



# THE CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE



Volume LXXXI, Number 1

Chicago, Illinois

September 2021

804th REGULAR MEETING, Friday, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021

## Eric Wittenberg on

### ***"Seceding from Secession: The Creation of West Virginia"***

**Live/Zoom Meeting. Time: June 11, 2021 07:30 PM CST**

**Zoom Option ID and Passcode: See CWRT Facebook Page**



"West Virginia was the child of the storm," concluded early Mountaineer historian and Civil War veteran, Maj. Theodore F. Lang. The northwestern third of the Commonwealth of Virginia finally broke away in 1863 to form the Union's 35th state.

In his new book, *Seceding from Secession: The Civil War, Politics, and the Creation of West Virginia*, author Eric J. Wittenberg chronicles those events in an unprecedented study of the social, legal, military, and political factors that converged to bring about the birth of the West Virginia. President Abraham Lincoln, an astute lawyer in his own right, played a critical role in birthing the new state. The book is an indispensable source for everyone interested in understanding the convergence of military,

political, social, and legal events that brought about the birth of the state of West Virginia

Eric J. Wittenberg is an award-winning historian, blogger, speaker and tour guide. His specialty is Civil War cavalry operations, and much of his work has focused on the Gettysburg Campaign. He is the author of 18 published books on the Civil War and

more than three dozen articles that have appeared in various national magazines. He is also deeply involved in battlefield preservation work and often assists the Civil War Trust with its efforts, and is also a member of the Governor of Ohio's Advisory Commission on the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War. He is a native of southeastern Pennsylvania, and was educated at Dickinson College and the University of Pittsburgh School of Law. He is an attorney in private practice. He and his wife Susan and their three golden retrievers reside in Columbus, Ohio.

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## Battlefield Preservation

**The CWRT of Chicago** made the following donations to Battlefield Preservation in the 2020-2021 year:

Donation to American Battlefield Trust for Ed Bearss--\$2,000  
Donation on behalf of Earl Hess--\$500  
Donation on behalf of Greg Biggs to Save the Franklin Battlefield--\$500  
Donation to Gettysburg Foundation in memory of Marshall Krolick--\$500  
Donation to American Battlefield Trust for Champion Hill purchase--\$1,480  
Annual Color Bearer donation to American Battlefield Trust--\$1,000

Donors to the Ed Bearss fund will be listed in a future newsletter.

## American Battlefield Trust Saves Harpers Ferry Land

While I always enjoy adding new locations to the Trust's roster of successes, some sites are so significant they merit returning to time and again over the course of years and decades.

One such place is Harpers Ferry, where we've succeeded in saving 542 acres of hallowed ground over 29 years — most of which has been incorporated into Harpers Ferry National Historical Park. Today, as [our preservation story continues](#) at the West Virginia site, we're wrapping up a big chapter and celebrating the transfer of the last of four tracts — totaling almost 17 acres — that were saved in 2013-2014.

The 0.61-acre tract now transferred to the National Park Service was once the proposed site for a new gas station and mini-mart, but we've ensured that such a fate will never fall upon this sacred terrain. Along with 3.28 adjacent acres (across two tracts), the property was protected in 2013 through a partnership between the National Parks

Conservation Association, the National Park Service and the Bank of Charles Town, all of which recognized its profound role in history.

The small-but-critical parcel sits along the route of the Harpers Ferry–Charles Town Turnpike on Bolivar Heights. Charged with capturing the federal arsenal, Stonewall Jackson strategically placed artillery on the heights surrounding the town, and, on the morning of September 15, 1862, proceeded to rain fire upon the turnpike and its bordering fields. The move ultimately opened the gate for a Confederate flanking maneuver that forced a Union surrender.

Not only decisive in the largest capitulation of Union troops during the Civil War, the land also witnessed a key moment in abolitionist John Brown's 1859 raid. This land is close to the Allstadt Ordinary, a landmark of the raid, which we transferred to the park almost exactly two years ago.

Because of your unwavering support, we can deliver this memory-packed parcel of battlefield land to Harpers Ferry National Historical Park, making for a more complete western gateway to the park. **We'll never stop working to piece together the preservation puzzles at our nation's battlefields, as each piece represents the unique perspectives engrained in our American story.**

David Duncan  
President

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## **June Meeting**

### **By Mark Matranga**

The 803<sup>rd</sup> Regular Meeting of The Civil War Round Table featured A. Wilson 'Will' Greene's incisive account of the First Petersburg Offensive: "We Have Done All That Is Possible and Must Be Resigned." In what was the opening phase of the continuing confrontation between U.S Grant and Robert E. Lee that commenced in May 1864, Greene detailed Grant's ultimately failed attempt to destroy Lee's last connections to the lower south which ran through the Cockade City, the ultimate gateway to Richmond.

Grant had been frustrated by Lee in his attempt to reach Richmond directly from the north. After the terribly sanguine affairs in the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania in the first weeks of May, Grant had George Gordon Meade's Army of the Potomac track the

Army of Northern Virginia southward but was again stymied at the North Anna. Grant's ill-advised frontal assaults at Cold Harbor succeeded only in proving that attacks against entrenched foes produced only endless casualty lists.

Having been stymied, Grant determined to move Meade's army across the James River and to attack Richmond from the south. Accomplished with astonishing secrecy on June 14 and 15, engineers stealthily built pontoon bridges across the James River, and moved a substantial portion of the army across on June 14 and 15. Grant already had Benjamin Butler's Army of the James occupying the local forces under P.G.T. Beauregard at the Bermuda Hundred, the land between the James and Appomattox Rivers.

