



The Dispatch
Newspaper of the

**CAPITAL DISTRICT
CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE**

PO Box 11493 Loudonville, NY 12211
www.capitaldistrictcivilwar.org



Volume 37, Number 1

January 2020

**CDCWRT DONATIONS NOW TOTAL
\$1,590,747.76
IN ACTUAL AND MATCHING FUNDS**

2019 Donations

\$1000 to the American Battlefield Trust to preserve land at various battlefields (a \$32 to \$1 match)

\$100 to the Harriet Tubman and William Seward statue project in Schenectady

\$200 to the Cedar Creek Battlefield Association

**WE HAVE DONATED \$220,495.26 IN ACTUAL FUNDS
OVER THE PAST THIRTY-SIX YEARS.**

JANUARY MEETING

Friday, January 10, 2020

WATERVLIET SENIOR CENTER

1541 BROADWAY

WATERVLIET, NY

Potpourri Night

Social Hour	6:00 – 7:00 p.m.
Business Meeting	7:00 p.m.
Presentation	7:00 – 8:00 p.m.
Questions & Answers	8:00 – 8:30 p.m.

The regular meeting of the CDCWRT will be held at the Watervliet Senior Center on Friday, January 10, 2020.

Matt George has arranged for Mary Scicchitano to speak on local soldiers G.W. Guernsey and Lewis Shipley. Philip DiNovo will speak on Italian Americans in the Civil War. And, Steve Rockwell may be available to speak on William H. Hershey.

UPCOMING EVENTS

February 14: Ted Shuart will discuss Will Hill's diary and the U.S. Signal Corps

March 13: Chris Gwine will present "Why We Fought" about Union veterans' reminisces of Gettysburg.

April 10: Ralph Siegal will discuss controversies surrounding the Peach Orchard.

DUES, DUES, DUES

The Round Table membership year starts January 1. The dues level is \$35, and members also have the option to make donations to the Operating and Preservation Accounts. Payments in cash or check can be mailed to the Round Table with your name, newsletter preference (email or paper copy), updated email or street address, and distribution for any additional donations. Credit card payments can be made at the January meeting.

CDCWRT'S 2020 ELECTIONS

Elections for members of the Executive Board will be held at the January meeting. The slate of nominees is:

President: Erin Baillargeon
Vice President: Nick Thony
Treasurer: Steve Muller
Secretary: Rosemary Nichols
At-Large member: J.J. Jennings
At-Large member: Mark Koziol
At-Large member:

Any member in good standing (dues paid) may be nominated from the floor for any board position, including those with a nominee.

THANK YOU, MEMBERS

The Executive Board would like to thank the following people for their support: Al McLeod, J.J. Jennings, M.P. Bonczar, Jeffery Falace, Paul Spofford, Dean Long, Luanne Whitbeck, Mary Ellen Johnson, Benjamin Mastaitis, Joseph Prezio, Larry Arnold, William Schreiner, Galen Ritchie, and Susan Shaffer.

MOUNT VERNON: AN OBSCURE BIT OF CIVIL WAR HISTORY

by Mary Ellen Johnson

The depredations of fire, theft, vandalism, battle damage, occupation for officers' headquarters, or use as a hospital were the fates of all too many southern plantation houses. How Washington's Mount Vernon remained unscathed is a little known chapter of Civil War history.

Washington's home had fallen into serious disrepair by the time its owner Augustine Washington sold it to a group of women representing every state in the Union. These women had been chartered by the State of Virginia as the Mount Vernon Ladies Association. They took possession in February 1860 after having raised \$200,000 to buy the house and 200 acres of the original plantation, planning to restore and preserve it in honor of Washington, a man revered by both North and South in spite of their other differences.

In charge was Miss Ann Pamela Cunningham, a South Carolina planter's daughter who in the 1850s had initiated the scheme to save Washington's home. Sarah C. Tracy, a Troy, NY native and also fluent in French, was hired as her secretary. To be superintendent of the house and grounds and in charge of repairs was Upton Henry, a local Virginian with Washington family connections. At the insistence of the northern donors, no enslaved people were to work on the property, only free black men and women could be hired. On the premises were Emily, Priscilla and

Frances, cook and maids, and George, coachman and general assistant. Also residing there during these years was a woman to act as chaperone for Miss Tracy when Miss Cunningham was away.

Called back to South Carolina during the autumn of 1860, Miss Cunningham found it impossible to return once the war broke out. Sarah Tracy's correspondence kept her apprised of developments at Mount Vernon, giving a first-hand account of the difficulties she and Upton Henry encountered during the war years.

Sarah Tracy's first duty was shopping for furniture, curtains, and carpets to furnish the virtually empty mansion, while Upton Henry commenced to patch the leaking roof, begin interior painting and attempt to restore the covered passageway from the house to the kitchen. He also provided tours to such prominent visitors as the Prince of Wales in October 1860 and Mary Lincoln and friends in March 1861.

