

CAPE FEAR CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

October 2002

Newsletter

Editor: Bob Cooke

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Thursday October 3 Meeting, Cape Fear Club (206 Chestnut Street, corner of 2nd)
Social Hour 6:30 p.m., Program 7:00 p.m.

Attention! Attention! Attention! Attention! Attention! Attention!

Please note the meeting date, as it is Thursday.

Our October meeting will be held at the Cape Fear Club. It will be a dinner meeting and your money (\$19.50) will have to be in by 27 September. Please note also that the meeting begins at 7 p.m. Dinner will include chicken, barbeque, baked beans, slaw, soft drinks, coffee and cake. We apologize for the short date. Our speaker will be A. Wilson Greene (see below.)

Our speaker at our September meeting, David Norris, now a resident of our fair city, gave us an in-depth look at Major General John Gray Foster's raid on Goldsboro. Foster, an 1846 graduate of West Point found himself in command of the (Union) Department of North Carolina in 1862. Mr. Norris told us that it was probably Foster's desire to use the men under his command before their enlistments ran out, that prompted his decision to attack Goldsboro, or more specifically, the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad-General Robert E. Lee's lifeline to the troops in Virginia. Foster had an idea on how to bring the war to a conclusion. He would cut the railroad, move back to New Bern, board vessels which would take him to Wilmington and then attack that city! By cutting the road, Confederates would not be able to speedily reinforce that city. The plans were ambitious, but never came to fruition. Gathering most of his men (some eleven thousand infantry and cavalry along with forty pieces of artillery, covered by several gunboats) Foster advanced on 11 December 1862, following the Trent River. After sharp skirmishes at Southwest Creek, Kinston and Whitehall (present-day Seven Springs) he moved on to the railroad bridge at Goldsboro. His attack was made in conjunction with General Ambrose Burnside's push to Fredericksburg. Even though Foster had received word of Burnside's failure, he continued on.

Approaching the tracks of the W&W, he sent two columns southward to strike at depots below Goldsboro (Everettsville and Mount Olive,) he moved with his main column, targeting the railroad bridge over the Neuse River. There he met Confederate troops under Generals "Shanks" Evans and Thomas Clingman, entrenched on the north side of the bridge. After a stubborn battle lasting several hours, a Union trooper managed to set the bridge afire and Foster, not wishing to press his luck decided it was time to leave. The Confederates didn't know that Foster's men were nearly out of ammunition. Making their way back to their New Bern enclave, the Federals would never again make such a large movement from their eastern bases. As Mr. Norris posed, was the raid successful? The planned attack on Wilmington fizzled out, but the railroad bridge was destroyed and one or two miles of track had been torn up, with several buildings and warehouses burned. At Whitehall, the Federals had damaged the gunboat (the CSS *Neuse*) being built there, but none of the damage was permanent. The railroad bridge was rebuilt and the road was back in operation in a short time and the gunboat was eventually completed. Foster was later transferred to the Department of the South and would ask to be relieved of duty due to injuries from a fall from a horse. He died in 1874 in Nashua, New Hampshire.

Our October speaker will be A. Wilson Greene. Mr. Greene is a Chicago native who received his B.A. in history from Florida State University and M.A. in History from Louisiana State University. He worked for 16 years for the National Park Service as a historian and Park Manager, including three years at Petersburg National Battlefield and 8 years at Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park. He left the Park Service in 1990 to serve as the first president and executive director of the Association for the Preservation of Civil War Sites, now the Civil War Preservation Trust. In 1995 he became executive director of the Pamplin Historical Park and the National Museum of the Civil War Soldier

Mr. Greene is the author of six books and more than two dozen articles on Civil War history. His most recent book is "Breaking the Backbone of the Rebellion: The Final Battles of the Petersburg Campaign," which will be the subject of his talk. He is currently working on a history of Petersburg during the Civil War. He is a frequent lecturer and tour guide for the Smithsonian Institute and a variety of other organizations.

Please join us in welcoming Steve Gunter as the newest member of the Steering Committee.

Patriotism or Piracy?

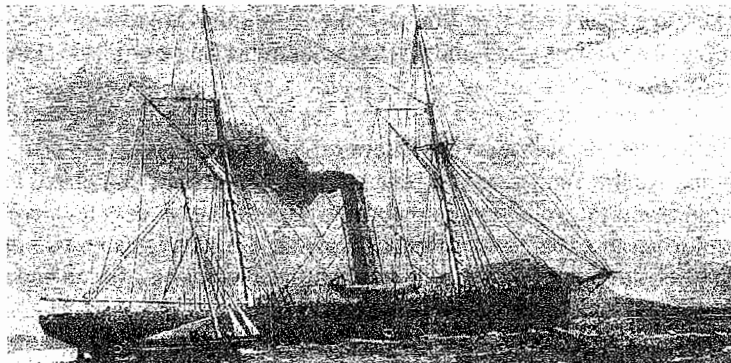
The U.S. mail steamer *Roanoke* pulled out of Havana harbor in November 1864, bound for New York. After about four hours, a man, dressed in a Confederate officer's uniform shouted, "In the name of the Confederate States of America, I demand the surrender of this vessel as a lawful prize!" Several other men with him moved quickly throughout the steamer disarming and rounding up the crew. One crewman resisted and "four balls pierced the body of the man." He was the only casualty of Lieutenant John Clibbon Braine's plot to seize a ship out from under the noses of the Yankees and bring it to Wilmington, N.C. He found, however, he could not get into the port of St. Georges in Bermuda, so after disembarking the crew and passengers on a passing brig, he set the ship afire.

It was not John Braine's first seizure of a northern steamer. In December 1863, he had boarded the steamer *Chesapeake* in New York. She was bound for Portland Maine, when Braine and his accomplices, took over the ship. He steamed the vessel northward, dropping the passengers and crew at St. John's (New Brunswick) where he attempted to get coal and other provisions. