



# THE CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE



Volume LXXX, Number 4

Chicago, Illinois

December 2020

797th REGULAR MEETING, Friday, December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020

## David Powell on:

### *“Union Command Failure in the Shenandoah Valley”*

**Zoom Meeting. Time: Dec 11, 2020 07:30 PM CST**



David Powell's latest book, Union Command Failure in the Shenandoah, provides a fresh perspective on the May 1864 Shenandoah Valley campaign. By shifting attention away from the VMI cadets to the Union military's strategic goals and command structure, Powell adds nuance and depth to a well-studied campaign. (h/t CivilWarMonitor)

The battle of New Market enjoys a status in that belies its small scale. This is largely due to the drama surrounding the participation of the Virginia Military Institute cadets. While the cadets are celebrated for their actions, historians often cast Union General Franz Sigel as an incompetent buffoon who missed a golden opportunity to sweep Confederate forces from the Shenandoah Valley in the days leading up to the battle. As a 1983 graduate of VMI, David A. Powell knows the story of the cadet's actions at New Market very well. Rather than focusing on this well-covered subject, however, Powell's study brings Franz Sigel's role in the campaign to the forefront, placing his actions and decisions in the broader context of Union grand strategy and command structure.

Powell's analysis allows for a greater appreciation of the challenges Sigel faced during the campaign, including Grant's unrealistic timetable for the invasion and the failure of other Union forces to cooperate with Sigel, but he does not exonerate the general. Sigel's reliance on Col. Augustus Moor and Maj. Gen. Julius Stahel, who ignored Sigel's orders to pull back from New

Market on the morning of May 15, suggests his questionable judgment. His hodgepodge assigning of units--ignoring the established chain of command--led to confusion on the battlefield. Powell observes that by ordering a counter-charge with shaky, inexperienced troops at a key point during the battle of New Market, Sigel had lost sight of the broader strategic goal of avoiding a catastrophic loss to keep Confederate troops occupied on the field and away from Gen. George Crook's planned advance on Staunton.

Chicago-area resident Dave Powell has published 8 works on the Civil War, including volumes on the Chickamauga and Tullahoma Campaigns, and his latest, Union Command Failure in the Shenandoah.

## **Battlefield Preservation**

The future of a nine-acre historic property near Brown's Ferry, whose history stretches back to before the founding of the City of Chattanooga, is secure, thanks to its purchase by the American Battlefield Trust. Earlier efforts to protect Brown's Tavern were ultimately unsuccessful, but the Trust was able to muster donor support and matching grants from the federal **American Battlefield Protection Program** and the **Tennessee Historical Commission's Civil War Sites Preservation Fund** to secure the site. The Trust anticipates transferring the land and historic structure, as well as two other properties previously purchased at Brown's Ferry, to **National Park Partners**, the acclaimed friends group dedicated to safeguarding and promoting the six units of Chickamauga and Chattanooga National Military Park. ...

After its defeat at the Battle of Chickamauga in September 1863, the Union Army of the Cumberland was trapped and besieged in Chattanooga, dependent on a single, fragile supply line. The October 27 Battle of Brown's Ferry (or Wauhatchie) was fought for one reason: Food. In a bold plan to open a more direct supply line, Union troops used bridge pontoons to float past Confederate guards on Lookout Mountain and along the banks of the Tennessee River, putting in at Brown's Ferry on the far west bank. Having established a bridgehead, these Federals drove back opposing forces in sharp fighting. The resulting "Cracker Line" facilitated the men, food and supplies necessary for November's Federal assaults on Lookout Mountain and Missionary Ridge.

But the property's significance long precedes the Civil War. The original Brown's Tavern, a log-construction building dating to 1803 still stands on the site. It was operated by Cherokee businessman John Brown, who owned 640-acres, including the ferry and the tavern that took his name. Brown served as a private in Col. Gideon Morgan's command of Cherokees who fought for the United States in the War of 1812. Brown operated the tavern until 1819, then spent a decade living elsewhere before returning in 1830. The family was forced to leave their home in 1838, as a part of the Cherokee Removal in Chattanooga, a phase of the Trail of Tears, although they later received special federal permission to return to their home. In recognition of this

significance, Brown's Tavern is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is included as a stop on the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail.