Once the war broke out, Federal troops moved into Virginia in May 1861 and Sarah Tracy proved her mettle, heading straight to Washington when she heard rumors that Federal soldiers were about to be placed at Mount Vernon. She went directly to the office of Gen. Winfield Scott. An officer acted as her intermediary, reporting to Scott that the ladies were attempting to keep Mount Vernon and its acreage a strictly neutral area. Scott sent out word that as long as the South also respected its neutrality no Federal troops would be placed there.

1861 and early 1862 brought the shooting war close to the site. Tracy

reported southern troops were in the area and mentioned hearing the shooting downriver at Aquia Creek in May 1861. While Bull Run was several miles distant, she wrote to Miss Cunningham that the day of the July 21st battle the rapid cannon fire was audible most of the day. August 1861 brought a skirmish at Pohick Church six miles away, while only four miles distant Confederate cavalry raided and fought at the Accotink crossroads. McClellan's troops occupied Alexandria and the nearby area during the winter of 1861-62 and not too far away at Centreville, Joseph Johnston's army made winter camp, finally marching south in March 1862.

Federal troops guarding access to Washington remained in the area throughout the war, restricting travel to even those with a pass. Because Upton Henry was a native Virginian, and a quiet Confederate sympathizer with several relatives in the Confederate army, he was unable to leave Mount Vernon. At first Sarah Tracy received a personal pass as well as passes for servants doing errands such as getting the mail. However, once McClellan took command, he issued new regulations forcing Miss Tracy to get new passes for the servants who could no longer get past Federal pickets on the route to Alexandria. She had a fruitless personal meeting with McClellan, who "declined giving them, saying no servants could be trusted, etc." Roads within three miles of Mount Vernon were blocked so that their basic supplies were beginning to run out. With pickets refusing to allow even Miss Tracy through, supposedly on the orders of General McClellan, she decided the time had come to get to

Washington to see General Scott himself.

Plucky Miss Tracy, driven by "a Negro of admirable sang froid," in a wagon pulled by a pair of mules made her way to a local farmer who had made a path through the woods. After a few tense hours she managed to arrive in Washington at Scott's office. His aide requested a written account of her problem, took it in to General Scott whose advice to her was to go straight to Mr. Lincoln. "If his pass was disputed, there was "no power but the president who could help me..." Miss Tracy then related to Miss Cunningham, President Lincoln "received me very kindly and wrote a note to General McClellan requesting him to see me and arrange the matter in the best way possible."

When she met with McClellan, he "said it was a grand mistake, he had never given an order revoking one of General Scott's passes... It was over zeal on the part of the volunteer officers." He offered to send provisions to Mount Vernon by boat from time to time, and did follow through on this offer.

Mail became seriously disrupted having two opposing armies facing each other and Virginia viewing itself as part of a different country with a different postal service and its own postage stamps. Corresponding with Miss Cunningham living behind Confederate borders presented difficulties, and often letters never got through to their destination. Miss Tracy on yet another trip to Washington requested permission from the War Department to exchange letters with Miss Cunningham. It was granted with the proviso that no military matters

were to be discussed. Mail was erratic and at one point in 1864 Miss Cunningham wrote that she had just received the first letter from Miss Tracy in two years.

The small steam boat that had made regular stops at Mount Vernon had been requisitioned by the Federal government to become part of several flotillas carrying the Army of the Potomac south to the Peninsula. On board one boat the surgeon of the 77th New York recorded that bells tolled as they passed Mount Vernon with the comment, “the mansion and grounds are nearly as they were left by Washington.”

Things were quiet until August 1862 when both armies returned to the area, clashing a second time at Bull Run. Col. Mosby showed up, raiding Federal troops at Fairfax Court House. McClellan was sacked, replaced by General Burnside who marched the Army of the Potomac south. Many of these troops marched through the Mount Vernon neighborhood, and with that the fighting moved away from Mount Vernon.

Washington’s home and tomb occupied a special place in American hearts, whether Union or Confederate, spurring large numbers of soldiers to visit if possible. Ground rules were established to preserve the site’s neutrality. Strict measures called for all soldiers to stack arms outside the gate and enter wearing civilian clothes or to cover uniforms with blankets, etc. Before Federal troops assumed control of Alexandria and the surrounding area, Mount Vernon’s visitors had been mostly Confederates, but were

replaced for the remainder of the war by northern soldiers.

An early group consisting of 150 members of a New York regiment arrived in one group and were reluctant to stack arms though they finally cooperated. Another regiment a few days later were more assertive in refusing to stack arms, their colonel insisting on seeing a written order from General Scott. Eventually they calmed down, stacked arms and were allowed in. Once the second battle of Bull Run was past, Miss Tracy headed to Washington, got a written order, but it doesn’t seem as if anyone else ever challenged the rules.

The most prominent visitor was Prince Napoleon who showed up with the French Minister in Washington and his suite. After being shown over the house and grounds, the Frenchmen were grateful to find a French speaker and a luncheon before heading back to Alexandria in a mule drawn wagon. One visitor who came twice, recording his visit in words and in a sketch, was Robert Knox Sneden of the 40th New York. In December 1861 Sneden and three others were shown over the house and grounds “by a man” surely Upton Henry.

