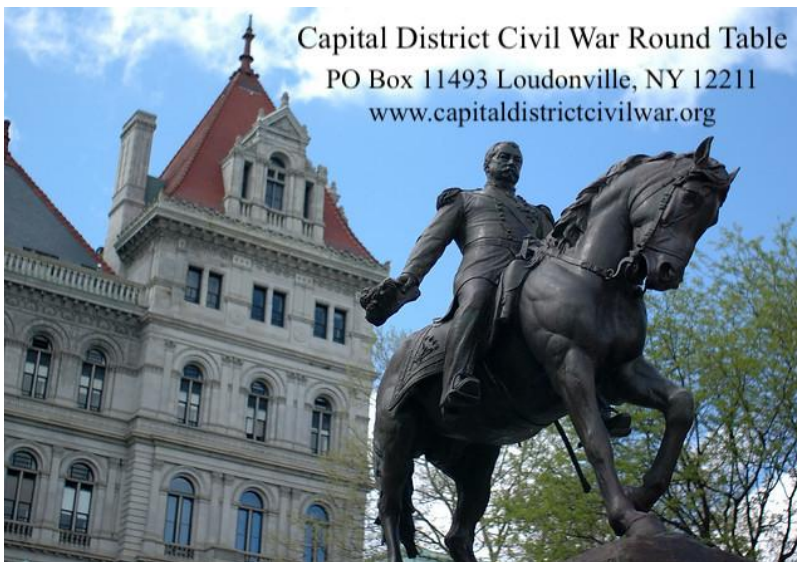


# The Dispatch

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## Eyes in the Sky



The Battle of Fair Oaks, Virginia print by Currier and Ives. An observation balloon is visible in the top left corner. Image from the National Air and Space Museum.

[https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/the-battle-of-fair-oaks-1862/nasm\\_A19480002000](https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/the-battle-of-fair-oaks-1862/nasm_A19480002000)

## MAY MEETING

Friday, May 12, 2023

AT THE WATERVLIT  
SENIOR CENTER

### Vic Vignola: New York Regiments at Fair Oaks

Social Hour with light refreshments	6:00 p.m.
Business Meeting	7:00 p.m.
Presentation	7:00 – 8:00 p.m.

Surprisingly little has been written about the important Battle of Seven Pines/Fair Oaks. The bloody two-day affair (May 31-June 1, 1862), fought on the doorstep of the Confederate capital, was the first major battle in the Eastern Theater since Bull Run/Manassas the previous summer. It left more than 11,000 casualties in its wake and the primary Southern army without its commander. The possession of Richmond hung in the balance.

Vignola based his study on a host of primary and archival sources, many of which have never been published. The result is a well-illustrated and mapped readable tactical and leadership account that will please the most discriminating reader. Sandwiched between Shiloh and the Seven Days' Battles, the combat at Seven Pines (Fair Oaks) has been mostly forgotten or overlooked. Although tactically inconclusive, the ramifications were far-reaching in ways no one could have

foreseen. And like Shiloh, Seven Pines (Fair Oaks) provided a clear warning that the war would be long and bloody.

Victor Vignola is a lifelong student of the Civil War and has written articles for publication in *North and South Magazine* and in other forums. Due to supply related issues publication of his first book, *The Battle of Fair Oaks – Contrasts in Command* (Savas-Beatie), is delayed until November 2023. He delivers historical programs, conducts tours, and regularly visits various Civil War sites. Vic's career included executive level labor and inter-agency relations for the Office of Mental Health in New York State. He lives with his family in Orange County, New York, home of the 124th New York "Orange Blossoms" Regiment.

## UPCOMING EVENTS:

June 9: Tom McMillian's presentation will be on Armistead and Hancock: beyond the legend.

## THANK YOU, MEMBERS

The Round Table wishes to thank Dean Long for providing refreshments at our Round Table meetings and Matt George for his continuing donations and tireless work arranging speakers.

