

Cape Fear Civil War Round Table

October, 1999

NEWSLETTER

Editor: George Slaton

THE BATTLE OF SPOTSYLVANIA COURT HOUSE

An Evening With Gordon Rhea

Thursday, October 14

Cape Fear Club

Corner Second & Chestnut Streets

Dinner 7:00 pm.....Program 7:30 pm

! Paid Dinner Reservations Required By Monday, October 11 !

Every year members look forward to our annual fall meeting when a leading Civil War historian joins us for dinner and a special presentation. This year, we're proud to announce that Gordon Rhea, whose Civil War battle and campaign studies rank among the best ever written, will speak to our group on one of the hardest fought engagements between Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and Grant's Army of the Potomac.

Gordon Rhea, a Virginia native, graduated from Indiana University *summa cum laude* in 1967 and received his M.A. in history from Harvard University as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow in 1968. He received his J.D. from Stanford University Law School in 1974. Mr. Rhea has served as an Assistant United States Attorney and as Special Assistant to the Chief Counsel, Senate Select Committee on Intelligence Activities in Washington DC. He has lectured extensively on military history at the US Army Training and Doctrine Command and has spoken to numerous historical societies and Civil War Round Tables around the country.

Mr. Rhea is perhaps best known for his impressive *The Battle of the Wilderness: May 5-6 1864* (LSU Press, 1994) and *The Battles of Spotsylvania Court House and The Road to Yellow Tavern: May 7-12 1864* (LSU Press, 1997) both of which have won several awards. Robert K. Krick's review, "Gordon Rhea's *Spotsylvania* is a splendid piece of historical research and writing. It unquestionably will be the definitive word for decades to come on that pivotal confrontation between Lee and Grant, and is destined for recognition as one of the great military classics on the Civil War in Virginia," reflects his praise of both of these important studies. And by the way, if you have these volumes in your library, you may wish to bring them to the meeting for signing.

Remember that your paid dinner reservation of \$15.00 must be received by Monday, October 11. Sticky Fingers will serve up a delicious and filling meal which includes Memphis-style barbecue pork and chicken with baked beans, cole slaw, potato salad, iced tea or lemonade! We had a huge turnout for our dinner meeting last fall. Don't miss this one! Send your check right away for \$15.00 to CFCWRT, Box 10535, Wilmington NC 28404.

! MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS AND SIGNUPS NOW DUE !

Don't delay! Mail your check for \$25.00 for your 1999-2000 membership to the RT address above or bring it to the October meeting. Your membership entitles you to all the privileges of the RT, including the monthly meetings, tours and newsletter. Thanks to everyone who pays their dues promptly.

THE STORY OF THE OFFICIAL RECORDS

(The OR's, as they are popularly known to students, both browsers and serious researchers, of the Civil War is the richest available compilation of primary source material of the 1861-1865 conflict. Sid Sidlo, Editor of *The Ramrod*, the newsletter of The North Carolina Civil War Round Table which meets in Burlington NC, is the author of the following fascinating story of how the OR's were compiled. It is reprinted here with Sid's permission)

The three compilations of *The Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* - the 127 volume OR-Armies, the one (large) volume OR-Atlas and the thirty-volume OR-Navies, all including both Union and Confederate documents - are indispensable to students of the Civil War. In spite of the OR's limitations, most scholars regard them as the only full, accessible, and unbiased documentation of the war.

How did the *Official Records* come to be collected and published? In a very handy little book called *A User's Guide to the Official Records of the American Civil War* (paperback, \$12) Alan and Barbara Aimone of West Point not only provide a succinct guide to understanding and using the records, but tell us their fascinating history, only a part of which I'll relate here.

Compilation of the records was first proposed by Major General Henry Halleck in 1863. A law to collect Union Army records was signed by Lincoln on 20 May 1864. After the fall of Richmond, Halleck ordered Confederate papers to be gathered and sorted, although many were destroyed when the city was set on fire. Yet that still left 500 "boxes, hogsheads, and barrels" of Confederate papers that reached the War Department by August.

Scholars owe much to Halleck. Even during the war, he prevented destruction of many captured Rebel records. Later he spent some of his own personal fortune to see that they were properly preserved and published.

Work began immediately after passage of the 1864 law, but delays led Congress in 1866 to pass a law calling for effective organization of the work and development of a long-range plan and cost estimates. Then for a few years the project came to a halt for lack of leadership and the government's focus on Reconstruction.

It is not a slight on Halleck or other early collectors to note that the records were originally intended for memoir-writing officers, not professional historians. The historical profession was then in its infancy. Lobbying by Union and Confederate veterans' organizations restarted the project after it stalled. In 1874 Congress appropriated funds to pay for publication of the Army records. By 1877 thirty-seven preliminary volumes of Union records and ten of Confederate had been generated. But all material was ordered chronologically, not by campaigns or battles.