Almost all visitors wanted a souvenir of some kind and most settled for a leaf to press to send home in a letter. However, in spite of Mr. Henry’s vigilance, one of that group managed to swipe a brass screw from a harpsichord supposedly played by Martha Washington. Sneden was especially impressed by the Bastille key sent to Washington by LaFayette. Back again in December 1862, Sneden noted “the house was much in need of

repairs...all the outhouses, kitchen and barns were in a dilapidated condition.” Other visitors who sketched wartime Mount Vernon were illustrator Alfred Waud whose drawing appeared in *The New York Illustrated Journal* in December 1861 and Winslow Homer who also stopped there in 1861.

While endless visitors could be an annoyance, they were asked to pay twenty five cents if they could afford it, providing the income needed for the mansion’s inhabitants to survive and to attempt any repairs or restoration. By 1864 Miss Tracy complained that after the Second Battle of Bull Run no steamboats could stop on the Virginia shore and with the strict pass system, very few visitors came to Mount Vernon. She claimed fewer than ten visitors came in a month’s time.

Once the fighting had ended and the steamboat began docking again floods of returning soldiers, anxious to see Washington’s home before returning to their own homes, turned up for tours. Many of them carved their initials in the trunks of trees lining the lane from the West Gate to the mansion or stripped bushes of leaves for a souvenir.

Mount Vernon, one of our nation’s great national historic treasures, escaped the war unscathed as the result of shrewd management. The major factor was the idea of establishing neutrality and strictly abiding by the policy, a concept that was accepted by the two sides who each shared deep feelings of love and respect for George Washington. Plus, in charge on the premises were two strong personalities representing both sides of the conflict, a northern woman and a southern man, both deeply

dedicated to preserving Mount Vernon during this time of national crisis.

BOARD UPDATES

The Executive Board met on Monday, December 16, to discuss the business of the Round Table.

The Operating Account had \$1,361.39. Membership renewals are being held for deposit until January. The Preservation Account had \$2,340.68.

Matt George will represent the Round Table at the New York State Museum’s *Great Places and Spaces* program. It will be held on Saturday, Jan. 11 from noon to 4 p.m.

The next meeting of the Executive Board is Monday, January 20. If you wish for more information, please contact any board member.

BUFORD’S VIEW

by Matt George

As I sit at my computer early this Christmas morning in 2019, my thoughts turn to the general topic of the Civil War and Christmas. Of course, the most significant Civil War Christmas present was given in the telegram sent by Sherman to President Lincoln on Dec. 22, 1864. It arrived at 6:45 PM on Christmas Day . It said:

*His Excellency President LINCOLN:
I beg to present you, as a Christmas gift, the city of Savannah, with 150 heavy guns and plenty of ammunition, and also about 25,000 bales of cotton.*

*W.T. Sherman,
Major General*

But, perhaps more in the true Christmas spirit are the many stories that occurred along the Rappahannock River near Fredericksburg on Christmas Day. There are a number of stories about both sides singing Christmas Carols together from their camps on the river. Perhaps the most often told account was one that appeared in Harper's Weekly in 1886. It was related by the Reverend John Paxton, a veteran from the 140th Pennsylvania Infantry Volunteers. During the harsh winter, the soldiers suffering from exposure, disease, and loneliness had their thoughts turn to home and their families.

While on patrol along the shore, in foot deep snow, eighteen year old Paxton and four comrades came upon a small group of Confederates on the opposite shore. Hearing a challenge from the other bank of "Who goes there?" Paxton replied, "Hello, Johnny, what are you up to?"

Johnny replied "Yank with no overcoat, shoes full of holes, nothing to eat but parched corn and tobacco, and with derved Yankee snow a foot deep, there's nothing left, nothin' but to get up a cough by way of protestin' against this infernal ill treatment of the body. We 'uns, Yank, all have the cough over here, and there's no sayin' which will run us to the hole, the cough or your bullets". They wished each other a Merry Christmas.

"Say, Johnny, got anything to trade?"

"Parched corn and tobacco, - the size of our Christmas, Yank." was the response.

"All right, you shall have some of our coffee and sugar and pork. Boys, find the boats."

There were small illegal "trading boats" hidden along the river bank. They then arranged for a brief cross river trade. The Union soldiers watched the Rebs glee at getting real coffee, sugar with cries of "Hurrah for hog". The Confederates shouted "reckon you 'uns been good to we'uns this Christmas Day." They wished each other Merry Christmas again and left.

Paxton said in his article that at that moment, they "were brothers, waving salutations of goodwill in the name of the Babe of Bethlehem, on Christmas Day in '62." The spirit of Christmas "struck a truce, broke down the wall of partition, became our peace. We exchanged gifts. We shouted greetings back and forth. We kept Christmas and our hearts were lighter of it, and our shivering bodies were not quite so cold. ...We forgot the biting wind, the chilling cold; we forgot those men over there were our enemies, whom it might be our duty to shoot before evening."

The essence of what happened there on the Rappahannock on Christmas Day should be preserved and spread like a contagion of goodwill to all humans regardless of race, color, religion, place of birth, or any other artificially created states of differences ascribed to humanity.

**CDCWRT
P.O. BOX 11493
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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.

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