

# THE CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

Volume XLIII, Number 5

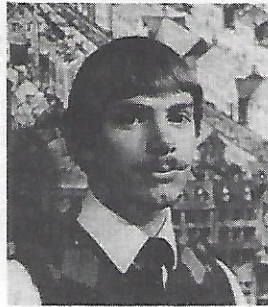
Chicago, Illinois

January, 1983

## Dennis E. Frye on The Cows' Tails Mystery: The Siege and Capture of Harpers Ferry

The circumstances surrounding the siege and capture of Harpers Ferry by Lee's army in September, 1862, raised many questions for historians to ponder, and even provided a mystery to be solved—why was an order by the Federal commander to hold Maryland Heights “until the cows’ tails drop off” not carried out? Investigating these questions at The Round Table meeting on January 14, and perhaps solving the mystery, will be Harpers Ferry Park historian Dennis Frye. Dennis, who has lived most of his life in or near Harpers Ferry, is well-qualified to discuss this topic, and listening to his attempt to solve the mystery should make for a most enjoyable evening.

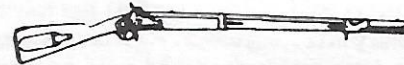
On September 4, 1862, Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia splashed north across the Potomac River. Within a few days the veteran Confederates had settled around the central Maryland town of Frederick, poised and anxious to conduct a campaign of maneuver. The first invasion of the North had begun. General Lee's campaign faced a problem, however. The Union forces occupying the lower Shenandoah Valley had not retreated northward with the invading Confederates. Lee realized that the 14,000 Federals steadfastly emplaced to his rear at Harpers Ferry and Martinsburg could disrupt his supply and communication lines and impede the army's freedom of movement in Maryland and Pennsylvania. Something had to be done.



Dennis E. Frye

A bold gamble was necessary. Outnumbered two to one by McClellan's advancing Army of the Potomac, Lee divided his forces. Three columns were directed to attack and capture the Federal garrison at Harpers Ferry while the remainder of the army awaited the reunion of the detached forces at Boonsboro, 20 miles to the north. Lee allowed three days for the operation's completion. Time was critical. But three days passed, and Lee had received no word of Harpers Ferry's surrender. McClellan was moving uncharacteristically fast, threatening to disrupt the operation. What was happening? Had Lee gambled the Army of Northern Virginia into extinction?

Meanwhile at Harpers Ferry, the stars and stripes continued to float above the besieged garrison, but its



417th Regular Meeting

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Dennis Frye

on

The Cows' Tails Mystery:  
The Siege and Capture  
of Harpers Ferry

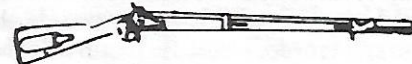
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Friday, January 14, 1983

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Illinois Athletic Club  
112 S. Michigan

Cocktails at 5:30 p.m. Dinner at 6:30 p.m.  
\$12.50 per person



### Meeting site

Please note that all meetings for the balance of the 1982-83 year will be at the Illinois Athletic Club, 112 S. Michigan.

### Executive Committee meeting

President Marv Sanderman has announced there will be an executive committee meeting at 5:30 p.m. on January 14 in the Directors Suite South, 5th Floor, Illinois Athletic Club. All current officers, committee chairman and past presidents are urged to attend. An agenda will be mailed to all Executive Committee members.

hours were numbered. Colonel Dixon S. Miles—ordered to hold Harpers Ferry “to the last extremity”—found himself surrounded by Confederates. Hoisting artillery  
*(continued on page 3)*

# THE CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE



**Founded December 3, 1940**

18 East Chestnut Street  
Chicago, Illinois 60611  
Phone: (312) 944-3085

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The only requirement for membership in The Round Table is a genuine interest in the Civil War and its era. For information, address Ward C. Smidl, 1104 Whippoorwill Lane, Palatine, Illinois 60007.



Lowell Reidenbaugh of St. Louis, a member of our Round Table, was one of five St. Louis Civil War Round Table members honored for "loyal and faithful service" on the occasion of that organization's 25th Anniversary in September. Lowell, who has spoken to us several times and who is a regular companion on Battlefield Tours, served as president of the St. Louis Round Table in 1972-73; as program chairman for nearly a decade; and was responsible for the printing and distribution of their newsletter for a number of years. The other four honored were Rey Eilers, John Margreiter, Skip Rixman and Ray Hoffsetter.