## IN REMEMBRANCE

Long-time Round Table member Howie Young passed away in early April. He was a charter member of the 125th NY Regimental Association. Contributions in his memory can be made to the

125th NY Regimental Association, PO Box 611, Rensselaer, NY 12144.

## BOARD UPDATES

The Executive Board met via Zoom on April 17. Vice President Mark Koziol agreed to be the Secretary *Pro Tem*.

The Preservation Account balance at this time is \$3,923.22, up thirty dollars from the raffle held at the April meeting. We also had income from cachet sales by Matt Farina. The Board approved a \$300 donation to the American Battlefield Trust for their \$30:\$1 match for lands at five Virginia battlefields. We also donated \$50 to the 125th NY Regimental Association in memory of Howie Young.

The Operating Account balance is \$4,235.59. There are upcoming expenses that will come out of this account, including fees for the website and post office box. Matt George let us know that he made several contacts at the conference he attended.

## BALLOONING IN THE EASTERN THEATER

by Rosemary Nichols

The Civil War triggered many innovations, not just in warfare but in other activities associated with the military. I have always enjoyed learning about the role of the observation balloon in the early years of the war in the Eastern Theater.

The large observation balloon played its most prominent role under the leadership of Thaddeus Lowe in the

Peninsula Campaign in the battles of Malvern Hill, Gaines Mills and Fair Oaks/Seven Pines.

The following article is edited and excerpted from an excellent study placed on the American Battlefield Trust website. The author is James L. Green, Director of Planetary Science at NASA, an ABT member, and Civil War ballooning authority.

*'The capabilities of a tethered observation balloon to help the Union Army make maps, artillery spotting, and observe the location and activities of Confederates up to about 15 miles away were demonstrated at the outbreak of the Civil War in the Washington DC area by a number of accomplished aeronauts and by John LaMountain at Fortress Monroe.'*

*'The US government first gave John Wise the title of "Chief Aeronaut" in mid-July 1861 but he soon abandoned that role after the mismanagement of the balloon he had constructed for the US Government during the battle of First Bull Run was accidentally destroyed. Before the end of the summer of 1861 Thaddeus Lowe would be named the next "Chief Aeronaut" for the Union Army.'*

*Lowe used his position to obtain funding and the Government's permission to build seven balloons, 12 field gas generators, and a flat-topped balloon barge. The balloon barge was a specially made "aircraft carrier" created by removing the superstructure and engines of the old steamer George Washington Park Custis.'*

The names of Ebenezer Seaver, Joseph

**B. Starkweather, John Steiner, William Pauling, and John R. Dickinson do not trip quickly off the tongue. These men, together with Lowe and Wise, were the initial members of the Union Air Force.**

**From October 1861 until early in 1862 Lowe dispersed his balloons at locations along the Potomac River. They provided Washington DC with *'some degree of security since a well placed tethered balloon could observe the movement of a large Confederate army up to a day's march away.'***

**In mid-March 1862 McClellan decided to move the Union army to the Confederate Capitol in Richmond. McClellan sent Lowe to scout ahead, which he did. Lowe arrived at Hampton, Virginia on the Peninsula on March 28 with several balloons, gas generators, and all necessary inflation materials aboard his flat topped aircraft carrier.**

***'With four army wagons and two gas generators in tow Lowe's wagon train was then escorted to the Yorktown area area by the 13<sup>th</sup> NYVI in Martindale's brigade.'***

**Lowe's nearly daily balloon ascensions at Yorktown attracted much attention from the Confederates. The balloon was a constant target for their guns. Lowe stated, "the enemy opened upon (the balloon) with their heavy siege guns or rifled field pieces, until it had attained an altitude to be out of reach, and repeated this fire when the balloon descended, until it was concealed by the woods."**

***'McClellan received balloon reports on a regular basis. More than any other time in the history of the Balloon Corps, Lowe's operations became well***

***integrated into the army's operation,' according to author Green.***

**Matthew Brady's photographers arrived about June 14, 1862 and photographed Lowe's operations. Lowe took the opportunity to recreate in pictures the Balloon Corps reported actions during the Battle of Fair Oaks. Lowe then wrote about the activities extensively.**

