



THE RAMROD

North Carolina Civil War Round Table

January 2018

2018 Programs

Ed Bearss – Jan. 6

Civil War Medicine

**N.C. Museum of History at 5
East Edenton St., Raleigh for
January!**

**The rest of 2018's programs
will be announced in the next
newsletter**

Dinner starts at 6:00 p.m. and program at 7:00 p.m. Please e-mail Membership Secretary Dick Whitaker at dwbiz53@gmail.com or call him at 336-293-3980 to make reservations. Payment of \$20 per person can be made in cash or check at the door. Make checks payable to NCCWRT.

The NCCWT is dedicated to the study and preservation of the history of the American Civil War. With the exception of January when we meet on the second Saturday, we meet on the third Saturday of these months: March, July, September and November at the K & W Cafeteria (Exit 143 on I-40/85) in Burlington.



Ed Bearss will talk about Civil War Medicine on January 6, 2018 at the N.C. Museum of History in downtown Raleigh.

Did a Union Surgeon Save Ed Bearss' Life?

I called Ed Bearss on December 1st to ask about his plans for the joint meeting of NCCWRT and RCWRT at the *North Carolina Museum of History*, beginning at 12:30 on *Saturday, January 6, 2018*. There will be a \$10 charge for all attendees.

When I called, Ed said, “Tell me what you want to hear about”. We discussed the topic of **Civil War Medicine** and he was enthusiastic. My mind raced to Major Jonathan Letterman, Union (1824-72), the “Father of Battlefield Medicine”. More than a week following the bloody battles of Second Manassas, (August 28-30, 1862) many casualties remained on the battlefield. **Letterman's** response was to develop a three-tiered innovative, progressive stage of medical care: 1) “A Field Dressing Station”; 2) “A Field Hospital”; 3) “A Large Hospital”, all supported by an Ambulance Corps. At Antietam (September 17, 1862), more than 17,000 wounded Union and Confederate casualties were evacuated in less than 24 hours; this was unheard of in



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military medicine. So, did the planning of Union surgeon Jonathan Letterman save Ed Bearss life?

Ed quickly brought me back to his personal battlefield wounding in WW II. On January 2, 1944, Ed was wounded by at least 4 rapid-fire Japanese machine gun bursts (“it felt like being hit by a sledge hammer”) at Silimati Point, New Britain. Ed vividly recalls the Letterman-designed “field dressing station”, but he lost consciousness rapidly and awakened 3 days later in a “field hospital” on New Guinea! Weeks later, he was transported to a “large hospital” in the United States.



[First Marine Division landing on New Britain](#)

Ed said, “In the Civil War, I would have lost both arms...if I had lived at all”. He also reminded me that sulfa (1935) and penicillin (1941) were beginning to be introduced during his prolonged 26

month recuperation. After undergraduate and graduate studies and several brief governmental jobs, he entered the National Park Service in Vicksburg on September 28, 1955.

Was it Jonathan Letterman’s prescient work that saved Ed’s life? What was the role of the fortuitous introduction of antibiotics? Perhaps, it was Ed’s determination to live life to its fullest. Ed’s story will be both vivid and miraculous. At times, it will be surreal. He still maintains his sense of humor. Ed frequently is asked, “How do you get into the Park Service?” Ed routinely answers, “Well, I wouldn’t recommend getting machine gunned during combat”!

--Gene Adcock



President's Column

Frank Ward

LEE ON THE MISSISSIPPI:

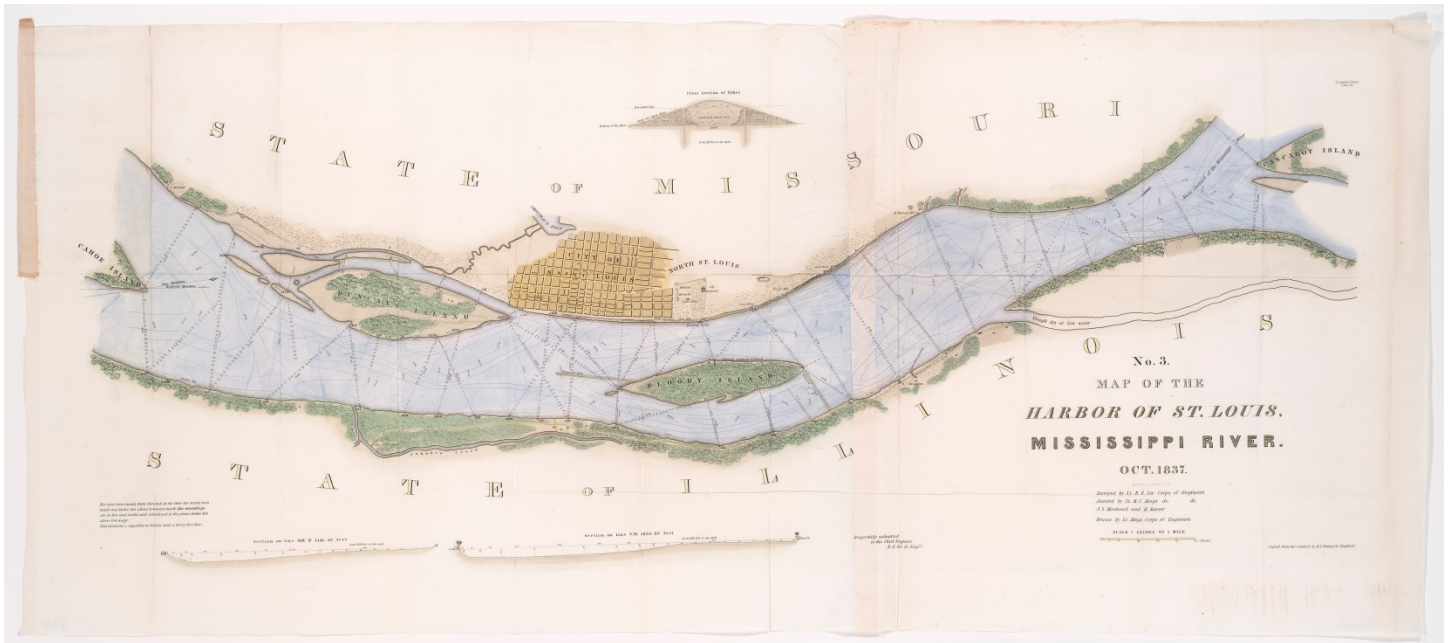
**CHRONICLE OF A LIFE
FORETOLD**

Before the advent of this season of iconoclasm, when Robert E. Lee and his Lieutenants have become subjected to both literal and metaphorical dismantling, he was much admired by many American citizens. He was known as the nearly godlike scion of an aristocratic but profligate father. Decades before the Civil War, he was a celebrated soldier in Mexico; General Winfield Scott, commander of the American army during the Mexican War, called him “the very best soldier that I have ever seen in the field.” Lee declined the offer of command of the Union Army in order to proffer his sword to Virginia. As commander of the Army of Northern Virginia, he was a bold if sometimes fallible commander, who was occasionally reckless when his blood was up. He is, however, far less known for his impressive but comparatively mundane service in the U.S. Army’s Corps of Engineers nearly thirty years before his defining leadership during the Civil War.

As America expanded westward, would-be settlers encountered physical obstacles to their progress, and the government offered fitful funding to remove or ameliorate the barriers. Among the objects of those early

internal improvements was the Mississippi River. In the early 1830s Congress appropriated funds both to improve navigation on the mighty river above the mouth of the Ohio and to save the river harbor at St. Louis from becoming sand-bound. Because he graduated near the top of his West Point class, Lee was given the coveted post of an Army Engineer and was sent westward for two challenging and vital assignments. The first was to render two stretches of rapids-beset river navigable so that, in Lincoln’s poetic post-Vicksburg phrase, the Father of Waters could flow unvexed to the sea along its entire course. His second objective, more specific and more local in its effect, was to alter the flow of the powerful river to reverse a process threatening the St. Louis harbor.

In 1837 Lee headed for St. Louis by way of Philadelphia, where he hoped to buy the requisite surveying equipment. He was accompanied by his assistant in the enterprise, Second Lt. Montgomery Meigs, fourth in the West Point Class of 1836. Although Meigs was a native Georgian, he had, by coincidence, grown up in Philadelphia. After an arduous trip, the two Army engineers reached St. Louis, which Lee described a primitive but expensive frontier town: “the dearest and dirtiest place I was ever in.” Although he considered the nascent town “a bloody humbug,” he nonetheless saw a potential that warranted the investment of scarce federal resources.



At once Lee recognized that it was necessary to find a means of protecting Bloody Island – scene of many duels -- from erosion, a process that was depositing sand and silt on downstream Duncan Island, near the Missouri shore, just below St. Louis. Lee determined that the river current was shifting sand and silt from Bloody Island, with that avulsion resulting in the accretion of Duncan Island. If not abated, the enlarged Duncan Island would seal the docks of St. Louis behind the advancing upstream end of that island. In fact, steamboats were already running aground there.