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Cassette tapes of lectures presented to The Round Table by such distinguished historians as Bruce Catton, Allan Nevins, T. Harry Williams and Pete Long will be made available each month, beginning in January, by Research Center Committee chairman Leslie MacDonald for \$5 each. Each tape contains two lectures.

The lectures, and the months they will tentatively be available, are: January—Bruce Catton, "Politics and the Army of the Potomac" (9/26/63), and James I. Robertson, Jr., "Civil War Chaplains" (3/10/78); February—Allan Nevins "The Dark Hour of the War in the Northwest" (9/11/59), and Otto Eisenschiml "Gettysburg" (6/20/52); March—Shelby Foote "Grant's Seven Failures Above Vicksburg" (11/5/63), and Ralph G. Newman "Benjamin Franklin Butler: Politician and Hero" (10/12/66); April—Glenn Tucker "Chickamauga" (5/14/65), and E. B. Long "Ulysses S. Grant: The Man Behind the Memoirs" (4/11/52); May—Col. Harold B. Simpson "Jefferson Davis and the United States Camel Corps" (3/20/67), and Lloyd D. Miller "The Union Left Flank, July 2, 1863" (5/27/52); June—John Hope Franklin "The Military Occupation of the South, 1865-1866" (10/16/64), and T. Harry Williams "Beauregard the Man" (5/6/55).

Proceeds from the sale of the tapes will go to the Research Center. To make your purchase, see Leslie at the meeting.

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According to an item in USA TODAY, the National Underwater and Marine Agency, which in the past five years has located 22 sunken ships, may have found the "Ghost Fleet of the Confederacy." The fleet of ironclads was the Confederates' last defense to prevent the capture of Richmond in the spring of 1865. But when Richmond fell, the fleet vanished.

Clive Cussler, special projects director for the Agency, says "The ships were forgotten by most, passed off as folklore and even deleted from most history books." However, while searching through Army Corps of Engineers archives, Cussler found a map drawn in 1865 by Ben Maillefert, a salvage expert who clearly marked several wrecks. Scientists pinpointed the locations in the James River and special underwater detectors and divers found three ships which they believe are the Fredricksburg, the Virginia II and the Richmond. The ships may provide evidence on how armor was constructed during the 1860s as well as many artifacts which would be well-preserved in the silt.

Meanwhile, according to an UPI item, Cussler had little success in his six-month search for the remains of the Merrimack in the muddy Elizabeth River in Portsmouth.

## December meeting

That artillery played a significant role in the Civil War is a fact of which most are well-aware. Few, however, know many specifics about its use. Describing artillery tactics of the Civil War era for the 130 members and guests who attended The Round Table meeting December 10 was Perry D. Jamieson, staff historian in the History Office of the Strategic Air Command.

Perry began by noting the superiority of American artillery to that of the Mexicans in the Mexican War (1846-48). In fact, he said, the light artillery was the backbone of the American success. Infantry in that war was armed with smooth-bores, which have limited accuracy, and thus it had to rely on mass volume fire to achieve any effectiveness at all. For the artillery, Perry explained, this meant it could be used effectively as an offensive weapon (it could move in close against grouped infantry which made a fine target). In 1855, however, the War Department adopted the rifle as a shoulder arm, and from that point artillery began to lose its position with respect to the infantry. Now, explained Perry, artillery had to work under the fire of both enemy infantry and artillery.

Turning to the manuals which were used by artilleryists, Perry noted that these primarily provided nuts and bolts information as opposed to theory. Much of it was based on common sense—practical experience was generally a greater factor than book learning, he explained. In use at the time of the Civil War was a manual adopted in 1859 (however, it was basically a reworked version of an 1845 manual used in the Mexican War.)

In the Civil War, Perry said, artillery was most effective on the defensive en masse against infantry. Infantry tactics at this time, despite the use of more accurate rifles, still relied on keeping men close together—it was unavoidable given the need to maintain communication. Naturally, however, when close order infantry came into the open, artillery fire was deadly. Perry used as an example Stones River where the south encountered massed Federal artillery which tore great gaps in its lines.

When artillery was used as a defensive weapon, however, it was much less effective; it was limited by both terrain and technology. It was hard to shoot over your own troops, and many of the rifled guns which could be used at greater distances were unsafe (they would burst at the muzzle). Another problem with using it offensively was that the improved accuracy of the infantry's weapons made it difficult to move artillery in close. All in all, Perry said, during the Civil War artillery lost status with respect to the infantry in the eyes of many officers.

