



Founded on February 8, 1951

RICHMOND CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

MAY 2021

“The Civil War is the crux of our history. You cannot understand any part of our past, from the convening of the Constitutional Convention, down to this morning, without eventually arriving at the Civil War.”

Bernard de Voto

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May 11, 2021

7:30 p.m.

“Gettysburg’s Peach Orchard: Longstreet, Sickles and the Bloody Fight for the ‘Commanding Ground’ Along the Emmitsburg Road” by James Hessler

Join Gettysburg Licensed Battlefield Guide and co-author James Hessler as he discusses his latest award-winning book, “Gettysburg’s Peach Orchard.”

The historiography of July 2 at Gettysburg is usually dominated by the Union Army’s successful defense of Little Round Top, but the day’s most influential action occurred along the Emmitsburg Road in Joseph Sherfy’s peach orchard. Confederate General Robert E. Lee ordered a skeptical James Longstreet to seize this ground for use as an artillery position, but scheming Union General Daniel Sickles occupied the orchard first. Nearly 5,000 men then fought for control of the Emmitsburg Road in some of Gettysburg’s most brutal combat. Mr. Hessler will discuss

the action and human interest stories associated with the under-appreciated Peach Orchard at Gettysburg.



James Hessler brings almost two decades of experience as a Licensed Battlefield Guide at Gettysburg National Military Park. Jim has authored or co-authored three books on the Gettysburg campaign: *Sickles at Gettysburg* (2009), *Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg* (2015), and *Gettysburg's Peach Orchard* (2019). Jim's published work has received several distinguished book awards, including a two-time winner of the Bachelder-Coddington Award. Jim has also written several articles for national publications.

Jim is the co-host of the popular *Battle of Gettysburg* podcast, with an audience in more than 70 countries. He has been a guest on Travel Channel, NPR, PCN-TV, Civil War Radio, and Gettysburg Daily. He was one of the primary content designers for the American Battlefield Trust's mobile Gettysburg application. He is a frequent

speaker at Civil War round tables and has taught courses for the Gettysburg Foundation and Harrisburg (PA) Area Community College.



ZOOM SIGN ON INFORMATION

By Andy Keller

<https://tinyurl.com/RCWRT2021>

For Audio only call +1 301 715 8592. Long Distance Rates may apply

Meeting ID: 834 7150 6220

Passcode: 481366

To participate in a Zoom session, your computer will need a camera function, standard for most laptops, Smart Phones and tablets. I would suggest reviewing the camera function before that time. We recommend that you join 5 - 10 minutes before the meeting starts, to be sure that your equipment is working and review some of the features. You will be unmuted on admittance during that time for socializing, but you should mute yourself when requested. We hope to record the meeting so if you are unable to attend please send a request for the recording to Secretary.RCWRT@gmail.com.

A Word from the President

by Doug Crenshaw

I was recently asked to write a book review of Douglas Miller's *The Greatest Escape: A True American Civil War Adventure*, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. Miller makes use of many primary sources and accounts to tell the gripping story of life in Libby Prison, as well as the various escape attempts. The accounts describe the treatment immediately after capture, which was generally bad, but surprisingly the prisoners were often treated with respect. That all changed when they arrived in Richmond. The enlisted men were shuffled off to the outdoor hell at Belle Isle, with its lack of shelter, sanitation and very poor food.

The officers were sent to Libby's warehouse, where the conditions were abysmal. The warehouse was severely overcrowded, there was no heat in the winter and they roasted in the summer. Food was very poor, and the drinking water came from the muddy James River. Several unsuccessful individual escape efforts were made, but in early 1864 a group of prisoners worked together to dig down to the cellar, cut a hole in the wall, and tunnel to safety. Miller provides a fascinating description of their efforts in the rat-infested basement. He talks of their failed attempts, and their final success. Onehundred-nine ultimately crawled their way out of the prison.

As soon as the Confederates became aware of the escape, they fanned out, using dogs, and about half of the men were recaptured. The successful ones had to carefully move, in the bitter cold and across rivers and streams, until they reached the Union lines at Williamsburg. Miller also discusses the aid provided by Union loyalists, such as Elizabeth Van Lew and slaves the escapees encountered along the way, who provided food, shelter and directions.