**Green says that Lowe's balloon observations at Fair Oaks and the intelligence he provided to McClellan during the time period he was at the Gaines farm balloon station was the high point in the history of the Union Balloon Corps.**

**Under Lowe the aeronauts in the Balloon Corps made over 3,000 balloon ascensions and supported a number of the Peninsula campaigns. The Balloon Corps was disbanded when the Union army returned to Washington DC after the Battle of Chancellorsville. It had left its mark as the nation's first Air Force.**

**Lowe was not in a position to continue to advocate for his Balloon Corps. In July of 1862 he was diagnosed with malaria. Lowe never returned to the Peninsula.**

## **BUFORD'S VIEW**

**by Matt George**

**The McCormack Civil War Institute's Conference at Shenandoah University this past weekend was excellent. It was well worth the \$30. The Conference title was "So Tired and Exhausted" In Battle's Aftermath. It featured four speakers whose topics were informative and in the case of three of**

them, discussed subjects I knew very little about.

The first speaker was Jonathan Noyalas, a professor at Shenandoah and organizer of the Conference. His lecture was entitled "Crushed Under the Weight of the Staggering Blow." He explored battle's impact on families. A good portion of his talk discussed the pension system, its difficulties and the hardships of individuals and families applying for a pension. I already sent him an email hoping to get him as a speaker for our Round Table.

The second speaker was Melissa Winn of the American Battlefield Trust whose topic was "When This You See Remember Me - Portrait Photography and a New Experience of War." While our Round Table has familiarity with Civil War photography especially in connection to commemorative postal cancellations, what was totally new to me was the the Post Office's creation in Washington, D.C. of a "dead letter office." It was a huge building containing thousands of undelivered letters (many with photographs of soldiers that never reached their destinations). In the 1860s there was no such thing as a ZIP code and many soldiers simply put the recipient's name and city on the envelope (no street address). For small towns, this was fine, everybody knew everybody else, but an envelope addressed to "Joe Smith, Cincinnati" never got to Joe. If the letter contained a soldier's picture the folks at home never got to see him. So the Post Office kept the pictures and spent the next 40+ years trying to deliver them. They put them on display at many national events

including the Chicago Exposition in 1893. "If you can identify this man, contact us." They were still making deliveries into the 1900s. Melissa said she would contact me. I would also love to have her as a speaker.

The third speaker, Brian Matthew Jordan's (Sam Houston State University) topic was "A Macabre Toll: Civil War Soldiers Confront the Dead at Antietam." It was a decent discussion of the horrors these soldiers saw and how it affected them and the country.

The fourth speaker looked so young I thought he was still in high school. His name was Jonathan Jones from V.M.I. He spoke about his first book which is in the process of being published. The title of his talk was "Opium Slavery" After the war there was a rarely talked about opium epidemic among both physically and mentally wounded veterans (and civilians such as wives of soldiers and others). It was a shameful little secret that families tried to keep hidden from others, especially "pension investigators" who, if they discovered an "opium slave," would immediately stop the pension. Even though Civil War doctors often warned about the addictive properties of laudanum (opium and water) and morphine, it was a curse that plagued thousands after the war. He too would be a fascinating speaker.

TRIVIA: Email answers to this month's trivia questions to [jbuford63@aol.com](mailto:jbuford63@aol.com)

What famous Civil War photographer had an early studio in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.?

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*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](http://www.capitaldistrictcivilwar.org)  
or email: [cdcwrt@hotmail.com](mailto:cdcwrt@hotmail.com)

#### THE OFFICERS

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Treasurer	Steve Muller	Secretary	(open)
At-Large	Rik Scarce	At-Large	(open)
At-Large	(open)		

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Refreshments	Dean Long and Luanne Whitbeck		
Webmaster			
Education	Matt George		
Newsletter	Rosemary Nichols and Erin Baillargeon		