

THE CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE



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Chicago, Illinois

June 2024

828th REGULAR MEETING, Friday, June 14th, 2024

The Nevins-Freeman Award Address Tim Smith on "Grierson's Raid"

**Live/Zoom Meeting. Time: June 14th, 2024, 07:30 PM CST.
Zoom Option ID 845 3227 1496; No Passcode needed**



Benjamin Grierson's Union cavalry thrust through Mississippi is one of the most well-known operations of the Civil War. There were other simultaneous operations to distract Confederate attention from the real threat to Vicksburg posed by U. S. Grant's Army of the Tennessee, but Grierson's operation, mainly conducted with two Illinois cavalry regiments, has become the most famous, and for good reason. For 16 days (April 17 to May 2) Grierson led Confederate pursuers on a high-stakes chase through the entire state of Mississippi, entering the northern border with Tennessee and exiting its southern border with Louisiana.

The daily rides were long, the rest stops short, and the tension high. Ironically, the man who led the raid was a former music teacher who some say disliked horses. Throughout, he displayed outstanding leadership and cunning, destroyed railroad tracks, burned trestles and bridges, freed slaves, and created as much damage and chaos as possible. Grierson's Raid broke a vital Confederate rail line at Newton Station that supplied Vicksburg and, perhaps most importantly, consumed the attention of the

Confederate high command. While Confederate Lt. Gen. John Pemberton at Vicksburg and other Southern leaders looked in the wrong directions, Grant moved his entire Army of the Tennessee across the Mississippi River below Vicksburg, spelling the doom of that city, the Confederate chances of holding the river, and perhaps the Confederacy itself.

Novelists have attempted to capture the large-than-life cavalry raid in the popular imagination, and Hollywood reproduced the daring cavalry action in *The Horse Soldiers*, a 1959 major motion picture starring John Wayne and William Holden. Although the film replicates the raid's drama and high-stakes gamble, cinematic license chipped away at its accuracy. Based upon years of research and presented in gripping, fast-paced prose, Timothy B. Smith's *The Real Horse Soldiers: Benjamin Grierson's Epic 1863 Civil War Raid through Mississippi* captures the high drama and tension of the 1863 horse soldiers in a modern, comprehensive, academic study. This talk, based on the book, will bring you along for the ride.

Timothy B. Smith (Ph.D. Mississippi State University, 2001) is a veteran of the National Park Service and currently teaches history at the University of Tennessee at Martin. In addition to numerous articles and essays, he is the author, editor, or co-editor of more than twenty books with several university and commercial presses. His books have won numerous book awards, his trilogy on the American Civil War's Tennessee River campaign (Forts Henry and Donelson, Shiloh, and Corinth) winning a total of nine book awards. He is currently finishing a five-volume study of the Vicksburg Campaign for the University Press of Kansas and a new study of Albert Sidney Johnston for LSU Press. He lives with his wife Kelly and daughters Mary Kate and Leah Grace in Adamsville, Tennessee.

The Nevins-Freeman Award

In 1974, The Civil War Round Table of Chicago established the Nevins-Freeman Award, and bestows it annually on an individual whose advancement of American Civil War scholarship and support for the Round Table movement warrant special recognition. The award itself is designed as a generous financial donation to a historical preservation project chosen by the recipient.

This award is named for two men whose legacies have come to be synonymous with the Civil War era: Historians Allan Nevins and Douglas Southall Freeman.

A list of the awardees can be viewed on the Chicago CWRT website, at <https://chicagocwrt.org/anfa.html>.

Battlefield Preservation

Dear xxx

As a supporter of our work, I'm sure you're aware that the battle to preserve hallowed land is getting increasingly more competitive and expensive.

This is certainly the case for the 7.5 acres we are now currently fighting to preserve at Fredericksburg.

Two significant Civil War battles took place on this sacred land – one a devastating loss for the Union and the second a great victory!

The First Battle

In December of 1862, was one of the largest and deadliest battles of the Civil War. It featured the first opposed river crossing in American military history, as well as some of the deadliest urban combat of the Civil War.

It was also a decisive Confederate victory, that served as a catalyst for a Federal command change within Lincoln's principal army, while setting the stage for the spring 1863 campaign in northern Virginia.

