

Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

December, 1995

NEWSLETTER

Editor: George Slaton

ZEBULON VANCE, WARTIME GOVERNOR OF NORTH CAROLINA December 7 Meeting

Dr. Joseph Mobley from the N.C. Division of Archives and History will present a program covering the wartime career of Zeb Vance who was Governor of NC from 1862-1865. Vance's views on states' rights and his political stance with Jefferson Davis' administration make him an interesting figure during the war years. His competence in mobilizing his state's military resources has given him a reputation as one of the more effective CSA governors. Dr. Mobley has edited the papers of Vance and is a well-known authority on this famous and colorful North Carolinian.

The meeting will begin at 7:30 pm on Thursday, December 7, in Room 101 of King Hall at UNC-W. Bring a friend or two with you! We'll also be discussing our plans for the upcoming Petersburg/Appomattox bus tour.

THE BATTLE OF PETERSBURG AND LEE'S RETREAT TO APPOMATTOX Spring Bus Tour

The RT bus tour to Virginia, March 8-10, is just around the corner! The deadlines for sign-up are even closer! This comprehensive tour of the closing days of the war will be led by Chris Calkins, the acknowledged authority on the Battle of Petersburg and Lee's final retreat and a historian with the National Park Service. On Friday, Chris will take us to Five Forks battlefield, Dinwiddie Courthouse, White Oak Road, and the Gilliam Farm. Saturday's tour will follow the exact route of Lee's retreat toward Appomattox, taking in the site of the cavalry clash at Namozine Church, Saylor's Creek battlefield, the fields and woods where Lee's army encamped and where the surrender itself took place. On Sunday, we'll tour the Petersburg battlefield, visiting the Crater and Fort Stedman.

We'll travel from Wilmington to Petersburg by Five Star Motor Coach, spend two nights at Best Western Petersburg, and return home mid-afternoon Sunday. The cost is \$150.00 per person (subject to change if we're unable to fill the bus); this covers the cost of the bus, motel, two meals, tour by Chris Calkins.

Sign up soon! After our December 7 meeting, we'll open the tour to the general public. So, to guarantee yourself a seat on the bus, you should send your check for the full amount by then; your check serves as your reservation. Dan Geddie will be on hand at the December 7 meeting to help you complete your reservations. Or you can send your check to CFCWRT, Box 10535, Wilmington NC 28405. This will be an unforgettable tour. Plan to join us!

CIVIL WAR CALENDARS Scenes from Fort Fisher

Many of you have seen and purchased copies of the 1996 Fort Fisher calendars which the RT along with the Friends of the Library are offering for sale this year. The calendars sell for \$10.00 each, and we hope that each member will buy one for themselves. The calendars will also make fine Christmas gifts for friends and family members. Profits from the sales will be divided between our RT and the Friends of the Library. Calendars will be available again at the December meeting or at the public library in the Local History room (on the second floor).

BRANDY STATION: PROLOGUE TO GETTYSBURG A Visit to the Battlefield

In the predawn hours of June 9, 1863, Gen. John Buford prepared to lead three brigades of Union cavalry supported by a crack infantry brigade across the Rappahannock River. Acting as the right wing of a two prong assault force, Buford would cross the Rappahannock at Beverly's Ford. Once across the river, he was to move up the country road to the railway station located in the sleepy hamlet of Brandy Station. Buford was to secure the town and wait for the left wing commanded by Gen. David Gregg and Col. Alfred Duffie. The left wing was to cross the Rappahannock at Kelly's Ford, six miles away, simultaneously with Buford around 4:30 am. Buford was to attack the Confederate camps north of Brandy Station from the front while Gregg and Duffie swing around the Rebel right flank and hit their rear.

This bold and daring plan was the brain-child of Gen. Alfred Pleasonton, only recently given command of the Union cavalry corps. The plan was a good one on paper. Trap your quarry between your forces, destroy as many as you can, and disperse the rest. By destroying Stuart's cavalry, the Union army would leave Lee blind and without a protective screen to move his army. If Pleasonton's plan was successful it would end Lee's hopes of a strong incursion into the North.