It's a fascinating story and is well told. If you're in the market for a good read, you might want to check Miller's book out.

For future newsletters we welcome your articles, such as book reviews, stories about your favorite Civil War personality, your memorable battlefield visits, or your Civil War ancestor. Send your contribution to:

ullib1101@gmail.com

Round Table News

We are pleased to announce the launch of our new website at www.richmondcwrt.org.

You will find news about the current meeting, the monthly newsletter, a link to the membership form, our favorite links, and more here. While we could not salvage photos from the old website, we were able to save most of the files going back to the beginning of the round table. Please check it out and let us know what you think.

In other news, our Facebook site now has over 1,000 followers (1,034 as of this writing) and 956 "likes." Not bad for having been in existence only for a little over two years.

May in Civil War History

Citizens of Virginia certainly experienced many hardships during the Civil War years. As the war went on, many battles were fought in the state with two of the major ones in the month of May, one year apart.

Chancellorsville, May 1-6, 1863

The Battle of Chancellorsville rages on only 50 miles from Washington, D.C. Union Major General Joseph Hooker's Army of the Potomac is fighting an army half its size, General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Due to Lee's superior tactics, the Confederates win a major victory. However, the triumph is greatly weakened by the wounding of General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson by friendly fire (Jackson died on May 10).

Following is an excerpt from Douglas Southall Freeman's *Lee's Lieutenants* about the incident:

"To assure speed in the attack, "Stonewall" turned his horse and started back the way he had come. Silently he rode along till he was nearly opposite the weather-boarded house in the woods by the roadside. Suddenly from South of the dark road, there was a shot. Several others were fired. A volley roared through the woods.

"Cease firing, cease firing," Hill's voice rang out.

In the darkness, Jackson could not see who had fallen, nor did he have time. He felt the sorrel swerve suddenly away toward the North and dash into the woods. With his left hand, he checked the horse. His right hand he lifted to hold his cap and to protect his face from the low hanging boughs.

"Cease firing," Morrison yelled, as he ran toward the lines, "you are firing into your own men!" "Who gave that order?" a voice shouted back. "It's a lie! Pour it into them, boys!"



Boulder on Chancellorsville Battlefield marking the spot where Jackson was wounded

There was a long flash in front of Jackson – a volley by a kneeling line. Instantly he knew he had been hit. His left arm fell limp; his grip on his bridle rein was lost; a bullet had struck his uplifted right hand....."

"..... Quickly Wilbourn sprang to the ground. "They certainly must be our troops," he exclaimed. Jackson nodded but said nothing. He was looking up the road, toward his own line, as if he scarcely could realize that his soldiers had fired on him."

The Wilderness, May 5-7, 1864

The first conflict in Grant's campaign is fought in an overgrown area in central Virginia. Lee hopes that this terrain will cut down the Union's advantage of more men and more artillery. A brush fire starts between the two armies' lines during the night and wounded soldiers left on the field die screaming as they are burned alive in front of their comrades.

As the second day of fighting begins Grant tells a reporter who is returning to Washington, "If you see the president, tell him for me that, whatever happens, there will be no turning back." The battle is sometimes described as a draw. The Confederates lose an estimated 8,000 men while the Union losses are said to be 17,000 or more. While Union casualties are heavier, the Union can better afford them and they don't stop Grant's move to the south.

Following is an excerpt from *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*:

"During the night all of Lee's army withdrew within their intrenchments. On the morning of the 7th General Custer drove the enemy's cavalry from Catharpin Furnace to Todd's Tavern. Pickets and skirmishers were sent along our entire front to find the position of the enemy. Some went as far as a mile and a half before finding him. But Lee showed no disposition to come out of his works. There was no battle during the day, and but little firing except in Warren's front; he being directed about noon to make a reconnaissance in force. This drew some sharp firing, but there was no attempt on the part of Lee to drive him back. This ended the Battle of the Wilderness...."

"More desperate fighting has not been witnessed on this continent than that of the 5th and 6th of May. Our victory consisted in having successfully crossed a formidable stream, almost in the face of an enemy, and in getting the army together as a unit. We gained an advantage on the morning of the 6th, which, if it had been followed up, must have proven very decisive. In the evening the enemy gained an advantage; but it was speedily repulsed. As we stood at the close, the two armies were relatively in about the same condition to meet each other as when the river divided

them. But the fact of having safely crossed was a victory.

