

The Dispatch

Newspaper of the

CAPITAL DISTRICT CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

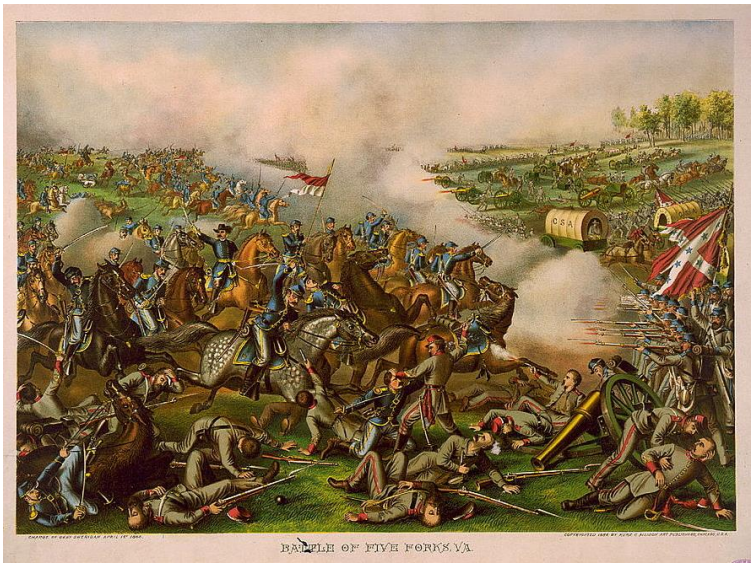
PO Box 14871 Albany, NY 12212

www.cdcwrt.net



Volume 32, Number 3 March 2015

Decisive Battle at Five Forks!



City Point – April 1, 1865

This is a special edition of *The Dispatch.* We have received word of a stunning victory of Union forces over a large Confederate force at Five Forks, Virginia, near Dinwiddie Court House. Sources say that a 9000-man force under the command of Gen. George Pickett was holding this crucial cross roads when attacked by the 5th Corps under Gen. Gouverneur Warren and Union cavalry under the command of Gen. Phillip Sheridan. Many prisoners were taken. Pickett and his staff were not seen in the fighting.

There is wild speculation that Gen. Lee had pulled his men from the Petersburg defenses which are now too weak. Gen. Grant may order assaults on the entire Petersburg line, hoping for a breakthrough.

MARCH MEETING
FRIDAY, MARCH 13, 2015

WATERVLIET SENIOR CENTER
1541 BROADWAY
WATERVLIET, NY

APRIL 2, 1865:
DAY OF DECISION AT PETERSBURG

A. WILSON GREENE

Social Hour	**6:00 – 7:00 p.m.**
Business Meeting	**7:00 – 7:15 p.m.**
Presentation	**7:15 – 7:45 p.m.**
Discussion	**7:45 - -8:15 p.m.**

CDCWRT MEETING

The March meeting of the CDCWRT will be held at the Watervliet Senior Center on March, Friday the 13th, 2015. A very special guest speaker returns to address our Round Table. Author and historian, A. Wilson Greene, will present, **"April 2, 1865: Day of Decision at Petersburg."**

The campaign for Petersburg marked its 292nd day as dawn broke over the barren landscape six miles southwest of the Cockade City. Some 14,000 soldiers from the Union Sixth Corps (including many from upstate New York) waited on the chilly ground, anticipating the firing of signal cannon that would launch them on the most decisive assault of the Civil War in Virginia.

The resulting attack—known simply as the Petersburg Breakthrough—shattered the Confederate defenses held by ten small regiments from North Carolina and Georgia and kicked off a day of combat unparalleled in its significance and rarely equaled in ferocity and scale. By day's end the Army of Northern Virginia had found its last ditch at Petersburg. During the night General Lee quietly retreated over the Appomattox River, seeking to rendezvous with another Confederate army in North Carolina. Instead, of course, his rendezvous was with Ulysses S. Grant seven days later at Appomattox Court House.

Will Greene is the founding executive director of Pamplin Historical Park and the National Museum of the Civil War Soldier, which preserves the bulk of the Breakthrough Battlefield. He is one of the founders of the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites (APCWS) and served as its first president from 1990 to 1994.

As many of you know, APCWS became the Civil War Preservation Trust (CWPT) and then simply the Civil War Trust. This round table has been a staunch supporter of the organization in all three of its names.

