

Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

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NEWSLETTER

Editor: George Slaton

GENERAL ROBERT F. HOKE: LEE'S MODEST WARRIOR December 5 Meeting

Daniel W. Barefoot, in his recently published *General Robert F. Hoke: Lee's Modest Warrior*, has made a significant contribution to Civil War history in highlighting this underappreciated Confederate general from North Carolina. His book is a long overdue portrait of a forgotten American hero whose life and military service merits the study and attention that Hoke is beginning to receive. Mr. Barefoot is a graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he was Phi Beta Kappa and the University of North Carolina School of Law. A resident of Lincolnton, Mr. Barefoot has published two previous books about his native state. We're fortunate to have Daniel W. Barefoot as our guest speaker for the December meeting of the RT.

General Hoke was the youngest major general in the Confederate army. Ulysses Grant said he suffered the "worst whipping of the war" at this man's hands. The march Hoke led from New Bern to Kinston was taught at West Point as one of the most rapid troop movements in the history of warfare. It is even a longstanding tradition in North Carolina that Hoke was Lee's personal choice to take command of the Army of Northern Virginia in the event of Lee's death or disability. Yet too few people are aware of Robert F. Hoke.

Two weeks before his 24th birthday, Hoke witnessed the first Confederate casualty at the first battle of the war at Big Bethel, Va. It was Hoke who provided the rear guard as Joseph E. Johnston surrendered the bulk of the South's fighting men at Bennett House in Durham, the last surrender of the war. In between, Hoke saw action in virtually every significant battle in the East. He missed Gettysburg because of a serious injury he sustained at Chancellorsville. Ironically, Col. Isaac Avery was riding Hoke's black warhorse when he was killed leading Hoke's brigade in its famous charge up Cemetery Hill.

After he returned to action, Hoke was sent to recapture Plymouth and New Bern in eastern NC. After capturing Plymouth, Hoke was laying siege to New Bern when Lee ordered him back to Virginia. After holding off Grant at Cold Harbor, Hoke returned to his native state to defend Fort Fisher. Hoke commanded the Confederate forces in the Sugar Loaf area north of Fort Fisher and there resisted Federal attacks. Then Hoke continued to defend Wilmington as he retreated toward the city. Hoke will forever be associated with the Wilmington campaign. Afterwards, General Hoke played a conspicuous role in temporarily halting Sherman's advance at Bentonville. In this last battle of the war, Hoke commanded most of the North Carolina troops, including the "Red Infantry," under the command of Wilmington's Colonel John D. Taylor.

Just as admirable as his wartime achievements was the life Hoke led after the war. Despite being from a family who had long been prominent in state and national political affairs, Hoke refused to run for any political office. He became a champion of economic rebirth in the South, playing an instrumental role in the rebuilding of railroads and the development of the mining industry. When he died at the age of 75, the downtown streets of Raleigh were draped in black for his funeral, the flags in the state capitol were flown at half mast, and the state legislature was closed.

Hoke is a Civil War figure who clearly deserves the attention he will receive when the RT gathers in Cameron Hall on UNC-W campus, Room 132, at 7:30 pm, on Thursday, December 5. Mr. Barefoot will have his book on hand for purchase and signing. (Cameron Hall is located 200-300 yards east (or behind) King Hall, where our meetings were held last year. Parking Lot R is just in front of Cameron Hall, while Parking Lot S is the next closest to our new location).

THE HISTORIANS SPEAK Panel Discussion

The annual conference of the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites was held in Nashville during the last week of April, 1996. The focus for the weekend was Hood's Tennessee campaign. One of the features of the conference was a panel discussion led by Western Theater historians: Wiley Sword, Kent Masterson Brown, Brian Steel Wills, Edwin Bearss, Joseph Glatthar, Herman Hattaway, John Marzalek, and Jack Hurst. The panelists entertained questions from the audience. Here's a sketch of the discussion.

The first question was: Where was the war won, in the Eastern or Western Theater? Ed Bearss pointed to the efforts of Sherman, observing that when Sherman arrived in Goldsboro NC after his march from Savannah, Grant had pinned Lee down at Petersburg. "Sherman cut the heart out of the South, destroying the South's will to fight." Wiley Sword pointed out that the Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of Tennessee were the pillars that propped up the Confederacy. Both were vital. The war, he said, was lost in the West when the Army of Tennessee was defeated at Franklin and Nashville. John Marzalek observed that many historians agree now that the war in the West was crucial to the final outcome and that this view represents a turnaround from the former traditional focus on the war in the East.

In response to a question about the current and ongoing fascination with the Civil War, Kent Masterson Brown mused that, "We are a people who are characterized by rebellion, who don't like central authority, a people who are spellbound by an idea." He said that there are many people who, though they know little about the Civil War, are still captivated by it because it's about a group of people who felt they could accomplish something by rebelling. "That's a major cultural theme." Also, "there's something spellbinding about Jeb Stuart running rings around George McClellan." Herman Hattaway added that Lincoln spoke to the people about "the transcending meaning of the Union."

To the question: Did the Confederacy have a chance to win the war?, Joseph Glatthar responded, "Yes, if they could have convinced the Northern public that the price was high enough. If the South had won at Antietam, he suggested, the North might have lost its will to fight. Herman Hattaway agreed that the South could have won. "It was an interesting war because it was a close call." He added that Lincoln's election in 1864 signaled the end of the war.

Someone posed the question: Which was the better army, the Army of Northern Virginia or the Army of Tennessee? Wiley Sword stated that the AOT displayed great character and fortitude in facing its defeats. While the ANV so often dealt with success, the AOT was "the best in dealing with adversity." Ed Bearss reminded the audience that, though the AOT was not endowed with good high command leadership ("there was no charismatic father figure like RE Lee"), the rank and file of the AOT was as good or better than the ANV. Arthur Fremantle, the British journalist who visited both armies, said the AOT was as good as its eastern counterpart, but that there were no corps commanders equal to Jackson or Longstreet.

Joseph Glatthar, responding to the question: "Was Hood's Tennessee campaign a good idea?" said that Hood felt he had to go after Sherman's supply lines. The problem was, he said, that Sherman had decided he could operate without his supply lines, and so Sherman out-manuevered Hood by letting him go to Tennessee.

Most of the historians on the panel responded to a question about the Confederate flag issue. They seemed to agree that the misuse of this historic symbol has led to a polarization of the issue. One panelist added that the flag's use by radical groups has made it hard for others to fly the flag simply out of pride. Another panelist observed that "good people should have stopped radical groups from using the flag" for political reasons.

A final question was: "Why should we preserve CW battlefields?" Ed Bearss said that, "until you have seen and walked the terrain, you cannot understand a particular battle." He reminded us that Lincoln told his audience at Gettysburg that, "the land has been consecrated by blood." Bearss then told a very moving story about a Vietnam veteran who had lost one leg below the hip and the other leg below the knee. This veteran was seen walking, with great difficulty, the Pickett/Pettigrew field at Gettysburg. He finally reached the picket fence near the Union lines where he fell trying to climb the fence, and "there was no one there to pick him up." Bearss said that it's no wonder that people like this veteran have no patience with developers who are eager to convert a battlefield to a project site.