Lee first directing a careful survey of the Mississippi from the mouth of the Missouri just north of St. Louis to some point south of the city. Next, as described by eminent Lee biographer Emory Thomas, the Virginian devised a plan calculated to “throw the full current of the Mississippi into the western (Missouri) channel. The current, in turn,

would then wash the sand bar and eventually Duncan Island downstream away from St. Louis.” Using indigenous materials and the simplest construction possible, Lee designed the construction of a dam and dyke, similar to those on the Hudson. Lee correctly forecast that, “The construction of these works will be attended with great difficulty.” Anticipating his tactical and strategic genius as head of the Army of Northern Virginia, in Thomas’s narrative, “He proposed to work with, not against, the river. Indeed, he hoped to coax the Mississippi to do most of his work for him . . . Lee’s proposal was more strategy than solution.”

Lee then contemplated the navigational problems caused by two sets of rapids far upstream of St. Louis, first surveying the rapids, mapping the river, sounding its depths at intervals, and collecting data. As Thomas describes it, his goal was to “open

the river year round and to render the rapids easier to negotiate at all river stages.”

According to his formidable chronicler Douglas Southall Freeman, while Lee handled the surveying in person, he put the actual drafting of the maps under the direction of his assistant Montgomery Meigs. (Recently, I acquired a contemporary copy of one of the maps prepared by Meigs, but, unfortunately, it is too large for inclusion.)

Although the plans had been prepared by December, by then it was too late in the winter to execute them, and Lee obtained permission to return to Washington. Meigs accompanied him to Arlington, where the subordinate stayed as a houseguest at the Custis Lee Mansion. Meigs, however, did not return to St. Louis with Lee the following spring, and the two did not encounter each other in any official capacity until 1861, more than two decades later, when Meigs replaced Lee’s old friend Joseph E. Johnston as Quartermaster General of the U.S. Army. And here is a paradoxical interlude in their relationship. Although the two had worked well together, Lee wrote little of his junior companion. Much later, however, when Meigs was old and Lee dead, Meigs wrote glowing, generous descriptions of his former senior officer, calling him “the model of a soldier and the beau ideal of a Christian man.” As Freeman describes it, Meigs remembered

Lee affectionately, “even when the war divided them.” And here is the curious part: in mid-June of 1864, despite his avowed respect for Lee, it was Meigs himself who ordered that burials of the Union war dead commence immediately on the grounds of Lee’s Arlington estate. It has been suggested that the choice of location for the National Cemetery was partially intended to humiliate Lee for siding with the South, but I have found no written confirmation of that surmise. (It is worth mentioning that during the War Meigs also supervised the building of the Capitol Dome, which was visible, if just barely, from Arlington House.)

Back in St. Louis, this time with his family, Lee had the satisfaction of learning that, as Thomas describes it, his “blast-and-remove method of altering channel of the river through a rapid indeed worked.” Lee also discovered that, while he might triumph over imposing natural obstacles, man-made impediments would intransigent. He did not complete his projects because of his apprehension that Congress would not appropriate the funds necessary to carry them to conclusion. Because of the Panic of 1837 and a sharp “bust” phase of the business cycle, it appeared that there would be no more money for his Mississippi projects. Although the Commander of the Engineer Corps authorized \$20,000 for the work, Lee calculated that after only three months work on the rapids, “we shall be obliged to hand up our fiddle.” Although Lee was also authorized to use such

government property as boats and pile drivers, there was no money to authorize workers to operate it. The mayor of St. Louis provided municipal funds to allow Lee to continue the harbor project, and it was able to continue. By then Lee's strategy had begun to work: the current washed away the bar that threatened the harbor and had begun to erode Duncan Island.

In another foreshadowing of his Civil War prodigies, in an annual report Lee "made repeated references to what work would be possible with money to build more boats and hire more workers." In the end, anticipating his wartime accomplishments as a commander with too few troops and insufficient supplies, he had to do the most and the best that he could with the limited resources available.

In the end, Congress adjourned without appropriating any more funds to Lee's projects, and he was ordered to St. Louis to sell his equipment and to close accounts on the entire venture. After a year's leave with his family in Arlington, Lee was back in St. Louis, in Thomas's description, "to look over his unfinished work and dismantle the enterprise he had spent four years assembling." It requires little imagination to see a parallel a quarter of a century hence in Appomattox, after a far different "four years of arduous service."

