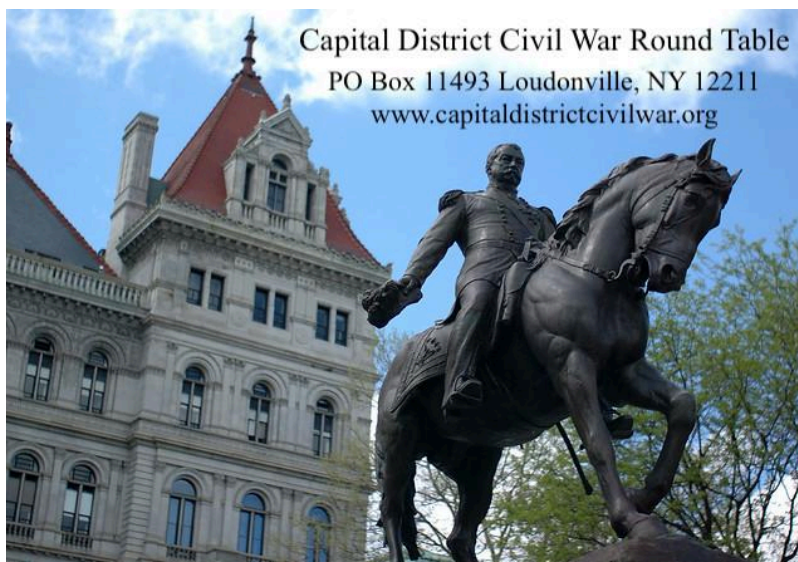


The Dispatch

Volume 41, Number 5

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General William Tecumseh Sherman



William T. Sherman on horseback at Federal Fort No. 7, c. November 1864

MAY MEETING

Friday, May 10, 2024

AT THE WATERVLiet

SENIOR CENTER

Derek Maxfield

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

A twenty-year veteran of higher education, Derek Maxfield has been a history professor at Genesee Community College since 2009. During his tenure, he has been twice honored by SUNY – in 2013, Maxfield was awarded the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Scholarship and Creative Activities and in 2019, the SUNY Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching.

Though Maxfield's early career in journalism and radio made him a talented writer early on, it was not until 2015 that he began writing professionally again. Invited to write for *Emerging Civil War*, Maxfield became a regular contributor. Soon after he was invited to write a book for the ECW series which became his first book *Hellmira: The Union's Most Infamous Civil War Prison Camp – Elmira, NY* (Savas Beatie, 2020). Although he was happy to be offered the opportunity to publish, it was not the book he first wanted to write. Utterly fascinated with Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman, the eccentric redhead had been a subject of study for Maxfield for

decades. After the success of *Hellmira*, he finally got the opportunity to write a volume on Uncle Billy, which became *Man of Fire: William Tecumseh Sherman in the Civil War* (Savas Beatie, 2023).

Another old interest dating back to high school resurfaced after Maxfield joined GCC – acting and directing. Inspired by living history events during the Civil War sesquicentennial, he came up with the idea of dramatizing conversations between historic figures as a way to teach history. This led to a partnership with colleague Tracy Ford, who would go on to portray Gen. Sherman. Maxfield, who would portray Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, wrote a script which became "*Now We Stand By Each Other Always*." The play toured the country for several years before the pandemic suspended performances. Once the pandemic began to wane, Maxfield developed a new play – "*Grant on the Eve of Victory*" – which he performs with his spouse Jess. Since then, new plays have been in development, including a three act play featuring Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Rush.

When he is not teaching, writing, or performing, Maxfield can be found at his home in Churchville, NY with a cat in his lap while working on genealogy. He and his spouse Jess enjoy a quiet life with five cats and a python.

UPCOMING EVENTS:

June 14: Chris Bryan's presentation will be on the XII Corps

September 13: Phil Vitiello: the Rains Brothers

BOARD UPDATES

The Executive Board met via Zoom on April 15. The Operating Account balance was \$3,935.16. The Preservation Account balance was \$3,963.46. We will have another book sale at the June meeting.

The feedback survey to get input on meeting logistics, speakers, and dues is still active. If you received a digital copy of the newsletter, you have a direct link. If you get a paper copy, you can type the web address below into your Internet browser to reach the survey (the letters are case specific, so capital letters need to be capitalized). Please reply one time, only.

<https://forms.gle/eNSQxCXU2gBtzsc4A>

CHERISHING CIVIL WAR MEMORABILIA

by Rosemary Nichols

The CWRT Congress' "weekly events" posting announces that Fleischer's Auctions in Columbus, Ohio is selling the William T. Sherman Collection with an online auction until May 14, 2024. The announcement brought to mind an opportunity I had a number of years ago with the American Battlefield Trust to visit an historic Southern house owned by an enthusiastic weapons collector.

The small room probably was the place in the mansion where traditionally the master had met with business associates and staff. The space had that utilitarian feel. It had been repurposed into a showcase for a magnificent collection of historic

firearms. Every space in the 12 by 12 room, from the chair rail up to the 14 foot ceiling, was covered in guns.

Each gun was carefully labeled with its provenance and how it came to be in the owner's collection. I didn't try to count how many guns there were, but there were a lot. Not surprisingly, since the mansion was in a Southern city, the bulk of the collection was Confederate in origin. There were some weapons which had done service with the Buffalo Soldiers and others in the post-Civil War Era.

The only comparable displays of historic firearms I have seen are in the Visitors Center at Gettysburg and the weapons collection in the basement of our own New York Military Museum in Saratoga Springs. But those are public institutional collections. This assembly of historic weapons was strictly private and very rarely exposed to view.