The Second Battle

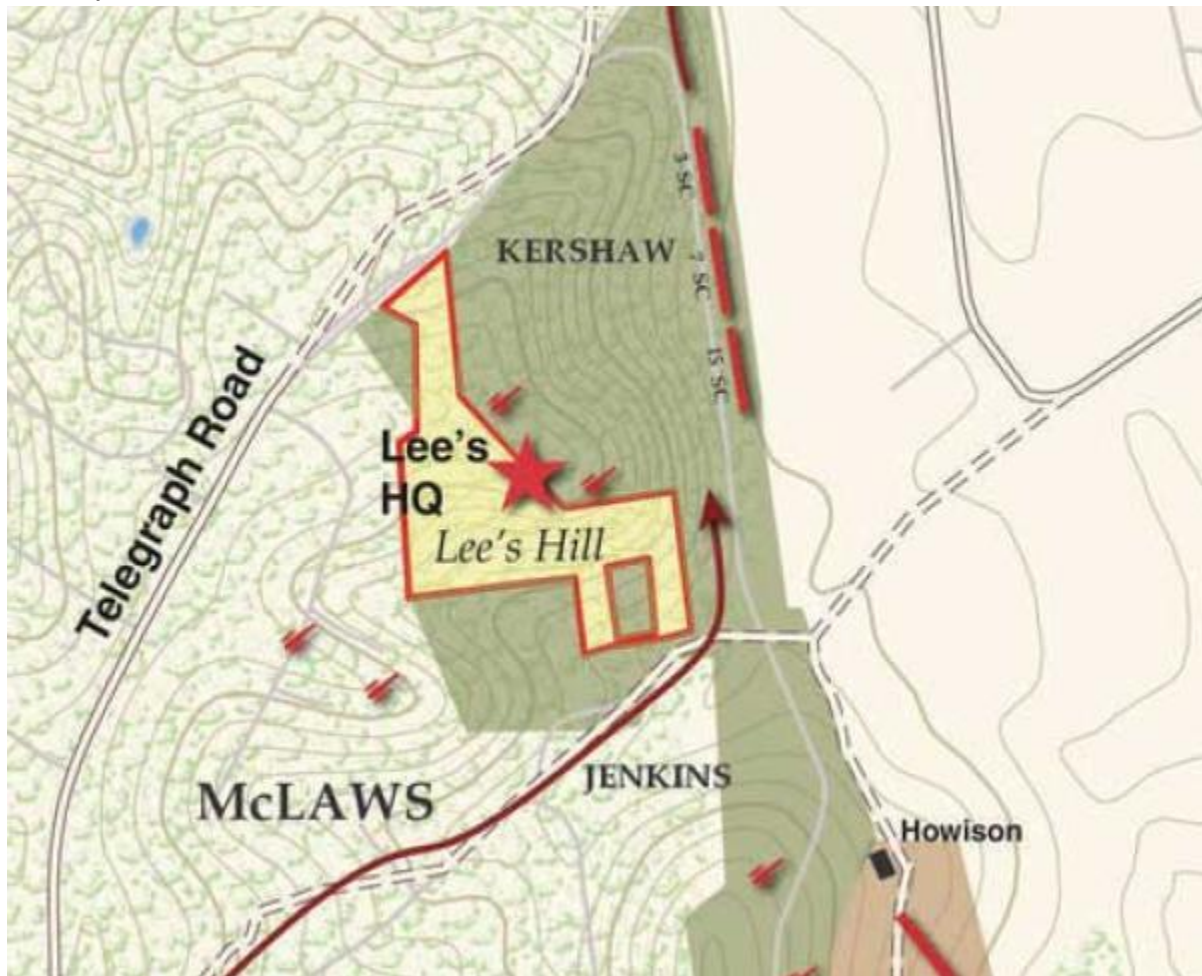
In April of 1863, Union General Joseph Hooker split his army into three pieces, leaving one in the vicinity of Fredericksburg to hold the Confederates in place, while his other wings cut into the rear of the Confederates.

Undaunted, Robert E. Lee, too, split his forces to meet these threats, leaving some 56 cannon and 11,000 soldiers at Fredericksburg to hold the Federals in place, while Lee and Stonewall Jackson led the remainder of the army west to thwart Hooker. On May 3, 1863, Union forces overwhelmed Lee's rear guard at the Second Battle of Fredericksburg.