By 1877, seeing that results to date were unwieldy and unsatisfactory, the War Department appointed a full-time curator, Lt. Col. Robert N. Scott, who had been aide-de-camp to Halleck during and after the war. The very capable Scott was familiar with military bureaucracy and the "records management" practices of many of their officers.

Early on, Scott made two important editorial decisions. First, he specified that the records would be organized topically - all reports of a campaign or battle, Union reports followed by Confederate, were to be placed together for a connected account; in the same volume, related correspondence in chronological order would follow the reports. This was a critical decision for historical research.

Second, Scott established criteria for selecting meaningful documents. Not only must the document be official and significant, but it must have been generated during the war, and no more than a few weeks or months after the events it covered. He realized that human memory is unreliable even after a short time.

While there were some disputes over what was and was not significant, the most controversial policy was over the issue of wartime production. Scott believed rightly that unaltered documents revealed leaders' knowledge and understanding of the situation at the time of action, and so best served veterans and historians who could then understand the bases for wartime decisions, whether the data was correct or not. All of this meant that there were to be no after-the-fact corrections or alterations to the original documents. Many officer veterans had tried to supplement records with post-war "corrections" and retrospection. Scott and later editors did, however, permit annotations, such as notes about individuals vindicated by postwar commissions. They also allowed correction of misspellings and bad grammar.

From the beginning, Scott employed both Confederate and Union former officers to promote impartiality and balance in selection and editing. The job was daunting, to say the least. The papers to be compiled were "counted not by documents or boxes, but by tons, roomfuls, or the contents of buildings." Every document included in the *Official Records* was authenticated as much as possible; this required time-consuming research and correspondence by a staff that averaged six officers and sixty-nine clerks. Never has there been serious questioning of the authenticity of the vast majority of material collected and published.

In Scott, the government had clearly found the man for the job. Both qualified and completely dedicated to the task, he left his mark on others to follow. He supervised completion of the first 18 volumes (the first volume was distributed in July, 1881) and did significant work on the next 18. When Scott died in 1887, a succession of other editors continued the task until the last of the 128 volumes, the *General Index*, was published in 1901. The project had taken thirty-seven years and cost three million dollars, a bargain by today's standards. In 1903, after eleven thousand sets of the army records had been published and distributed, the printing plates were destroyed by law; modern editions are facsimile reproductions.

SABRE STROKES

Now it's easier than ever to obtain the complete military service records of your Union and Confederate ancestors. No longer do you have to wait six to eight weeks to receive the records from the National Archives. Service records are now available through Broadfoot Publishing Company. CSA records have a one-day turnaround while USA records are only two weeks. The cost is \$25.00 for the first ten pages with an additional charge for more. For order forms, call 686-9591 or order by fax 686-4379. Take a look at Broadfoot Publishing Company's website at <http://broadfoot.wilmington.net>.

Since there's a considerable overlap of interest in Civil War and Indian War buffs, those who have enjoyed the excellent quarterly, *Civil War Regiments*, published by Savas Publishing Company will want to know about the premier issue of *Journal of the Indian Wars*, just available from Savas and featuring *Custer at the Washita and Little Bighorn* with a number of articles on this subject.

Browsing through the newsletters of other RT's, we find an interesting note in *The Long Roll*, published by the Piedmont CWRT (Charlotte NC). Frank Vandiver, professor at Texas A&M and a CW historian of note, was interviewed recently by the *Charlotte Business Journal*. One question posed to Vandiver was, "Do you think Robert E. Lee was sincere when he offered his resignation after losing at Gettysburg?" Vandiver's response? "I think he was in a real mental funk and I don't think he would have been surprised if President Davis had accepted it. It was a terrible letdown: the whole ethos of Lee's army was wrecked. Long after the war, Davis wrote to another one of his former generals and said that Lee had never mentioned before, during or after that battle what the tactical strategy was. Davis was baffled by that. Even fifteen, twenty years later, he nursed some resentment."

One of the more interesting articles I've read recently is *A Question of Rhetoric: Joshua Chamberlain and the Surrender at Appomattox* in the fine monthly CW magazine, *North & South* (June, 1999). William Marvel, author of nine books on the CW including the recent biography of USA General Ambrose Burnside, makes a convincing case that the well-known story of Chamberlain's gallant reception of the Confederate surrender at Appomattox was a fanciful tale. Chamberlain first claimed this honor in 1903 at a meeting of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion in New York. The five USA general officers, including General Grant, who could have disputed Chamberlain's claim were dead, the last one having passed away only ten months before the MOLLUS meeting. Marvel observes about "the benevolent victor of Appomattox" that "we recognize him in this way because that was the way he presented himself. There seems no doubt that he acted courageously on the battlefield, but the details by which he painted himself such a heroic figure seem to have suffered a little embellishment." So often the origin of accounts of CW events and their persistent appeal through the years is more interesting than the purported events themselves.