I couldn't help wondering as I recalled this unique experience, what Sherman would have thought of the modern enthusiasm for collecting and viewing historic weapons of war. He did keep his sword. I know this affection for guns is not new. Probably prosperous survivors of the multiple wars fought by Roman legions had similar displays of gladia, javelins and swords to grace the walls of their estates.

A preliminary confession: William Tecumseh Sherman is one of my favorite Civil War characters, probably because he was such a character. Sherman had a long life, most of which was not served in the military. His attitudes and prose seem to me more contemporary than many of his peers.

Sherman seemed willing to discuss the mental health issues he experienced after Shiloh. He had an enthusiasm for non-military things and people. At the end of his 71 year life after the passing of his wife, he chose to live in New York City, enjoying the life of a successful and revered public figure, the active theater scene and, according to gossip at the time, a variety of attractive younger ladies. In some senses New Yorkers can claim him, if we so choose.

But back to the sword and trunk that is being auctioned in Ohio from now until mid-May. The Fleischer's flier advertises the items as 'One of the most significant lots of Civil War artifacts offered in recent memory: General William T. Sherman's wartime saber and military trunk.' The items are offered directly by General Sherman's descendants through his daughter, Maria "Minnie" Ewing Sherman Fitch (1851-1913). Both the sword and chest were 'venerably preserved by generations of the Fitch-Sherman family until now.' One wonders about the back story. Why sell these treasures now? Were they not offered to important Civil War museums with major collections or are these institutions planning to bid?

General Sherman's wartime saber is described as 'a rarely seen variant of a standard cavalry officer model produced by Christopher Roby of West Chelmsford, Massachusetts (Civil War Artillery & Cavalry Sabers, Thillman. 2001. pg. 320.). This "special order" saber features a 30 1/2 inch blade, and was likely personally chosen by Sherman to suit his taste.' At the start of the war, Sherman was a mounted field-grade officer and this agile saber

would have been an ideal weapon.

Though it is a high-grade example appropriate for an officer of Sherman's rank and pedigree, the saber is without question a weapon that was intended for actual combat. Sherman himself stated he did not wear a sword after he succeeded General Grant in command of the Western Theatre of the war in early 1864 (6 December 1881, William T. Sherman to Herbert E. Hill, Seth Kaller Inc.). Thus, the saber's use can definitely be attributed to the period of Sherman's service where he saw action in numerous engagements, including the Battle of Shiloh. Sherman was wounded twice and had three horses shot dead underneath him in that contest.

The saber and trunk's provenance is further enhanced by two known letters (not included in the auction) that seemingly record their original ownership and chain-of-ownership. The first was written to General Sherman in 1878 from his wife, Ellen, regarding the inheritance of his valued possessions:

"Judge Reber called and read from a letter he had from you to the effect that you wished him to take to his house...guns and the swords you wore in battle...[I] shall keep the swords, as I have hitherto kept them, as I have kept your wedding suit and the hat you wore at Shiloh and other relics innumerable...for your children and mine and for our children's children."

Ellen continues: "Judge Reber is older than you are and has no home in which to store anything- Mag told me last Sunday week that she had no place to put a trunk- if it be the mere custody,

Mr. Fitch is far more competent on every account" (5 July 1878, Ellen Sherman to William T. Sherman, University of Notre Dame Archives). "Mr. Fitch" is undoubtedly Thomas William Fitch (1843-1915), her son-in-law, and the direct ancestor of the Fitch-Sherman family.

The second letter, written in 1881 by General Sherman, is in response to a request made for him to loan a sword he "wore during the famous march to the sea." Sherman explains to the sender that he did not wear any sword during the march or after he succeeded General Grant in command of the Western Armies, but does state he owns "in some old chest at St. Louis swords worn by by me as Colonel, Brigadier General, and Major General [before his march to the sea]..." (6 December 1881, William T. Sherman to Herbert E. Hill, Seth Kaller Inc.).

These are a special pair of items to auction. I hope the person or institution that ends up buying the sword and its trunk allows them to be seen by the public. Too often, these special resources are taken into private ownership. Then they are only shown to a select few, like those privileged to view the amazing weapons collection I described earlier.

BUFORD'S VIEW

by Matt George

There are two new books that might be of interest to our members. One has just become available this week. There has not been a major biography of Charles Sumner in fifty years ("*Charles Sumner and the Coming of the Civil*

War" by David Donald). Historian Stephen Puleo had just come out with a very positive look at the abolitionist Senator from Massachusetts. The title is the "*Great Abolitionist- Charles Sumner and the Fight for a More Perfect Union.*" Sumner moved the country towards the twin goals of abolition and Civil Rights.

Due to be released April 30 is "*The Demon of Unrest – A Saga of Hubris, Heartbreak and Heroism at the Dawn of the Civil War*" by Erik Larsen. The very popular writer takes a detailed look at the pivotal five months between the election of Lincoln and the start of the Civil War. According to the *N.Y. Times*, it is one of the most anticipated books of the year. Larsen has written several successful books including "*Deadwake*," "*The Splendid and the Vile - In the Garden of the Beasts*" and "*Devil and the White City.*"

On Monday, April 22 the Underground Railroad History Center held their ceremonial groundbreaking ceremony for their new Interpretive Center. Paul and Liz Stewart worked long and hard to make this a reality. In addition to a building dedicated to Stephen Myers and the history of the local Abolitionist movement. The building will also complement the rich history and culture of the community it is located in.

Grant Cottage has also announced their 2024 schedule which includes a number of interesting speakers and topics.

I also received a nice email from our last speaker telling how much he enjoyed speaking to us and our hospitality.

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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**
or email: **cdcwrt@hotmail.com**

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