Before the first Union soldier crossed the Rappahannock, Pleasonton's plan was in shambles. He had broken the first cardinal rule of engagement. The new cavalry corps had not confirmed the location of his enemy through good military intelligence. Assuming that Stuart had gathered his forces at Culpepper Court House, some twelve miles away, the thirty-nine year old Pleasonton, anticipating only sporadic picket resistance, led his men into the teeth of the entire Confederate cavalry.

From the outset the assault was doomed. Buford crossed his men as planned, but Gregg was delayed for over two hours waiting for Duffie, who had become lost in the dark on his way to Kelly's Ford. Things went from bad to worse. Not only two hours late, but once across the river, Gregg allowed Duffie's brigade to move on toward Stevensburg instead of staying in his support as originally planned, thus seriously reducing the size of his force.

This was the opening sally of the greatest cavalry battle to take place on American soil. The battle would mark the birth of the Union cavalry as a force to be reckoned with for the remainder of the war. Stuart, still flush with the success of the 'grand review' of his elite corps, would exhibit a coolness and brilliance under surprise attack that would far exceed his abilities to date, a brilliance that was to be forever extinguished in eleven short months at Yellow Tavern.

These facts are but a few I was privileged to learn when I attended the Fall Tour (Oct 13-15) sponsored by APCWS (Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites). There were thirty of us present including Bill Rodgers, another member of our RT. The tour included Brandy Station, Catlett Station, Aldie, Middleburg, and Upperville. The speakers included Clark "Bud" Hall, the expert on Brandy Station, Robert O'Neill (Aldie, Middleburg, Upperville), Horace Mewborn, co-author of a book on Mosby's command, and Dan Beatty, secretary of APCWS and an expert on Union cavalry. Perhaps the greatest thrill of all was meeting JEB Stuart IV, great-grandson of Gen. JEB Stuart, who spoke to our group on Saturday night.

What is so very special about the area surrounding Brandy Station is that so much of it is in pristine condition. On a dry day you can walk down to Beverly Ford and see the spot where USA Lt. Henry Cutler was mortally wounded and became the first casualty of the Gettysburg campaign.

With a little imagination you can visualize young USA Lt. Robert Allen, a single bullet left in his pistol, ride out of the treeline (still there), straight at USA Col. G.F. "Gimes" Davis sitting on his horse in the bend of the road to Brandy Station. Davis, so intent on exhorting his 8th NY to stand firm, did not hear Death riding pellmell for him until it was too late. His men, seeing Davis felled by a bullet to the brain, were so demoralized that they broke and ran for the river, giving the Confederates valuable time to send reinforcements. This lovely, special road is already bordered on one side by an unnecessary private county airport. The land on the other side of the road is threatened by a developer wanting to build a Formula One race track.

Fortunately for posterity, the area around St. James Church, the scene of fighting involving "Grumble" Jones and Wade Hampton with our own NC 1st Cavalry, is protected by the membership of the church. Fleetwood Hill, Stuart's HQ, which changed hands so many times that day, is still privately owned farmland. But that is subject to change at any time.

America is a land of many resources, some renewable, others not. CW sites fall under the latter category. Through 20/20 hindsight, students of the CW easily see the importance of various battles, their impact on the war as a whole. Tours arranged by organizations like APCWS or the Civil War Society can give us some small insight into the conditions these men fought under.

In all the battlefields that I've been privileged to visit, whether they were well-cared for and protected like Manassas or Harper's Ferry or endangered like Brandy Station, they have one thing in common. There is an uncommon hush that pervades the area. A quiet that calls to you. Only listen and you can hear the voices of men (and in some cases women) long gone, whispering "we are here."

I can't help but feel each time we allow one of these sites to slip away we tell these men of uncommon valor that we don't care anymore. What they did is not important, no longer matters in the grand scheme of things. To me that is an unforgivable tragedy.

Anyone interested in learning more about efforts to preserve these disappearing resources can contact:
APCWS, Box 1862, Fredericksburg VA 22402.

(Thanks to Tonia J. Smith, a member of the CFCWRT for providing this account of her recent CW adventure!).