"Tennessee's history is rich and multilayered," said State Historic Preservation Officer Patrick McIntyre, who serves as executive director of the Tennessee Historical Commission. "It is an honor to have played a role in ensuring that this special place will stand for generations to come, so that our children and grandchildren can feel a tangible connection to these important moments in our past."

The purchase of Brown's Tavern was a fully cooperative effort. The Trust was able to secure matching grants from the federal American Battlefield Protection Program, administered by the National Park Service, and the Tennessee Civil War Sites Preservation Fund, administered by the Tennessee Historical Commission/Tennessee Wars Commission, which were leveraged against private donations from Trust members. A conservation easement donated by the Trust and held by the Tennessee Historical Commission will ensure that the property is protected in perpetuity.

From the American Battlefield Trust

## **Virtual Civil War Events**

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.

## **November Meeting**

**By Mark Matranga**

The Civil War Round Table featured John R. Scales at its 796<sup>th</sup> Regular Meeting on November 13, 2020, when he posed the question, "Did Nathan Bedford Forrest make a difference" This inquiry is based on his recent study, "The Battles and Campaigns of General Nathan Bedford Forrest, 1861-1865," wherein Scales investigates Forrest's military ventures at the operational level and evaluates their impact on the war west of the Appalachians and the life of the Confederacy.

Born in Chapel Hill, Tennessee, on July 21, 1821, Forrest was one of 12 children. His family moved to Mississippi in 1834 where his father died in 1837. He had little formal education, and upon reaching adulthood, he apprenticed with his uncle at his livery and horse-trading company which Forrest took over when his uncle was murdered. He subsequently moved to Memphis where he made his fortune as a slave trader, planter and plantation owner. By 1861 he was one of the wealthiest men in the South.

By the time of the Civil War Forrest was no longer active in the slave trade and opposed secession. Nonetheless, he joined the Confederate Army in June 1861 as a cavalryman in the

Tennessee Mounted Rifles and soon was raising a battalion with his own funds. Commissioned lieutenant colonel and appointed commander of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Tennessee Cavalry, his first experience in command at Sacramento, Kentucky, brought success. He distinguished himself in February 1862, when he defied his superiors' decision to surrender and broke out of the siege at Fort Donelson. He then moved upstream to Nashville where he supervised the salvage of supplies and ordnance during the town's evacuation.

Forrest was then assigned to Johnson's army for the Shiloh Campaign where he provided vital reconnaissance, reporting on Union reinforcements coming toward Pittsburg Landing. He commanded the rearguard action and was wounded during the battle of Fallen Timbers. While he recovered his command was transferred to General Bragg, now in command of the Army of Tennessee. At that time, Union forces under Grant and Buell threatened Vicksburg and Chattanooga. Forrest was assigned a new command and ordered to raid Mid-Tennessee which he reached by travelling south of and around Chattanooga which enabled him to approach Murfreesboro from the east and achieve the surrender of the garrison and destruction of its stores.

After the battle at Murfreesboro Forrest set sight on Nashville, an operation that failed. Albeit a tactical failure, Forrest's raid was a strategic success. Before, there were 10,000 Federals on the railroad 30 miles from Chattanooga where a mere 5,000 Confederates awaited. The move into Mid-Tennessee effectively thwarted the Union campaign to capture the Gateway City, delaying that effort for over a year. Meanwhile, the attention paid to Forrest permitted Bragg to move up the Sequatchie Valley north to Kentucky. For this achievement, Forrest was promoted to Brigadier General.