Our Battle Today

The tract is entirely inside the authorized boundary of the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. Yet it is now unprotected and features several modern structures.

It has major significance in the two battles of Fredericksburg – it's the site of artillery positions, observation areas, and command posts. It's only a short walk from Lee's Headquarters.



The current zoning for this property allows for development into 34 residential townhouse lots, and developers have been chewing at the bit to acquire it.

We were able to negotiate a sale with the landowner, but it won't come cheap. It's going to cost us \$1.525 million over three years. And the first \$500,000 is due soon!

Join us today in this special effort to preserve twice-hallowed ground. Let's save history together!

'Til the battle is won,
David Duncan, President, American Battlefield Trust

April Presentation

By Mark Matranga

Lynn and Julianne Herman appeared at the 827th Regular Meeting of the Civil War Round Table on May 10, 2024, when Lynn gave an informative talk on “The Allegheny Arsenal Explosion.” This tragic event in Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania, was overshadowed by the momentous battle at Sharpsburg that same day, September 17, 1862. Yet almost 200 miles from the carnage along Antietam Creek, along the banks of the Allegheny River not far from Pittsburgh, the worst civilian disaster of the Civil War took the lives of 78 workers, mostly young women and girls.

At the time of the war, Pittsburgh was America’s premier manufacturing center, with numerous mills and foundries. The United States Arsenal was established there in 1814 and had served mainly as a supply depot for the U.S. Army’s western outposts. By the second year of the war, the Arsenal had expanded; its 1,200-person workforce produced gunpowder, cartridges and backpacks as well as cannon ordnance for the Union Army. As of September 1862, the Arsenal turned out 126,000 cartridges a day in a quite hazardous environment as events would prove. Gunpowder was a pervasive presence, in the air and on the ground, inside and outside the plant.

The Arsenal began hiring females in 1861 after Arsenal supervisors began to dismiss many young males who engaged in unsafe behavior handling gunpowder; women were found to be much more careful, reliable employees. Jobs at the Arsenal jobs were desirable and paid well, twenty-five dollars a week. This enabled women, especially young immigrant girls, to help support their families; often, more than one family member worked at the Arsenal. Reflecting their presence on the day of the explosion, in one section of the Arsenal, the Laboratory, 156 of the 186 employees were women. But as Herman noted, Arsenal hiring processes nonetheless reflected mid-century mores: women required references from their doctors or pastors before they could secure employment there.

September 17, 1862, was payday. At approximately 2 p.m. the first of three explosions rocked the Laboratory. Apparently, a spark ignited gunpowder on the gravel road leading to the plant, the fire from which spread to barrels stored on the porch. Many of the girls jumped out windows. As they ran from the resulting fire there were two more explosions. The walls and the roof of the Laboratory collapsed, killing some workers before they could flee. Firefighting efforts were hampered by exploding cartridges. It was estimated that approximately twenty-five thousand pounds of ammunition exploded; the entire building was destroyed, a pile of burned debris. Bodies were piled in heaps. Of the 78 dead, 72 were women. Local newspapers reported the horrors of badly burned bodies, many of which could not be identified and were eventually buried

in a common grave. Ironically, many who left the building to collect their pay were spared.

Following the tragedy, a coroner's inquest found Colonel John Symington, Chief of Ordnance and Commandant of the Arsenal, negligent for placing gunpowder near sources of ignition. He requested a military review which found him innocent; however, the official verdict found the cause of the explosion unknown. Symington was subsequently allowed to retire for health reasons. Alexander McBride, Superintendent of the Arsenal whose daughter Katie died in the explosion, had warned of the prospective dangers and had made attempts to reduce the risk of explosion by spreading sawdust on the macadamized road leading to the plant, was made to bear the brunt of the blame.

The Arsenal continued to operate for the duration of the war. A monument listing the names of those killed was dedicated near the mass grave in Allegheny Cemetery in 1928. Lawrenceville is now part of Pittsburgh, and few former Arsenal buildings remain. The site of the explosion is now a park.

The Arsenal explosion raises many interesting issues, including child labor as well as women in the workplace in the 19th century. And as Herman made manifestly clear, the United States government held little concern for the safety of its workers at the Arsenal or for the families devastated by its negligence.