In the post-War period many were dissatisfied with the manual in use, which was basically 20 years old, and a major revision was undertaken. This time significant changes were made and advice was made more specific. Also in the post-War period Emory Upton devised a new concept of infantry tactics—based on units of four maneuvering and fighting together—and an integrated system of infantry and artillery tactics (assimilated or combined tactics) was proposed. Although some veterans were critical of assimilated tactics, or at least with the way the book was written, the concept was endorsed in 1873. Assimilated tactics, Perry concluded, was an important contribution to tactical theory. It permitted the development of tactics that were appropriate for

future advances in arms and it promoted coordination between the branches of the army.

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The Medal of Honor that Samuel Eddy won in the Civil War battle of Saylor's Creek, Virginia, was formally presented at a ceremony in Chesterfield, Massachusetts on September 12. Although pinned to the ground with a bayonet through his chest in the battle, Eddy managed to reload his rifle and save his commanding officer, who was shot as he moved behind Confederate lines to accept the surrender. Eddy, then 42, lived to be 86. His medal originally had arrived by mail in a brown paper bag 32 years after the war, a fact that rankled the townspeople.

Army Lt. Gen. R. Dean Tice, a deputy assistant secretary of defense, presented the medal to Eurma Tower, 82, Eddy's granddaughter. Regiments of men in Union blue and Confederate gray, who fought in a reenactment the day before of the 1865 Virginia battle, participated in the ceremony.

Also during the ceremony, Tice returned the battle flag of the Savannah, Georgia, Volunteers which had been captured by a Massachusetts unit and which was recently found in a Pittsfield, Massachusetts attic. It was accepted by the commander of the Savannah Volunteers, a unit formed to participate in Civil War reenactments.

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*(continued from page 1)*

to the tops of the mountains encircling the Ferry, the Rebels commenced a ferocious bombardment. The hapless Federals, caught in a "perfect slaughter pen," waved the white flag. The largest capitulation of American forces in history prior to the fall of the Philippines in World War II occurred at Harpers Ferry on September 15, 1862.

As Frye notes, suspense and intrigue clouded this humiliating Union disaster. Endless questions were asked. Why didn't Colonel Miles hold the mountains? Why were the Federal defenses virtually non-existent? Was escape possible? Did McClellan move too slowly and fail to rescue Harpers Ferry? Was Colonel Miles drunk? And most perplexing of all, was Colonel Dixon S. Miles a traitor? He plans to conduct an investigation into these questions, and perhaps provide the answer to the "Cows' Tails Mystery."

Dennis Frye, who has been a full-time historian at Harpers Ferry National Historical Park since 1979, began service with the National Park Service in 1973 at age 13 as a volunteer at Antietam and Harpers Ferry. He attended Shepherd College in West Virginia, on the banks of the Potomac River only one mile from the retreat route used by Lee following the Battle of Antietam, and graduated in 1979 *summa cum laude*. At Shepherd he studied under Dr. Millard Bushong, author of *Old Jube* and *Turner Ashby and Stonewall's Valley Campaign*.

Dennis is past president of both the Hagerstown and Harpers Ferry Civil War Round Tables and currently serves as editor of the Harpers Ferry CWRT newsletter. He is in the process of researching and writing a multi-volume series on Harpers Ferry during the Civil War; the initial volume (actually the second in the series) deals with the siege and capture of Harpers Ferry in 1862. He is also preparing a history of the Second Virginia Infantry, CSA, for the Virginia Confederate Regimental Series. Last spring he served as a tour guide for Bud Robertson's "Campaigning with Lee" seminar.

# THE NEW BOOKS



(compiled by Dick Clark)

Dunlop, William S. *Lee's Sharpshooters or The Forefront of Battle, A Story of Southern Valor*. Introduction by Robert K. Krick. Dayton, Ohio: Morningside Bookshop, 1982. Ltd 500 copies. \$30.00. Original of 1899.

Elting, John R. and Michael J. McAfee, *Military Uniforms in America, vol. III. Long Endure: The Civil War Period, 1852-1867*. Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1982. \$35.00. From the series produced by The Company of Military Historians.

Goyne, Minetta Altgelt. *Lone Star and Double Eagle: Civil War Letters of a German-Texas Family*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, Press, 1982. Pbk \$15.00

McPherson, James M. *The Negro's Civil War: How the American Negroes Felt and Acted During the War for the Union*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982, ©1965. Pbk \$8.95

Meredith, Roy. *Mathew Brady's Portrait of an Era*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1982. \$25.95

Mohr, James C., editor. *The Cormany Diaries: A Northern Family in the Civil War*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982. \$29.95. Concerns the 16th Pennsylvania Cavalry.

