

# Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

May, 1998

NEWSLETTER

Editor: George Slaton

\*\*\*\*\*

## An Evening With THE CHICAGO CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

Featuring Speakers  
**MARK BRADLEY and CHRIS FONVIELLE**  
On  
The North Carolina Campaigns of 1865

To Be Held On  
The *USS North Carolina*  
Friday, May 1st  
Cash Bar at 6:30 pm & Dinner at 7:00 pm

***! Paid Resevoration Required !***

Our Round Table looks forward to joining The Chicago Civil War Round Table for dinner and a program led by historians, Chris Fonvielle and Mark Bradley, on Friday, May 1. The Chicago RT will be visiting Wilmington during its spring bus tour of North Carolina Campaign sites.

The Chicago Round Table has generously invited our Cape Fear Round Table to "dinner on the fantail" aboard the *USS North Carolina*. About 75 Chicagoans will be on hand.

Chris and Mark will be leading tours of the Wilmington and Bentonville areas for the Chicago Round Table. The program Friday night will be an overview of the NC Campaigns. Ed Bearss, former Chief Historian of the National Park Service, and tour leader *extraordinaire* will also be present.

The bountiful dinner (\$15.00 per person) will consist of fried and boiled shrimp, fish fillet, deviled crab, chicken, potato salad, beans, and slaw. **Since the RT is on the line to the caterer for an exact count, you must mail a check for \$15.00 made out to CFCWRT to Cape Fear Civil War Round Table, Box 10535, Wilmington NC 28405 to arrive by Tuesday, April 28 in order to attend. Your check is your reservation. Send your check now before you forget!**

Let's all turn out for this special event, our last program of the year, and join members of the oldest Round Table in the nation for an enjoyable social hour, a delicious dinner and a great program!

The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table will take its usual summer break from June through August and will resume its meetings in September for the 1998-1999 year. Members will receive the next newsletter in late August. Meanwhile, during the summer months, the steering committee will be hard at work planning programs and events for the coming year.

The final membership roster for the year has reached 115. We can be proud of what we've accomplished together in just four years!

## THE CHICAGO CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE Founded 1940

The Chicago Civil War Round Table, founded 58 years ago, was the *first* of well over 200 Civil War Round Tables now meeting regularly in this country and around the world. Its current membership is well over 400, the only requirement being a genuine interest in the American Civil War. Activities include ten monthly dinner meetings which feature prominent guest speakers, annual tours to Civil War battlefields and associated sites, the publication of a monthly newsletter, and other programs of interest to its members. Distinguished guest speakers have included: Edwin C. Bearss, Douglas Southall Freeman, James I. Robertson, Robert K. Krick, James McPherson, Wiley Sword, Gary Gallagher, Shelby Foote, William C. Davis, Alan Nolan, and many others. Mark Bradley and Chris Fonvielle were guest speakers in 1997. It is considered a distinct honor for any Civil War historian to be invited to address the Chicago Round Table.

The Civil War Round Table movement began in 1940 when Ralph G. Newman, proprietor of the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop in Chicago began hosting lunches where his customers discussed Civil War topics. By December, 1940, the impromptu lunches had become so popular that Newman and twelve friends decided to hold regular monthly dinners. Each dinner featured a presentation by a RT member or a guest historian. "Worldwide, there's a fascination with the Civil War that just won't go away. People who appreciate military history realize that it was the last old-fashioned war and the first modern war, and they were fought simultaneously," said Newman recently.

The Round Table was formally established on the evening of December 3, 1940 when members gathered at the Bismarck Hotel in Chicago. *The Chicago Tribune*, under the impression that sixteen Civil War veterans would meet there for the evening, sent a reporter and a photographer! The first meeting featured a program on Stonewall Jackson's Valley Campaign by Percival G. Hart, a founder of the RT.

One of the Chicago RT's first field tours was to Richmond, Virginia in 1953 where members were invited to the home of Douglas Southall Freeman, the great Lee biographer and ANV historian. Dr. Freeman, though himself a teetotler, directed his servants to serve mint juleps to his visitors from the North. Freeman gave what proved to be his last speech; it focused on the reliability of witnesses and writers on the Civil War, as well as the task of the historian. Five weeks later, Freeman died, and Elmer Gortz, a well-known Chicago attorney and civic leader attended the funeral as a representative of the Round Table.