Although Lee's four years on the Mississippi had been a bittersweet experience, in the words of Emory Thomas, "He had planned and worked and proven that his plans would work, only to have to leave his projects incomplete and never see fruition for his skill and energy. But he had the satisfaction of knowing and proving his capacity to solve problems that had baffled others. And in a rare peacetime promotion, the Army recognized his accomplishment by making him Captain Lee.

In the persuasive opinion of Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee had done "pioneer work on the river." Undeniably, his work initiated the process of developing the upper Mississippi and opening it to navigation. Furthermore, by moving the river to the Missouri shore, Lee enabled St. Louis to continue as a great river port during the 19th century. In short, Lee might not have moved mountains, but, like Hercules, he did shift the course of a great river.

By Frank P. Ward, Jr.

Nov 2017 NCCWRT Financials	
Opening balance	\$7,372.28
Income	
Dues/Dinner/Raffle	\$958.00
Outgo	
K &W Tip (cash)	\$40.00
K &W Fee	\$457.60
Speaker Fee	\$275.00
Ending Balance	\$7,557.68

Mackowski Leads a Great NCCWRT Discussion



Chris Mackowski always draws good attendance and always stirs up a lot of interaction. The November 18, 2017 meeting of NCCWRT was no exception. As seen in the accompanying photo, his productivity as an author and editor has increased extensively since his last NCCWRT on May 21, 2016. For tonight's meeting, we asked him to focus on a *contemporary* topic, rather than a historical figure or battle. His plan was to begin-at-the-beginning of a contemporary controversy: Jubal Early and the myth of the Lost Cause. Recall, all myths require some elements of truth.

Chris began, however, by passing out blank cards and asking individuals to anonymously to pick someone to whom a monument should be dedicated. He collected the cards and the interactions immediately began! Surprisingly, many members volunteered their reasons for a particular nominee. With this unanticipated beginning and Chris' moderating the discussion, virtually every member participated in the thoughtful give-and-take for nearly an hour. Chris concluded that this was a striking difference from other current "Monumental Discussions", in which he has participated either on his blog (Emerging

Civil War) or during his visits to roundtables. One non-violent detraction about the 'correctness' of Civil War monuments rests on the lack of historical context and poor knowledge of recorded facts. Real, or perceived, offense is another major stumbling block in "Monumental Discussions".

Please review the thoughtful minutes (in this issue of **The Ramrod**) by our Recording Secretary, Teresa Harnish. Teresa reported on many of the topics that we debated. Her minutes will make you feel good about NCCWRT and may make absent guests feel as if they were in attendance!

NC Civil War Round Table Meeting Minutes November 18, 2017

Minutes:

A motion was made and seconded to approve the minutes as written in the RAMROD.

Treasurer's Report:

The balance in the treasury is \$7372.28

Introductions:

Guests were welcomed and introduced.

Raffle:

The book raffle brought in \$48.

Program:

Gene Adcock introduced our guest speaker, Chris Mackowski. Chris returned for his third visit to the NCCWRT. Because Chris' professional experiences are so broad, he is one of the most sought-after public historians. He is a full professor at St. Bonaventure University in their Jandoli

School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Chris is also an author, editor, playwright and photographer.

Chris' planned presentation was about Jubal Early: Lee's 'Bad, Old Man' and the Beginning of the Lost Cause" but instead lead a very interesting and interactive discussion about recent events surrounding the removal of Confederate monuments. Chris asked the group to think about the controversy regarding the Civil War monuments. He handed out blank cards and asked that if we could each pick one person that should have a monument, who would that person be? Some members then shared who they chose to have a monument. He gathered the cards and read the suggested names and led an interesting discussion as to why some of the names were chosen to have a monument.

Chris asked members to share their thoughts on the current events related to the monuments and Confederate flag. Discussion ranged from the social media's role to political correctness, the lack of people being informed and education's role in teaching and informing students. Chris offered his thoughts and many different perspectives for all of us to consider. The monuments, the Confederacy, the Confederate flag, all have different meanings to different people. Once upon a time people could discuss and agree or disagree but now, people are often offended. Some people do not research to know the facts and history.

Chris offered questions for the members to consider.

- Who is taking part in the discussions?
- Who is funding and has ownership of the property?

- Who is the monument dedicated to?
- When the statue was raised, who was holding the power?
- What are the politics of the monument?

We can't make value judgments and can't assume we all have the same perspective. We all have different interpretations of the same event and the Confederate monuments. We have to open the communication channels and discuss openly and honestly.

Next Meeting:

The next meeting will take place in Raleigh on January 6, 2018 with Ed Bearss discussing Civil War medicine.