Phillips, Richad Covel. *Richard and Rhoda: Letters from the Civil War*. Edited by Marion G. Phillips and Valerie Phillips Parsegian. Washington, D.C.: Legation Press, 1981. \$1950. He was with the 44th NY Vols.

Pierce, Sally and Temple D. Smith. *Citizens in Conflict: Prints and Photographs of the American Civil War: The Catalogue of an exhibition held at the Boston Athenaeum, December 5th through the 31st, 1981*. Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1981. Pbk \$6.00

Seibert, Donald A. *A Chronology of the Civil War. Volume I. 6 November 1860 to 3 December 1861*. Fayetteville, NC: The Trophy House. \$12.00

Seymour, Digby Gordon. *Divided Loyalties: Fort Sanders and the Civil War in East Tennessee*. Knoxville: East Tennessee Historical Society, 1982. 310 p. \$25.00. Enlarged edition of that done in 1963. Concentrates on the 1863 Knoxville campaign.

Silas, 1825-1897. *Reminiscences of Uncle Silas; a History of the Eighteenth Louisiana Infantry Regiment*. Edited by Arthur W. Bergeron, Jr. Baton Rouge: Comite des Archives de la Louisiana, 1981.

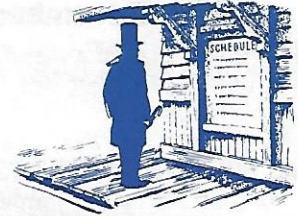
Stone, Richard G., Jr. *A Brittle Sword: The Kentucky Militia, 1776-1912*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1977. \$6.95.

Stone, Richard G., Jr. *Kentucky Fighting Men, 1861-1945*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1982. \$6.95

Urwin, Gregory J. W. *Custer Victorious: The Civil War Battles of General George Armstrong Custer*. Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1982. \$29.50.

*A Virginia Military Album, 1839-1910: A Collection of Photographs and Manuscripts from the VMI Archives, Lexington, Virginia*. Collected by Diane B. Jacob and Judith Moreland Arnol. Charlottesville: Published for the Friends of Preston Library by the University Press of Virginia, 1982. 98 p., ill. \$14.95.

# BULLETIN BOARD



## Future meetings

Regular meetings are held at the Illinois Athletic Club, 112 S. Michigan, the second Friday in each month except as noted.

January 14, 1983: Dennis Frye on "The Cows' Tails Mystery: The Siege and Capture of Harpers Ferry."

February 18: C. Robert Douglas on "General George H. Thomas: Time and History Will Do Me Justice."

March 11: John Divine on "Cavalry Campaigns: A Prelude to Gettysburg."

April 8: Robert V. Johannsen on "Senator Stephen A. Douglas."

April 27-May 1: Annual Battlefield Tour to Chattanooga-Chickamauga.

May 13: Kathy Georg on "Actions at the Rose Farm on the Second Day at Gettysburg."

June 11: Civil War Conference. Nevins-Freeman Award Dinner and Installation of Officers. Recipient of award: Dr. John Hope Franklin.

## New members

Gary S. Bellos, 627 Pheasant Lane, Deerfield, Illinois 60015.

Leroy A. Bender, 801 LaCrosse Avenue, Wilmette, Illinois 60091.

J. Bruce Morgan, 1160 Countryside Drive, Elgin, Illinois 60120.

Timothy Pyne, 403 Blyth Road, Riverside, Illinois 60546.

## Change of address

Robert N. Huey, 2904 W. 33rd Street #229, Sioux Falls, South Dakota 57105.

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The U.S. Postal Service has issued a commemorative stamp to Dr. Mary Edwards Walker who served as a surgeon in the Union army without pay and was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Andrew Johnson in 1865. Walker, an 1852 graduate of Syracuse Medical School, was denied a commission in the army but volunteered her services. At one time she was captured and was in prison for four months. A review board took away her Medal of Honor in 1916, but it was reinstated by the Secretary of the Army in 1977.

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A bust of General Patrick Cleburne, who died at the battle of Franklin, Tennessee, was dedicated November 21 at the new Carter House Museum at Franklin. The museum is just west of the Carter House on the battlefield. Originally, the bust was to be placed at Carnton. However, since restoration is going so slowly, it was decided to place it at the museum instead. The bust was done, gratis, by artist Pat Horan.