



THE CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE



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821st REGULAR MEETING, Friday, October 13th, 2023

Carlton Young on

"Two Vermont Brothers in the Army of the Potomac"

**Live/Zoom Meeting. Time: Oct. 13th, 2023, 07:30 PM CST.
Zoom Option ID 845 3227 1496; No Passcode needed**



Imagine clearing out your family attic and discovering an enormous collection of letters written by two soldiers during the Civil War, but not knowing why the letters were there. Faced with that situation, Carleton Young spent more than a decade visiting battlefields and researching the two soldiers as well as other people who appear in the letters. The two brothers were members of the celebrated Vermont Brigade in the 6th Corps of the Army of the Potomac. In

Voices From the Attic: The Williamstown Boys in the Civil War, he tells the story of these two brothers who witnessed and made history by fighting in the Peninsula Campaign, then at South Mountain, Antietam, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Mine Run, the Bristoe Campaign, the Wilderness, Petersburg, and Cedar Creek. They then preserved that history through their surprisingly detailed and insightful letters.

The publication of the book was followed by many favorable reviews. *Civil War News* called it "a substantial contribution to the genre of first-person Civil War accounts

becoming so popular today.” The *Vermont History Journal* called it “more than another good narrative, the book is an adventure of historical research and discovery.” The *Western Pennsylvania History Journal* said that the book “offers a deeply interesting look into two detailed experiences of the war which explore the battles as well as life in between. Unlike other soldiers who may have skipped over tough details when writing home to families, the brothers did not shy away from describing the horror of battles, their hardships in camp, and what they saw as they marched through the South. More than merely satisfying an interest in the war, the author demonstrates our surprising connections to each other both past and present.”

As a result of such reviews, Carleton Young has been invited to share his story with more than 250 Civil War Roundtables, historical societies, and other organizations around the country.

Carleton Young has undergraduate degrees in economics from Westminster College and in English from Point Park University, an MA in history from Ohio University, and his PhD in the history of education from the University of Pittsburgh. For 37 years he taught AP American history at Thomas Jefferson High School in Pittsburgh. He has also taught classes as an adjunct professor at the Community College of Allegheny County, the University of Pittsburgh, Eastern Gateway Community College, and in the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Carnegie Mellon University.

Battlefield Preservation

Dear American Battlefield Trust member,

Today, as we commemorate the more than 22,000 casualties of the September 17, 1862, Battle of Antietam, 161 years ago on America’s Bloodiest Day, it feels even more meaningful for me to tell you that our most recent victory saves nearly 150 acres of battlefield land associated with the Maryland Campaign, including the Jacob Avey Farm, some of Antietam’s most hallowed ground.

Witness to America’s Bloodiest Day

Just a few short months ago, I asked you to help us save a key 20-acre portion of Antietam’s Jacob Avey Farm, where some of the fiercest fighting of the Battle of Antietam took place and where Confederate soldiers were buried after the battle, according to the recently discovered Elliot Burial Map. Folks, you answered our call, and because of you, this sacred ground is saved!

The land also includes the historic Avey farmhouse, where the Avey family lived. Like many civilians in Sharpsburg, Jacob Avey Sr. suffered great financial loss due to the battle. Heavy fighting took place on his land, and an errant Union shell penetrated his house. His claims for reimbursement from the Federal government, like many others in Sharpsburg, were rejected, despite his feeding Union soldiers and caring for them in his house. Now we can share his family's story through the power of place.

The Trust's Chief Historian Garry Adelman shares video footage of our latest victory at Antietam: The Jacob Avey Farm! Preservation Victory at Antietam!

September Presentation

By Mark Matranga

Adolfo Ovies spoke at the 820th Regular Meeting of The Civil War Round Table to presenting *The Boy Generals, George Custer, Wesley Merritt, and the Cavalry of the Army of the Potomac*, an insightful account of what has been called 'a spirited rivalry.' Ovies offers a much darker relationship between the boy generals, one which steadily deteriorated, moving from distaste to acrimony and ending in insubordination.

Custer, last in the class of 1861, barely avoided expulsion during his final year at the Academy, while Merritt (Class of '60) was learning cavalry operations serving on the frontier under John Buford. Merritt's training was oriented toward dragoon tactics, which envisioned horse and soldier riding to battle where the trooper, armed with carbine and pistol, fought dismounted. In contrast, once unleashed on the enemy, Custer embraced the flamboyant style of the Hussar, preferring the shock power of the mounted saber charge.

Custer was an amiable and gregarious sort whereas Merritt was a stoic whose reserved nature ill-fitted the cavalry culture. Merritt was a stickler for regulation who resented the heavy drinking, publicity seeking Custer who fraternized with former classmates, even crossing enemy lines to attend a confederate officer's wedding. Wesley Merritt was not one for the grandiose gesture.

Both officers were assigned combat roles in 1863 when a feud began to grow. Ovies related multiple incidents which tended to amplify Custer's reputation at Merritt's expense: at Beverly Ford and St. James Church prior to Brandy Station in June 1863, and at that battle. Ovies cited accounts crediting Custer as having taken command of Merritt's unit and having been 'in the lead' at Yew Ridge, fabrications according to Ovies. Merritt was not pleased with Custer's antics.

