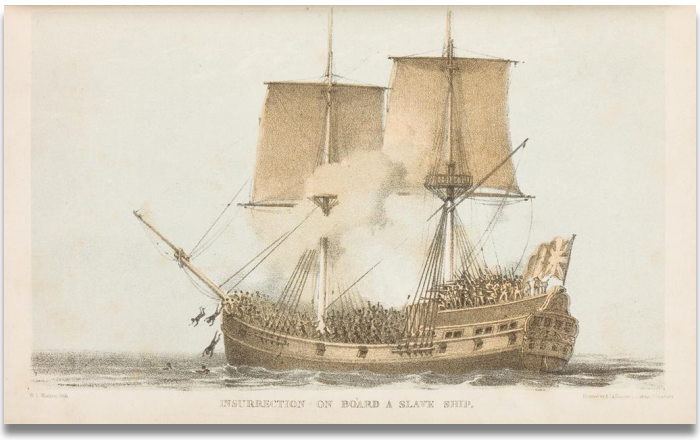
By 1800, when Congress first authorized the seizure of slavers by commissioned vessels of the United States, the navy had achieved matching parity with the army in number of personnel and money appropriated for it.

Several seizures were made soon after passage of the act of 1800, but otherwise naval restraint on the slave trade did not attain much more than token significance until after the War of 1812.

For one thing, it appears that many American slave traders protected themselves by switching registry to one of the nations that had not yet outlawed the traffic. Then the war itself and the accompanying British blockade effectively restricted

American slave trading along with other maritime commerce.

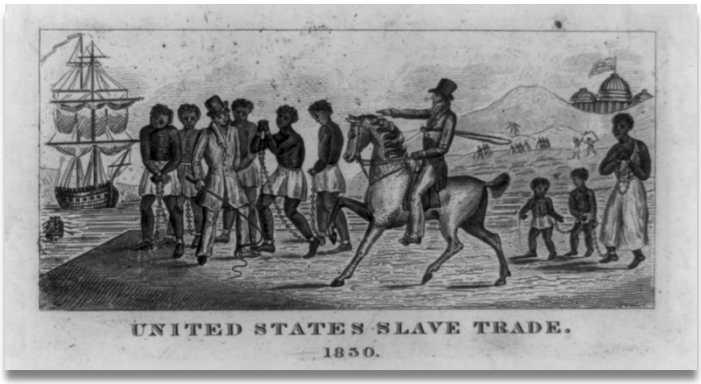
But after 1815, the international traffic in slaves quickly revived, and enforcement of the laws against it became one of the main assignments of the peacetime navy…



"Insurrection On Board a Slave Ship" (1851)

In the international effort to suppress the slave trade [made illegal in the United Kingdom in 1807; and in the United States in 1808], confiscation of the offending vessel became the principal sanction and proved over the years to be a far from effective one. The critical factor, as in the case of bonding a captured ship, was the ratio of estimated risk to expected profit.

A shipload of Africans was likely to be worth ten or fifteen times the value of the vessel itself. One successful Atlantic crossing could recoup the losses from several captures, and the odds much of the time favored success.



Possible Abolitionist engraving, ca. 1830s

Criminal sanction would have been a stronger deterrent if it had been more extensively employed, but the British, as chief enforcers, had no authority to punish foreign nationals with imprisonment or death.

They confiscated and destroyed slave ships by the hundreds, but the crews, though sometimes turned over to their own national authorities, usually went free to sail again on subsequent slaving voyages.

It was the United States, more than any other nation, that struggled with the problem of using criminal sanction against the slave trade.

Prosecuting Slavers in New York

Criminal procedure against alleged slave traders was subject to all the constitutional restraints and common law rules associated with Anglo-American justice, including

presumption of innocence, the right to trial by jury, and the requirement of proof beyond reasonable doubt.

Frequently, however, the jurors proved stubbornly unwilling to convict. This was conspicuously true of several southern juries in the late antebellum period. It appears that after the year 1846, not a single person was convicted on slave-trade charges in a southern federal court.

The great majority of prosecutions were initiated in northern states, most of them in New York. There, about one-sixth of the persons indicted from 1837 to 1861 were ultimately convicted.

More than twice as many were acquitted, and the rest likewise gained their freedom, whether via *nolle prosequi*, because of divided juries, by forfeiting bail, or in a few instances, by simply escaping from custody.

During that period, according to the records compiled by historian Warren S. Howard [in America Slavers and the Federal Law, 1837-1862], twenty men received prison sentences averaging two years in length, but they served only about one year, on average, because of ten presidential pardons.

Fifteen of the convictions were under the law of 1800 and five under the law of 1818 [a revision of the act of 1807], which provided maximum penalties of two years and seven years, respectively.

Three men indicted under the Piracy Act of 1820 were allowed to plead guilty to the act of 1800. One was not so lucky.