This did not prevent Bragg from transferring his men later in 1862 and forcing Forrest to return to West Tennessee to recruit and outfit a new brigade. Before and after that event, he led raids on Grant's supply lines from Kentucky to Jackson, Tennessee, destroying track and making the lines unrepairable. This and the Holly Springs raid caused Grant to retreat to Memphis and adopt a river supply route to Vicksburg. In 1863 Forrest again raided into Tennessee. He chased down the remnants of the Abel Streight raid in Georgia in April/May 1863, ending an attempt to cut the railroad south of Chattanooga. His troopers fought at Chickamauga and pursued the Union army during its retreat. Scales opines that if Forrest could have delayed the Union reserve forces for another 15 minutes the Union position on Horseshoe Ridge would have collapsed.

Raised to Major General at the end of 1863, Forrest lost his command and returned to West Tennessee to raise another. His command perpetrated the Fort Pillow Massacre in April 1864 when colored troops were executed while surrendering. This followed a Kentucky campaign where he successfully raided Paducah but could not compel the garrison's surrender. Then followed Forrest's most notable victory in June 1864, Brice's Crossroads, where he routed Sturgis and inflicted disproportionate casualties on a Union force over twice as large. Scales

commented that this action and Forrest's pursuit of Smith's column effectively kept the Prairie-Black Belt agricultural regions free from Federal intrusion for a year.

Forrest raided further in 1864: Tupelo, a defeat, and Memphis. He destroyed the Union depot at Johnsonville in November before joining Hood during his movement on Nashville. He shielded the army after its disastrous defeat there in December. He was promoted to Lieutenant General in early 1865; his command surrendered that May.

Did Forrest make a difference? Scales concludes that his actions at Murfreesboro and in West Tennessee in 1862 and in Mississippi in 1864 prolonged the war by more than two years. He also considers his cover of Hood's retreat from Nashville "brilliant." He noted that Sherman found Forrest to be 'a most remarkable man,' while Shelby Foote considered him a genius. But Forrest had flaws, most significantly, his temper. He quarreled with his superiors, especially Bragg who stripped his command more than once, and transferred his men to Wheeler who Forrest considered his inferior. The racist butchery of Fort Pillow and his post-war career in the Klan will forever hover heavily over Forrest, but as a military tactician he was, as one author described him, "An Untutored Genius."



## **BULLETIN BOARD**

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

**Thursday, December 3 | 7 pm – 8:30 pm | Instructor: Nick Sacco, NPS | \$15 (\$10 FOM)**  
**| Virtual**

Ulysses S. Grant was a slave holding farmer who voted for Democrat James Buchanan for the presidency in 1856. Twelve years later Grant himself was elected to the presidency as a Republican committed to securing the right to vote for African Americans. Park Ranger Nick Sacco will examine Ulysses S. Grant's political evolution, how the War shaped his views towards race and slavery, and why he came to believe the Republican Party was the only party that could successfully promote sectional reconciliation during the Reconstruction Era. Mr. Sacco will also provide additional resources for teachers who want to teach their students about Grant and the Civil War era. A Zoom link will be emailed the day of the program.

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

## 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.

Dec. 2nd Kankakee Valley CWRT: Charles Tinder on "Slaves in Southern Industries During the Civil War"

Dec. 4th, Northern Illinois CWRT: Eric Wittenberg on "Seceding from Secession" (Zoom)

Dec. 11th, **Chicago CWRT**: Dave Powell on "Union Command Failure in the Shenandoah" (Virtual Presentation)

Dec. 15th, Lincoln-Davis CWRT: Kurt Carlson on "Pat Cleburne"

Dec. 17th, South Suburban CWRT: Holiday Party (virtual)

Dec. 18th, Salt Creek CWRT: Brian Conroy on "The First Michigan Engineers" (Zoom)

## Future Chicago CWRT Meetings

**Note: The Oct.-Dec. meetings will be "online"**

Jan. 8<sup>th</sup>, 2021: Jennifer Murray on *General George Meade*

Feb. 12th: Leslie Goddard presents *Clara Barton*

Mar. 12th: Greg Biggs, *The Nevin-Freeman Address*

Apr. 9th: Ron Kirkwood on *Too Much for Human Endurance: The Spangler Farm Hospitals*

May 14th: Michael Hardy on *General Lee's Immortals*



Reminder: Stay healthy! And have a great Holiday Season!