Custer continued to act with customary bravado once Union forces passed through Aldie Gap, ordering a saber charge which necessitated a fighting retreat. Merritt's brigade fought dismounted in an area with numerous stone fences. But both were promoted to Brigadier General as the Army approached Gettysburg on June 29, 1863. Custer performed with distinction in the campaign albeit his command sustained substantial casualties. Merritt participated in the ill-fated charge that took the life of another 'boy general,' Elon Farnsworth.

The feud continued in 1864. At Yellow Tavern, Custer destroyed supply trains that could have fed Union troops who had only minimal rations. Merritt was enraged, calling the escapade a "gaucherie." But Sheridan upstaged Merritt, complimenting Custer who he said had also destroyed 10 miles of railroad.

Next, at Trevilian Station in June, although surrounded on day one, Custer eventually fought his way to the objective. Merritt was delayed by bad roads and heavy opposition but finally broke through. The next day Custer failed to support Merritt, who described "slow work" as the enemy was not pressed on the left. Custer on the other hand wrote his wife, "I carried my instructions out to the letter." Ovies notes that Custer almost lost his entire command the first day. Both men sought to place blame on the other for the operation's failure.

In the Shenandoah Valley most of the glory went to Custer, especially at Cedar Creek. When several of his men were killed after capture by one of Merritt's units, John Mosby accused Custer of reprisal, saying he "murdered my men." This could not have endeared Custer to Merritt. And when Merritt, in command of the division at Waynesboro, ordered that horses strength must be husbanded, Custer paid no attention and peremptorily attacked Early, routing him from the Valley.

At this point in the war, Custer was through with Merritt, and "set on a program of insubordination," says Ovies. Custer thought himself the better soldier, that he, not Merritt, should command the division. Thus he attacked at Dinwiddie Courthouse without orders, resulting in a fiasco when he failed to reconnoiter the muddy field. Twice on the road to Appomattox he disobeyed Merritt's orders, the second time at Appomattox Station, effectively ending the retreat.

Ovies' difficulty is with Custer, whose mythological status he feels compelled to debunk. Admittedly a great horseman, Custer was not necessarily a great cavalryman. And it is undeniable he was a glory hound. Still, he possessed many formidable attributes: he led from the front, did not shirk from risk, and attended to the needs of his men. Merritt on the other hand was a martinet. Merritt retired a Major General in 1900 after a long and successful career, but he will never be remembered in the same way as his former rival.

Robert Utley noted that had Custer retired after the war he would not have achieved the immortality his monumental failure at the Little Bighorn conferred on him. Ovies appreciates this irony. He presents both men as resolute soldiers, both instrumental in raising Union cavalry into a dominant force. Dragoon versus Hussar was perhaps not the ultimate difference but rather two men with differing personalities and leadership styles.



BULLETIN BOARD

Our in-person meetings are currently held at:

Holiday Inn Oak Brook

17W 350 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:

On Friday Oct. 13th at noon, Carl Smith will talk on “The great Chicago Fire of 1871”

On Saturday, Oct. 14th, from 1-2 p.m., Steve Acker will speak on “The Fight for a Gettysburg Farm,” telling the story of the Sherfy Farm during the Battle of Gettysburg.

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

Bruce Allardice will speak on “*Loose Lips*” *Military Secrecy and the Civil War* October 4th at the Kankakee Valley CWRT, and on Oct. 6th to the Northern Illinois CWRT. See www.civilwarbruce.com for more.

Dennis Doyle will be speaking Oct. 26th to the Gettysburg CWRT on “Illinois Regiments at Gettysburg.”

More Upcoming Local Civil War Events

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

Oct. 4th, Kankakee Valley CWRT: Bruce Allardice on "Loose Lips"--Military Security in the Civil War

Oct. 6th, Northern Illinois CWRT: Bruce Allardice on "Loose Lips"--Military Security in the Civil War

Oct. 8th, Northwest Indiana CWRT: Pat Brennan on "Gettysburg in Color"

Oct. 10th, McHenry County CWRT: Charlie Banks on "Confederate Railroads"

Oct. 10th, Southwest Michigan CWRT: Phil DeHaven on "The Infamous Dan Sickles"

Oct. 12th, Milwaukee CWRT: Carleton Young on "Two Vermont Brothers in the Army of the Potomac"

Oct. 17th, Lincoln-Davis CWRT: Kevin Connelley on "Ghosts of the Civil War"

Oct. 21st, Salt Creek CWRT: Dan McCarthy on "Irish Confederates"

Oct. 26th, South Suburban CWRT: Jan Rasmussen on "The Dakota War 1863-1865"

Future Chicago CWRT Meetings

Nov. 10th: Ernest Dollar on "Hearts Torn Asunder: Trauma in the Civil War"

Dec. 8th: Scott Mingus on "Texans at Chickamauga"

Jan. 12th, 2024: Pat and Dylan Brennan on "Gettysburg in Color"

Feb. 9th: Harold Knudsen on "James Longstreet and the American Civil War"

March 8th: Chris Bryan on "The Union XII Corps"

April 12th: Will Greene on "The Cracker Line and Chattanooga"

May 10th: Lynn and Julianne Herman on "The Allegheny Arsenal Explosion"

June 14th: Tim Smith (Nevins-Freeman Award) on "Vicksburg"

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. Their next "House Divided" author interview is October 5th, 3:30 CST, with Steve Inskeep discussing his new book, [Differ We Must: How Abraham Lincoln Succeeded in a Divided America](#). For more, visit <https://alincolinbookshop.com/>