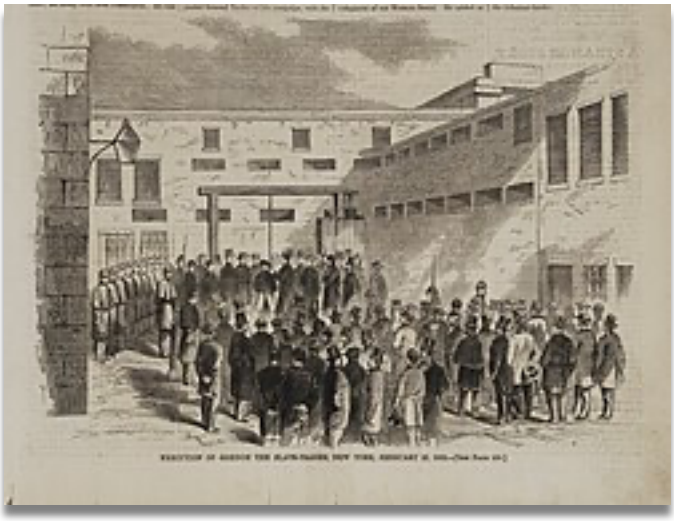


American Slave Trader Nathanial Gordon

Captain Nathaniel Gordon, thirty-three-year-old member of a Maine seafaring family, had become involved in slave-trading at a young age, perhaps as early as 1848.

His ship, the *Erie*, was seized off the Congo Coast in August 1860 with 897 slaves aboard, and ten months later he went on trial in the circuit court for the southern district of New York,

charged with the capital crime of piracy.

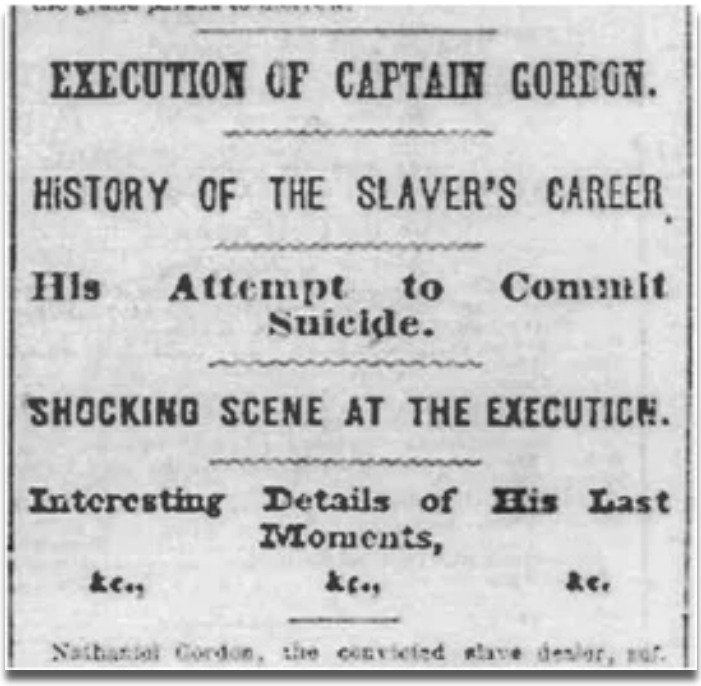


Engraving of the Execution of Captain Gordon

The jury could not agree on a verdict, primarily because Gordon's two mates swore to his innocence, but the district attorney, a newly installed Republican, determinedly sought more witnesses and instituted a second trial in November 1861. Four members of the *Erie*'s crew were now on hand to testify against their captain.

Along with other arguments, defense counsel maintained that the ship, at the time of its capture, was owned and commanded by Spaniards; that Gordon was just a passenger when the slaves were taken aboard; that the crime had been committed in Portuguese rather than international waters; and, most desperately, that Gordon was perhaps not an American citizen because he might have been born abroad during one of his parents' voyages.

The court brushed aside all technical objections, and the jury pondered for only twenty minutes before returning a verdict of guilty. Gordon was sentenced to death.



EXECUTION OF CAPTAIN GORDON.

HISTORY OF THE SLAVER'S CAREER.

His Attempt to Commit Suicide.

SHOCKING SCENE AT THE EXECUTION.

Interesting Details of His Last Moments,

&c., &c., &c.