With this, the lightly defended city some ten miles away lay open for the taking. Grant's gave Butler have overall responsibility for the initial assault on the city, with W.F. 'Baldy' Smith XVIII Corps Commander in tactical command. Smith's corps would make the initial assault at dawn on June 15, with Hancock's three division II Corps following immediately. The assaults on Petersburg did not commence until 7 a.m.; Smith claimed not to know nothing of his orders and barely had one division across the James at that time.

Smith eventually achieved some success when he finally placed all his divisions in line, but without Hancock's force was unable to achieve his objective. Hancock arrival was delayed due to orders from Meade not to move, to await rations his troops did not need, resulting in a crucial six-hour delay. Hancock did not come up until almost nightfall when he was ordered to replace Smith's men in line and was not a factor in offensive operations that day.

On the Confederate side, Beauregard had instructed Henry Wise to occupy defensive lines outside Petersburg, reinforcing him with Hoke's division the night of June 14. He was compelled to modify his lines and abandoned the Bermuda Hundred defenses to fortify the Petersburg line. Lee finally having of Grant's maneuver on June 16, he moved some of his force into the Bermuda Hundred and marched the remainder of his army to Petersburg.

Hancock's assault on June 16 produced additional success, causing Beauregard to pull back to new fortifications. Gouverneur Warren's V Corps arrived at Petersburg on June 17; his attack produced a modest success but did not penetrate the Confederate line. A new line at Petersburg, the Harris Line, stabilized Petersburg's defenses for the moment at least.

Greene recounted that Meade lost composure after the failure of the June 15-18 assaults but that Grant offered no criticism. Plans at Petersburg went awry from the start, mainly due to Grant's failure to issue clear instructions to his subordinates Meade,

Butler, Smith and Hancock. Meade for his part erred in not conferring with Hancock regarding rations. As for Smith, it has been said elsewhere that he committed “one of the biggest errors of generalship” when he failed to use Hancock the “moonlight night” of June 15, 1864.

Greene also cited other important reasons why the Army of the Potomac failed to reach its objective during the First Offensive: the men were played out after the arduous Overland Campaign; too many experienced field and line officers were dead or wounded and not enough experienced soldiers were in line; the by now entrenched conservative Army of the Potomac mindset; and piecemeal attacks. Grant’s fingerprints were certainly absent but Smith failed to execute and Butler bumbled his task. Greene noted that Beauregard must be given high praise for his performance.

The Civil War Round Table awaits Volume II of Will’s trilogy, “A Campaign of Giants: The Battle for Petersburg.” We are instructed that there were nine offenses at Petersburg, thus assuring that Will must return several times to recount the ten-month struggle to end the war in Virginia. As he well notes, it was tragic that it did not end on June 15, 1864.

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## BULLETIN BOARD

The **Kenosha Civil War Museum** is putting on programs which can be watched on facebook:

The museum is hosting its annual Great Lakes Civil War Forum on Saturday, September 11, 8:30-4:30, in-person and zoom. In person seating is limited. The theme of this year's event is Immigrant Soldiers of the Union Army.

Speakers include Ron Coddington, on “Faces of Immigrant Soldiers,” Jason Silverman on “Abraham Lincoln’s Lifelong Defense of the Immigrant” James Pula on “Polish Participation in Civil War America,” and Diana Dretske on “The Bonds of War.”

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

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The **Congress of Civil War Round Tables** is sponsoring a series of virtual Civil War Lectures by some of the nation's leading historians. Visit <http://www.cwrtcongress.org/lectures.html> to view the complete schedule and register

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The **Abraham Lincoln Bookshop**'s "House Divided" series has no Civil War related presentations currently scheduled Visit <https://alincolnbookshop.com/> for more.

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## More Upcoming Local Civil War Events

Due to government-ordered shutdowns, CWRT events are being cancelled or going online on an ad hoc basis. Contact the sponsoring organization for up-to-date details. Check the **Announcements** section of the CWRT's website for additional coming events.

- Sept. 3rd, Northern Illinois CWRT: Jerry Allen on "Murphy's Law and the Peter Principle"
- Sept. 9th, Milwaukee CWRT: Eric Wittenberg on "The Secession of West Virginia"
- Sept. 11th, Two Old Goats in Cedar Lake: David Keller on "Command at Antietam--Lincoln, McClellan and Lee"
- Sept. 17th, Salt Creek CWRT: Bruce Allardice on "Lincoln as War Leader"
- Sept. 21st, Lincoln-Davis CWRT: Don Allison on "Ghosts of Gettysburg"
- Sept. 23rd, South Suburban CWRT: Steve LaBarre on "Chicago's Black Soldiers in the Civil War"
- Sept. 25th, DuPage County Fairgrounds: Annual "Civil War and Military Extravaganza"

## Future Chicago CWRT Meetings

- Oct. 8th: David Dixon on *August Willich*
- Nov. 12th: Tom Clemens on *Joseph K. Mansfield*
- Dec. 10th: Dennis Doyle on *Illinois Regiments at Gettysburg*
- Jan. 14th, 2021: Jen Murray on *General Meade*
- Feb. 11th: Ann Durkin Keating on *Juliette Kinzie, the Civil War, and the Making of Chicago*
- March 11th: Mark Laubacher on *The USS Red Rover: Hospital of Firsts*

Apr. 8th: Jeffrey Hunt on *Meade and Lee at Rappahannock Station and Mine Run*

May 13th: Dr. Thomas Carson on *Lincoln as Moral Exemplar*

June 10th: Lauren Szady on *TBD*

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## CWRT Elections in June

Jon Sebastian was elected president for the 2021-22 year. Check out the CWRT's website for a full list of officers.

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## List of Presentations Added to CWRT Website

A new feature has been added to the CWRT's website: a list of all the speakers and topics since the first meeting in December 1940. This is part of our CWRT's history—check it out! The link to the list can be found on the home page of the website.