BULLETIN BOARD

Our in-person meetings are currently held at:

Holiday Inn Oakbrook

350 W 22nd St., Oakbrook Terrace

Parking at the Holiday Inn is FREE

Dinner \$40.00 Members and Non- Members

Cocktails at 5:30, Dinner at 6:30

Presentation only is \$10 per person.

The **Kenosha Civil War Museum** is putting on the following in-person/virtual programs:

June 14th, noon, the 2nd Friday lecture, Dr. Greg Burek on "Post-Civil War Veteran Mental Health."

June 29th, 1 p.m. John L. Hopkins on "The 1913 Soldiers Reunion at Gettysburg."

For more on programs at the museum, visit
<https://museums.kenosha.org/civilwar/events/>

Rob Girardi will present “General John E. Smith” at the Lincoln Association Symposium at Cantigny June 22nd. He will present “Illinois at Vicksburg” Aug. 13th and 20th at the Kenosha Civil War Museum.

Larry Hewitt will be presenting “The Birth of Combat Photography” June 6th at the Cobb County (GA) CWRT.

Bruce Allardice is speaking June 15th at the Buckley Home Encampment in Lowell, IN on “The Ten Worst Civil War Generals.”

More Upcoming Local Civil War Events

June 7th, Northern Illinois CWRT: Diana Dretske on "The Bonds of War: the 96th Illinois"

June 10th, Northeast IN CWRT: Rob Girardi on “The Civil War Generals”

June 11th, McHenry County CWRT: Bob Pressman on "John Brown, Hero or Terrorist? Martyr or Madman?"

June 11th, Southwest Michigan CWRT: Rob Girardi on "The Midwest Fights the Civil War"

June 18th, Lincoln-Davis CWRT: Steve Alban on "The Election of 1860"

July 1st, Rock Valley CWRT: Bjorn Skaptason on "Illinois Light Artillery Batteries at the Battle of Atlanta"

July 9th, McHenry County CWRT: Jerry Allen on "And Then He was a Lion: Major General James Steedman"

July 16th, Lincoln-Davis CWRT: Diana Dretske on "The Bonds of War: the 96th Illinois"

Aug. 5th, Rock Valley CWRT: Rob Girardi on "Civil War Engineers"

Aug. 13th, McHenry County CWRT: TBD

Aug. 20th, Lincoln-Davis CWRT: Dennis Doyle on "Illinois Regiments at Gettysburg"

Aug. 22nd, South Suburban CWRT: Father Bob Miller, topic TBA

Aug. 24th, Chicago CWRT Executive Committee Meeting, at "Camp Girardi"

Check the **Announcements** section of the CWRT’s website for additional coming events.

Future Chicago CWRT Meetings

Sept. 13th: Jim Hessler on "Dan Sickles"

Oct. 11th: Larry Hewitt on "The Birth of Combat Photography"

Nov. 8th: Kent Masterson Brown on TBA

Dec. 13th: Jon Sebastian on TBA

The **Abraham Lincoln Book Shop's** facebook page airs "Take a Break with History", every first and third Friday of the month at 1 pm CST.

On June 6th at 3:30 CST their "House Divided" series will feature Robert Colby speaking on his new book, "An Unholy Traffic: Slave Trading in the Civil War South"

For more, visit <https://alincolnbookshop.com/>

The CWRT Board Elections, at the May meeting, saw the following elected for the 2024-25 year:

President Dennis Doyle

First VP Bruce Allardice

Second VP James Adducci

Treasurer Karen Weber

Assistant Treasurer Kurt Carlson

Secretary Dan Modes

Assistant Secretary: Gary Fine

Trustees, Terms Ending in 2026: Tom Murray, Rick Branham, Ginny Proconier, Mike Celli



Our longtime friend and CWRT Trustee, **David Zucker**, passed away in May, at the age of 70. He was a longtime member and frequent contributor to the Chicago Literary Club, Civil War Roundtable, College of Complexes, Chicago Archaeological Society, Omnibus Society, and the Central Electric Railfans' Association. We'll miss him....

The **Abraham Lincoln Association 2024 Summer Symposium** will be held at Cantigny, Saturday, June 22 from 9-1. Attendance is free but seating is limited to 100. Please RSVP to Kay Smith at kaysmith.ala@gmail.com.

The presenters include Ed Achorn, Bill Shepherd, Dr. Dan Monroe, Joshua Claybourn, Guy Fraker, and our own Rob Girardi.