Annual tours began in 1951, the first to Nashville, Franklin, Stones River, and Chickamauga! In the early days, RT members traveled by railroad in private cars. Member Elmer Gordon, then general passenger agent for the Chicago and Eastern Illinois Railroad, made the arrangements. A later tour had the use of the Chicago White Sox plane.

A 50th Anniversary celebration was held in October, 1990. The banquet honored the two surviving founders, Ralph Newman and Elmer Gortz. A symposium included presentations by James Robertson, Robert K. Krick, Jerry Russell, and Ed Bearss. Another banquet featured an address by James McPherson.

Recently, the RT honored Shelby Foote with its Nevins-Freeman Award. The much-admired novelist and author of *The Civil War: A Narrative* had addressed the RT in 1963, 1968, and 1974. "Shelby Foote is living proof that history is too interesting to be left to the historians," Newman said in introducing Foote to a record Round Table crowd of 460 at the award dinner.

The Chicago RT also has its own published history! Barbara Hughett, a Lincoln scholar, authored *The Civil War Round Table: Fifty Years of Scholarship and Fellowship* in 1990. The book includes biographies of the founders, information on meeting places, awards, publications, speakers, and field trips. An important contribution to Civil War cultural history, this account provides considerable insight into how 20th Century Americans have studied and memorialized the Civil War. Barbara also serves as Editor of the monthly newsletter.

It is indeed an honor for the Cape Fear Civil War Round Table to spend an evening with such a splendid group of fellow CW enthusiasts as the Chicago Civil War Round Table! The evening will become a memorable part of our own history as a Round Table.

## ASSOCIATION FOR THE PRESERVATION OF CIVIL WAR SITES Quarterly Magazine *Hallowed Ground*

APCWS just published Volume One, Number One of its sumptuous new magazine, *Hallowed Ground*. James McPherson, a former vice-chairman of APCWS, penned a lead article about the importance of preserving Civil War battlefields. Other extensive articles by Clark B. Hall and Dan Beattie focus on the Battle of Brandy Station, the largest cavalry engagement on the North American continent. APCWS has put together a \$6.2 million package to preserve forever 1,543 acres of the field at Brandy Station.

The inside rear cover features a recent photograph of the forlorn monument to Colonel George W. Gowan of the 48th Pennsylvania, located on Crater Road in Petersburg, Virginia. The monument is completely surrounded by asphalt and the sprawl of urban development. It's a reminder of what we will lose unless we make battlefield preservation a priority.

As Jerry Russell, the Chairman of Civil War Round Table Associates, has often said, "We who study must also strive to save."

You can join the nearly 12,000 members of this superb organization by sending a \$30.00 basic annual membership to APCWS, Suite 200, 11 Public Square, Hagerstown, MD 21740. Phone (888) 606-1400.

### A PARTING SHOT

This feature of our monthly newsletter is usually a light-hearted anecdote about the Civil War. Let's close the RT year and honor Memorial Day with a thoughtful and sobering excerpt from a 1997 Memorial Day speech at Fredericksburg, Virginia National Cemetery. James Pates, city attorney for Fredericksburg, is vice president of Central Virginia Battlefields Trust, the recipient of our recent \$1000.00 gift by members of the RT. He generously gave us permission to quote extensively from his very moving speech which follows.

This cemetery was created in 1866 - just one year after the war - largely because of outraged Northerners who came here after the war, looking for their lost relations. What they found was desecration of the dead, utter devastation and resentment. They learned that the ground in front of Marye's Heights, where thousands of Union soldiers had died, was about to be turned into a fairground. They wrote to Congress and demanded that the government seize the hill and protect the memory of their loved ones. As one visitor wrote, "The Mayor and Council are all disloyal and will consent to and encourage any act calculated to disgrace the remains of our brave soldiers."

The quartermaster of the Army soon did seize this hill, disinterred hundreds of bodies buried in a mass grave along Kenmore Avenue, dismantled two other temporary cemeteries in Spotsylvania, and moved the bodies from there and from the City Cemetery to this hilltop, which thousands of Union soldiers had died trying to reach. The following year, Congress formally authorized the creation of this and other national military cemeteries. By 1873, the cemetery that you see here today had largely taken shape. A high wall had been constructed to keep out pigs (and, presumably, disloyal residents), the bodies had all been reinterred, the terraces re-established, and the headstones erected.