For those desiring an indepth look at Confederate Wilmington, the *Lower Cape Fear Region During the Civil War*, a UNCW Pathways course to be taught by Dr. Chris Fonvielle, will be of particular interest. The course is scheduled for Monday evenings 6:30-8:30 from October 11 to November 15. The cost is \$55.00, and the registration deadline is September 24. Register with credit card by calling 962-3195 or send check to Division for Public Service & Extended Education, UNCW, 601 South College Road, Wilmington NC 28403.

You might also enjoy attending the series *Memory and Monuments: Shaping the Past and the Future in the South, 1865-2000 and Beyond*, sponsored by the 1898 Centennial Foundation and the UNCW Philosophy and Religion Department. The first of these is *Race and Reunion; The Meaning of the Civil War in American History* (David W. Blight) NH County Museum, September 24, 7:30 pm, followed by three additional lectures in October and November which explore the theme of racial reconciliation by notable historians of the South. Call the museum for further details.

The current issue of *Scuttlebutt*, published by the Friends of NH Public Library, features an article by Beverly Tetterton of the Local History Collection and a friend to many of us historical researchers thanking the Cape Fear Civil War Round Table and other donors who met the \$14,000.00 goal to keep two important wartime Lower Cape Fear maps at home. Last fall, our members contributed a little over \$1000.00 to this project. You can view the maps in the library's North Carolina Room.

BATTLE REPORT September 9 Meeting

Our first meeting of the new RT year was a lot of fun! Sixty-one members greeted friends after the summer break. (We've had just at sixty members at all our meetings since January, a consistent fifty per cent attendance rate which is excellent for a RT!) They enjoyed wonderful refreshments, prepared and served by Nancy Fonvielle and Karen Budziszewski. Thanks Nancy and Karen! Greeters Jack Kuske and Parks Downing welcomed visitors Ray Ceqelski, Mike Tickle, and Cliff Winefordner. Raffle winner Palmer Royal won a print entitled *Confederate Winter* (Cape Fear Civil War Shop), Jules Laskey a Year 2000 CW Calendar (Cape Fear Civil War Shop), Dan Geddie a relic box (Cape Fear Civil War Shop), Bill Clark a copy of *Moore's Guide to Bentonville* (Cape Fear Civil War Shop) and Richard Long a North Carolina cupholder (Cape Fear Civil War Shop). Thanks to Mike Budziszewski of the Cape Fear Civil War Shop for donating the raffle items. The raffle total was \$123.00!

Don Koonce gave us a superb history of the Third North Carolina Regiment. Though this unit sustained 60% casualty rates at Antietam and Gettysburg and 50% at Chancellorsville, it could boast one of the lowest desertion rates, only 150 of the 1700 men who served.

The regiment was mustered in May, 1861, one of the first ten organized in NC. The officers, generally from Wilmington, were from prominent families, though the enlisted men were, overwhelmingly, farmers from the Cape Fear region. The battleworthiness of the regiment was largely due to the strict discipline and daily drill ordered by Colonels Gaston Meares, Robert Cowan, William Lord DeRossett, William Murdoch Parsley, and Major Stephen Thruston. Don told us that the 3rd never fled a field of engagement

At Antietam, the regiment carried its assault into the Cornfield where it was caught in a terrific crossfire. Of its officers, only three escaped disabling wounds. After participating in Stonewall Jackson's flank attack at Chancellorsville, the 3rd was posted near the area where Jackson was wounded, and the regimental surgeon, Dr. Thomas Fanning Wood, Don's great-grandfather, was just across the pike. When he received word that an unidentified officer had been wounded, Wood sent his ambulance driver, Thomas Jefferson Capps of Wilmington, who removed Jackson from the field. This celebrated CSA regiment was also in the Mule Shoe at Spotsylvania where it was overwhelmed by USA General Winfield Scott Hancock's early morning Second Corps attack. All but thirty of the regiment were casualties. The 3rd NC ended the war at Appomattox where it surrendered fifty-five enlisted men and four officers.

The wartime journal of Thomas Fanning Wood, edited by Don Koonce, will be published later this year by the University of Kentucky Press. You'll want a copy for your library!

A PARTING SHOT

(The ever acerbic CSA Major General Daniel H. Hill was finally transferred from the ANV because of his frequent criticisms of Lee and fellow officers in the high command. John Courtney, a member of the Piedmont CWRT in Charlotte, reports the following quote from *Milestones* by Lew Powell. Hill replies on March 24, 1863 to USA General J.G. Foster's censure for burning Plymouth NC)

You forget, sir, that you are a Yankee and that Plymouth is a southern town. It is no business of yours if we choose to burn one of our own towns. A meddling Yankee troubles himself about everybody's matters except his own and repents of everybody's sins except his own. We are a different people. Should the Yankees burn a Union village in Connecticut or a codfish town in Massachusetts, we would not meddle with them but rather bid them God speed in their work of purifying the atmosphere.

Your second act of forgetfulness consists in your not remembering that you are the most atrocious house burner as yet unhung in the wide universe.