Will's presentation will provide the context for the culminating day of fighting around Petersburg and outline the course of events that launched the Army of Northern Virginia into oblivion. Greene holds degrees in American history from Florida State University and Louisiana State University and is the author of six books and more than twenty published articles on Civil War and Southern history. He is at work on a three-volume study of the Petersburg Campaign for the University of North Carolina Press with a 2017 anticipated release of Volume One.

Do NOT miss this presentation. Bring a friend, a neighbor or even your spouse or significant other.

DUES! This may be your last newsletter!

The membership may recall that dues for 2015 were increased from $25 to $30 by action of the Board this past fall. **Annual dues are collected in January.** The primary reason for the increase was to off-set newsletter printing costs. In the past, the CDCWRT was blessed with free printing of newsletters. Unfortunately that is no longer available.

UP-COMING MEETING/ EVENTS

On March 13, 2015, Friday, the regular meeting of the CDCWRT at the Watervliet Senior Center will feature Pamplin Park Historian, A. Wilson Greene. This special program will occur in conjunction with the Avon Historical Society in Connecticut.

On April 10, 2015, Friday, the regular meeting of the CDCWRT at the Watervliet Senior Center will feature one or two members (Sharp Swan and Phil Jackson) of the 118th N.Y. Volunteers, also known as the Adirondack Regiment.

On April 11, 2015, Saturday, Siena History Day will take place on the campus of Siena College from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. There will be re-enactors from various periods and educational exhibits for children and adults. Since Matt George will be at Appomattox that weekend, the round table is seeking volunteers to man an information table at the event. Contact Matt George for information.

On May 3, 2015, Sunday, the Ten Broeck Mansion in Albany will sponsor their History Day open-house. Local history groups, including the CDCWRT, will have information tables. Volunteers should contact Matt George for details. This is the ideal opportunity to get involved with round table activities for the public.

On May 8, 2015, Friday, the regular meeting of the CDCWRT at the Watervliet Senior Center will feature Britt Isenberg, who will talk about the 11th Corps Field Hospital at the Spangler Farm during and after the Battle of Gettysburg.

On June 12, 2015, Friday, the regular meeting of the CDCWRT at the Watervliet Senior Center will feature John McTague, who will provide a tour of the National Cemetery at Gettysburg.

June 13-14, 2015, Saturday & Sunday. This marks the 23rd Annual Peterboro Civil War Weekend. Saturday starts with a Veterans procession led by A. Lincoln. Harold Holzer and Jan Reichard will be on hand for book signings and will exhibit their Lincoln funeral artifacts including a replica of the funeral casket. There will be exhibits, vendors, re-enactments and food. Patrick Schroeder will talk at 7 p.m. on the surrender at Appomattox. Adults $8.00. Check updates at civilwarweekend.sca-peterboro.org.

THE CIVIL WAR IN NORTH CAROLINA IN 1865

While siege activities slowed in the winter months in Virginia in 1865, Sherman's army in Georgia started its South Carolina campaign. Meanwhile, on coastal North Carolina, a combined naval and infantry campaign closed the last major seaport open for the Confederacy –Wilmington, NC. This article, entitled ***Sherman's Final March,*** by Philip Gerard, has been summarized from the February issue of *Our State: Down Home in North Carolina* magazine.

(Ed. Note)
Gen. Sherman next plans to march to Goldsboro where he will resupply, using the railroad from the captured port of Wilmington. He will then march to the Weldon Railroad and move his army up to Petersburg where he will help Grant crush Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. He has

told Grant that he has met little resistance from Confederate forces in North Carolina. This will allow him to support Grant. This was the plan agreed to after his March to the Sea.

Gen. Sherman's massive army streams across the Cape Fear River at Fayetteville on pontoon bridges, and surges in two muscular columns northeast, threatening Raleigh to the north and the Goldsboro railroad hub to the northeast. The move towards Raleigh is a feint to keep the Confederate forces in the field from concentrating. The force of 4,400 cavalry and 59,000 infantry seems unstoppable.

It falls to Gen. Joseph E. Johnston to stop it. He is now 58 years old, of slight stature, has a high forehead with frontal balding. He pursues any objective with single-minded intensity, and does not like to lose. Many of his fellow officers consider him the best fighting soldier of his generation. He is not new to Sherman as he fought a retreating action against superior numbers from Nashville to the outskirts of Atlanta. At this point he is removed from command by President Jefferson Davis, who personally does not like Johnston.

Johnston has two flaws of character. He is often prickly and irritable, and he is overly sensitive about matters of personal honor. At the outbreak of the war, Johnston reigns his commission as Quartermaster General of the U.S, Army and join the Confederacy. At First Manassas he commands forces as the highest ranking officer in the army, but Davis reorganizes the high command and Johnston is demoted to 4th in frank.