By the 1890's, some of the most bitter animosities between North and South had begun to fade, and veterans, nearing the end of their lives, longed to commemorate their dead comrades (and themselves). A host of Civil War monuments began to dot the landscape. On May 25, 1900, the cornerstone of the large monument at the foot of this hill was laid, commemorating the U.S. Army Fifth Corps and donated by its commander, Gen. Daniel Butterfield. The ceremony attracted national attention, not because of the dignitaries in attendance, which included President McKinley, but because it took place at the 31st annual reunion of the Army of the Potomac, the first reunion of that group ever held south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Thus, that ceremony and that memorial

represented a significant shift in attitudes between North and South and how this community remembered the war.

At about the same time, a separate movement was initiated, again in part by local residents, to create a new memorial here, a national campaign to create a park for the four battlefields. Thirty years later, in 1927, the Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park was finally established.

There is no question but that today, another Great Awakening of battlefield preservation is taking place, both nationally and here in Virginia. And it is fitting that part of this movement should be taking place on this hilltop.

But why is it happening? Why now?

Doubtless there are many reasons for this reawakening, but I am convinced that part of the reason lies in the peculiar history of this area and within our own personal histories. For many years, this region was so devastated by the war that most local residents considered it something best forgotten. Only recently have we sufficiently recovered enough economically that battlefield preservation can be a luxury we can now afford.

But for those of us who grew up here, this prosperity carries with it a certain poignancy. Every day, we can see our past - our collective memories - destroyed before our very eyes, as one battlefield after another gives way to shopping centers and parking lots. Just as those Northern visitors were outraged that a fairground could be placed on top of their dead kinsmen's graves, so now we too are outraged that ground so steeped in our nation's history and so much a part of our own local birthright can be so thoughtlessly forsaken.

Just several weeks ago, my father was telling me - for the first time - a family story about his great-great-uncle, Rowe Perry. He said, "You know, Uncle Rowe lived on Plank Road between our home place at Five Mile Fork and Salem Church. After the battle there, he was hired to load up the bodies from the trenches that had been built around the church and to haul them to the City Cemetery for burial. He said they were stacked up three feet deep. He loaded them up, like so many cords of wood, and hauled them." As I look around here today, I can't help but think that some of those bodies are now buried here.

While this story may carry highly personal meaning for me, I find that the sentiments it arouses are shared by many others here. Ours is a community that was shaped by so traumatic an event, so much larger than ourselves and our families, that we shouldn't be surprised that it remains a formative part of our collective consciousness and has helped to render Fredericksburg a place we consider home. The war remains a room, if you will, in this community's collective house of memories.

This hill also touches us deeply as a community because it stands out at a time when it is becoming so much harder for this, or any community, to preserve its own uniqueness. In so many ways, our world today is growing flat all over again, where the mountains are sinking and the valleys rising. You could call it the "homogenization of America," where one place looks pretty much like the next and where our personalities and beliefs are increasingly shaped by the great machines of mass culture. And it means that the place where I grew up, the South, is becoming little more than a figure of speech.

But deep down, I cannot believe that we really want to be like everyone else or that we want to live in a place that looks just like the next.

This hill stands today as both a cemetery and as a living, changing memorial to the men who fought here. But it is also our hill, with a Fredericksburg history, an actual physical part of our psychological landscape that has imparted meaning to our lives. It is not a California hill or a Guatemalan hill, it is a living part of each one of us who lives here. And just because the park service owns the land doesn't mean that the place belongs to it. It belongs to all of us, especially to those who live within its shadow.

On this Memorial Day, let us recognize that it is the responsibility of all Americans, as the heirs of the men who died here, and of our community, as the descendants of those who lived in this town 130 years ago, and of myself, as the heir of Rowe Perry, to reclaim our stake in this hill, to tend it as our own, to keep it from being leveled, to see it with fresh eyes, to walk it, to stand here and look eastward as they did in 1862, so that we can all draw strength, purpose, and wisdom from our past and prepare ourselves to face tomorrow.

\* \* \* \* \*