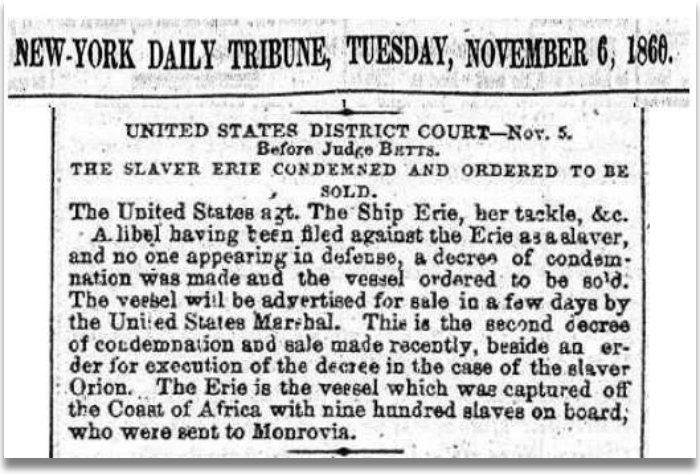
Nathaniel Gordon, the convicted slave dealer, suf-

New York City Newspaper Announcement, Feb 1862

The Supreme Court refused to intervene, and so did President Lincoln, except for granting a short reprieve. Gordon, after attempting to poison himself in his cell, died on the gallows on February 21, 1862.

The punishment seemed all the more extreme because of its uniqueness. No other American suffered death as a slave trader or even served a long

prison term for the crime. The two mates on the *Erie*, though scarcely less culpable than their captain, were allowed to plead guilty under the act of 1800 and escaped with sentences of eight and nine months...



NEW-YORK DAILY TRIBUNE, TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 6, 1860.

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT—Nov. 5.
Before Judge BETTS.
THE SLAVER ERIE CONDEMNED AND ORDERED TO BE SOLD.

The United States agt. The Ship Erie, her tackle, &c. A libel having been filed against the Erie as a slaver, and no one appearing in defense, a decree of condemnation was made and the vessel ordered to be sold. The vessel will be advertised for sale in a few days by the United States Marshal. This is the second decree of condemnation and sale made recently, beside an order for execution of the decree in the case of the slaver Orion. The Erie is the vessel which was captured off the Coast of Africa with nine hundred slaves on board, who were sent to Monrovia.

Sale of the Slaver USS Erie Notice, NY Daily Tribune, Nov 6, 1860

There is no telling how many Americans were dissuaded from entering the slave trade by the very existence of the law. We do know that the fear of hanging sometimes led culprits to conceal or forswear all connection with the United States and surrender to the British navy as persons subject to its police authority. It was because of the same fear, moreover, that prior to the late 1850s, Americans involved in the slave trade generally avoided association with the actual shipping of slaves. Thus, for most of its life, the Piracy Act seems to have had a deterrent effect that greatly reduced the occasions for its punitive use. Indictments under it were, in any case, very few before 1858.



USS Perry (right) seizes slave ship Martha, June 6, 1850.

Most of the American slavers seized with Africans aboard and therefore qualifying as pirates under the act of 1820 were taken during the brief period from April 1860 to April 1861, a time of national crisis culminating in the outbreak of civil war.

They were eight ships in all, carrying a total of more than five thousand slaves. Federal courts of admiralty confiscated seven of them: three in New York, one in Virginia, and three in Florida. Criminal prosecution proved much less effective, however, particularly in the South.

A Florida grand jury refused to indict one captain; a trial jury acquitted another; and apparently no action at all was taken against the third. Indictment of the slaver captain in Virginia seems likewise to have led nowhere.

In New York, where two captains, seven mates, and an owner were indicted, prosecutors did manage to secure five convictions, only one of which, however, was on a capital charge. Their efforts were frustrated in two instances by divided juries and in two others by escapes from custody...

By the 1850s, New York in particular had become notorious as the place where more slave-trade voyages were being organized, financed, and fitted out than anywhere else in the world.

The taint extended also to the United States government, both for failing to exercise adequate control over its own citizens and for allowing foreign slavers to shield themselves behind American registry and the American flag.

According to many a contemporary critic and more than one historian, federal officials were chronically negligent in their execution of the slave--trade laws, owing in large part to a systemic pro-slavery bias.

Don E. Fehrenbacher is the author of The Slaveholding Republic: An Account of The United States Government's Relations to Slavery (Oxford University Press, 2001), from which this essay is excerpted. This version is from a very excellent online New York history periodical, New York Almanack, August 13, 2005. If you do not subscribe to this free periodical (donations requested) you should.

CDCWRT UPCOMING PRESENTATIONS 2027

CDCWRT POTPOURRI NIGHT

Friday, Jan. 8 @ 7pm

Newly Added GAR Items to the NYS Military Museum

by Mark Koziol

The History of Cornileus Cornelius Van Wagner Chandler Co. E, 47th NY Vol. Infantry

by Alan Chandler

The Civil War: A History Of Books

by Shawn Connery

Pariah State

by Bob Bonner, Dartmouth Univ.

Friday, Feb 12 @ 7pm

Father Abraham: When We Sent Our Children to War

by Michael Aikey

Friday, March 12 @ 7pm

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**

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Treasurer	Steve Muller	Secretary	Shawn Connery
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Refreshments	Dean Long and Luanne Whitbeck
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Education	
Newsletter	Rosemary Nichols and Shawn Connery