He takes this as the gravest insult to his honor and enters into a feud with Davis that comes to a head when Johnston is wounded at Seven Pines. Robert E. Lee assumes command of the Army of Northern Virginia and Johnston is assigned to the west after his recovery.

But now Lee is pinned down in Petersburg, and John Bell Hood's actions have reduced the Army of Tennessee to a skeleton of its former self. Davis wants Lee to command all army groups but Lee says he can't be effective in two different theaters and recommends Johnston. Somewhat reluctantly, Davis recalls Johnston from retirement.

Johnston faces the ultimate test of his generalship: to defeat a well-equipped, seasoned army almost three times as large as his own. His only advantage is the cavalry --- three divisions under "Fightin' Joe" Wheeler and a fourth under Gen. Wade Hampton. They are thoroughly battled-tested and superior in numbers to the U.S. Cavalry under Gen. Judson Kilpatrick.

Johnston's only chance for victory is to force one of Sherman's columns into battle separately on prepared ground --- and to do this before the other two smaller Union armies from Wilmington and New Bern, can link up with Sherman. **"I will not give battle with Sherman's united army, but will if I can find it divided."**

But all of Johnston's forces are not assembled yet. Not knowing whether Sherman is aiming for Raleigh or Goldsboro, he intends to unite his troops at Smithfield, halfway between the two cities. They consist of Maj. Gen. Robert Hoke's division under Gen. Braxton Bragg; the ragged remnants of the Army of Tennessee; Lt. Gen. William Hardee's mixed column of coastal artillery and garrison units from Charleston, some 6000 men armed with obsolete muskets; and the horse troopers; altogether about 20,000 fighting men.

On March 6th, Gen. Bragg's force of nearly 12,500 is deployed to hold off A Union advance under the command of Gen. Jacob Cox. At Wyse Fork near Kinston, the Confederates battle doggedly for three days, mounting a series of fierce assaults on the Federals. But they cannot break the Union line and Bragg once more retreats.

Now that Sherman knows the enemy lies in wait somewhere ahead, he breaks out four

divisions from each wing to march without supply trains, ready for battle at a moment's notice. But he does not want to fight in North Carolina if he can avoid doing so. His objective is to link the armies and provide Gen. Grant with overwhelming force in Virginia.

Sherman's columns continue to move fast and on March 15th, Kilpatrick's cavalry catches Hardee's troops four miles south of Averasboro. Hardee's orders are to hold up Sherman's advance long enough for Johnston to unite and position his army. His troops occupy the boggy bottleneck between the Cape Fear and Black Rivers, blocking the Raleigh Road which Sherman wants. The rivers and swamps protect Hardee's flanks. The force he commands now has dwindled to about 6400 men because of desertions and straggling.

Hardee employs a three line defense, like the colonial forces used at Cowpens and at Guilford Court House. His least experienced troops are asked to hold the first two lines and delay the Federal attackers before falling back to the third line of experienced Confederates.

On the afternoon of March 15th, Union cavalry skirmished with the first defensive line. Fighting is inconclusive and both sides entrench, waiting for dawn. **"Hardee is ahead of me and shows fight," Gen. Sherman records. "I will go at him in the morning with four divisions and push him as far as Averasborough before turning (east) toward Bentonville."**

On the rainy morning of March 16th, the Federals attack over sodden ground. Almost by accident, Col. Henry Case, leading the Union 20th Corps through dense woods, emerges on the Confederate right flank and turns the line. One Union soldier writes, **"The Johnnies showed their heels as fast as God would let them."** Only the sudden arrival of Gen. Wheeler's cavalry stems the Confederate rout, and the two armies dig in for the night.

Although numbering fewer than 1100 men, the first defensive line of Confederates had blocked the Union advance for nearly five hours and had forced Sherman to deploy Kilpatrick's cavalry and two divisions of the 20th Corps (some 12,000 men).

But as the Union commanders plan their attack for the next morning, Hardee's troops quietly abandon their line and night-march to link up with the rest of Johnston's force. Hardee suffers about 500 casualties in the fighting, and Sherman suffers some 682 casualties. Sherman is confident that Hardee will withdraw of his own accord, yet he is surprised at the stubbornness of the Confederate resistance. Maj. Nichols of Sherman's staff notes, **"The Rebels have shown more pluck than we have seen in them since Atlanta."**

Hardee's stand is a classic delaying action and stall's Sherman's progress for one day. The combination of faulty maps and inaccurate information from Kilpatrick's cavalry convince Sherman that Johnston is falling back to cover Raleigh. The right column of the Union force is within 25 miles of Goldsboro late on March 18th. Johnston believes the left column under Slocum is more than a day's march from the right column.