Our losses in the Wilderness were very severe. Those of the Confederates must have been even more so; but I have no means of speaking with accuracy on this point. The Germania Ford bridge was transferred to Ely's Ford to facilitate the transportation of the wounded to Washington."

Preservation News

Speaking of the Battle of the Wilderness.... Central Virginia Battlefields Trust (www.cvbt.org) just announced that 36 acres of the Wilderness Battlefield, site of General Battle's Counterattack, were saved. CVBT supported American Battlefield Trust (www.battlefields.org) in raising \$24,500 and preserving this important piece of The Wilderness.

On May 5, 1864, lined up along the Orange Turnpike along the east side of a piece of open ground called Saunders Field, was Union General Bartlett's brigade from Griffin's Division of the V Corps, including the 20th Maine, 18th Massachusetts, 1st Michigan, 44th New York, 83rd Pennsylvania, and 118th Pennsylvania. According to a veteran of the 20th Maine: "When the order was given to advance all three brigades started on the double-quick with a yell, driving the enemy in confusion back upon his reserves."

The charge plunged across the field under heavy fire and crashed through the Confederate lines held by General Jones's Virginians in the Second Corps near the crest of the high ground on the south side of the Orange Turnpike. In the Confederate rear reserve, Brigadier General Cullen A. Battle readied his command of Alabama regiments, the 5th, 3rd, 6th, 61st, and 12th, his men

positioned on the northern side of the road. According to a soldier in the 3rd Alabama: "Orders were given for regimental commanders to move up rapidly to the crest of the hill and hold it at all hazards in case Jones gave way. The woods in front were so thick that it was impossible to see more than 20 steps from our line, and all thought that General Jones held the crest of the hill. Our enemy soon hurled a heavy column against General Jones, sweeping down on his flanks and it became evident that he was pressing our men back. At this juncture, Battle's brigade moved up at a double-quick."

Surprised to find Jones's men scurrying in retreat, the majority of the Alabama brigade swept across the Orange Turnpike and slammed into the advancing regiments of Bartlett's brigade. The 6th and 61st Alabama near the center of the Confederate line captured two artillery pieces and many prisoners.

Though the Union attack's coordination disintegrated in action, Bartlett's brigade had pierced the Confederate lines and might have gained further ground except for the arrival of Battle's Alabamians. The fighting over and around Saunders Field continued to rage through the rest of May 5th and into the 6th before both armies started maneuvering south for the next chapter of the Overland Campaign.

National Park historian Bert Dunkerly has observed: "The acquisition of this land would preserve the site of a Confederate counterattack, where no doubt casualties occurred. It would also help protect the western boundary of the National Park Service property along Route 20 from development."

From CVBT News Bulletin,
April 26, 2021

Upcoming Meetings

June 8: Nathan Hall, "The Spies of Richmond"

July 13: Jim Gindlesperger, "Fire on the Water: The USS Kearsarge and the CSS Alabama"

August 10: Dr. Charles Fennell, "The Battle of Culp's Hill on July 3, 1863"

September 14: Douglas Waller, "Lincoln's Spies: Their Secret War to Save a Nation"

October 12: Victor Vignola, "The May 31, 1862 Battle of Fair Oaks: The Struggle for the Adams House, Bull Sumner's Glory Day"

November 9 (dinner meeting):

Janet Croon, "The War Outside my Window: The Civil War Diary of LeRoy Wiley Gresham 1860-1865"

December 14: Scott Mingus, "The Battle of Second Winchester: The Confederate Victory that Opened the Door to Gettysburg"

Area Event of Interest

June 4-6: Reenactment, The Action at Wilson's Wharf. Fort Pocahontas is the site of the May 24, 1864 action in which US Colored Troops defended the fort they built against an assault by Fitzhugh Lee's Confederate Cavalry.

Open to the public 10-4 on Saturday and 10-3 on Sunday. \$10/adults, \$8/students. Civil War camps, battle reenactment 1 pm on both days. www.fortpocahontas.org.