Johnston plans an all-out assault on the left column near Bentonville. First to arrive is the division commanded by Gen. Hoke, a 27-year old North Carolinian: 5 brigades, fielding regiments from South Carolina, Georgia and North Carolina ---including 1000 teenage Junior Reserves and soldiers who escaped Ft. Fisher. Next on the field is the Army of Tennessee --- hardly an army at all, since it numbers only 4.500 men. They are filthy and exhausted, and even their old commander, Ge, John Bell Hood, believes the fight has gone out of them.

Hardee's troops are still a way off. The cavalry is scouting and preparing to screen Johnston's army as it deploys in an attempt to ambush Sherman's advancing left wing. Hampton positions his cavalry at the house of Willis Cole, a couple of miles south of Bentonville at the junction of the Averasboro-Goldsboro and Smithfield-Clinton roads.

The cavalry and Hoke's brigades will block the Union columns, forcing them to form into lines of battle, then goad them to attack a carefully chosen, entrenched position. When the attack fails and the enemy is reeling, the brigades will counterattack and drive them off. The Goldsboro road, running east to west, defines the battlefield. To the north, the Confederates deploy on elevated ground with down-sloping open fields of fire across the Cole farm. South of the road, the country turns boggy and nearly impassable, a swampy blackjack oak thicket. Hoke's division blocking the road east is the anvil. On it will swing the Army of Tennessee, deployed in an arc north and west.

At daybreak on Sunday, March 19th, the sky is clear and it promises to be a beautiful spring day. Gen. Johnston can be spied, **"sitting on his horse…with head uncovered, bowing to the small remnant of the noble army (Army of the Tennessee)."** Hampton's cavalry skirmish with the advancing Federals. Some Union officers are concerned that it may be more than cavalry, but Sherman assures them that it is just cavalry, and he rides off to join the right column.

Gen. Carlin's division is deployed to clear the road, but then Hoke's Confederates unleash a withering musket and cannon fire, sending the left half of Carlin's division scrambling for cover. Gen. Morgan's Federal division soon joins on Carlin's right and starts a series of sustained attacks. **[see Map 2]** Gen. Bragg, Hoke's commander, fears a breakthrough and pleads with Johnston to send reinforcements. Johnston concedes and dispatches Hardee's stongest division, commanded by Gen. Lafayette McLaws, to aide Hoke. Johnston lives to regret taking counsel of Bragg's fears. He later writes to Hoke, **"I believe than Gen. Bragg's nervousness when you were first attacked at Bentonville, was very injurious --- by producing urgent applications for help ---which not only made delay but put a large division out of position."**

Around noon, Carlin launches a recon-naissance-in-force to discover the strength of the enemy, but they too are badly mauled as they blunder into the entrenched lines of Bragg and Stewart. Gen. Slocum is now convinced the enemy are strong in his front, and he immediately requests assistance from the right wing of Sherman's force.

At 2:45, Johnson drops the hammer on Slocum. With Gen. Hardee leading the charge in person, the Army of Tennessee launches its final great assault. **"They can down on us like an avalanche,"** recalled a Union officer. Carlin's poorly deployed line breaks almost instantly. Fleeing their breastworks, the ranks of Federal soldiers are cut to pieces as the men scramble out of the ravine. The left half of Carlin's division reels backward toward the Morris farm while the right half caves in on Morgan's division. The 19th Indiana Battery loses three of its four guns.

Following up their advantage, bear down the Goldsboro Road and slam into Gen. Fearing's Union brigade which has been sent to stem the tide. Fearing's line crumbles and his men fall back to the west.

Around 4 p.m. Bragg's line attacks Morgan's division with furious fighting, often hand-to-hand. **[see Map 3]** The Federals repulse Hoke's Division, only to find elements of the Army of Tennessee moving on them from the rear, having pushed Fearing's force out of the way. The high water mark is reached as Confederate forces hurl themselves at the 20th Corps at the Morris farm. **[see Map 3]** Massed Federal artillery and Gen. Robinson's brigade repel wave after wave of attacking Confederates. Amid burning trees and brush, the Confederates withdraw to their original positions as night falls.

(Tune in next month to see if Johnston can strike again, or will the Union Right Wing arrive in time to save Slocum's bacon – the Left Wing of the Army.)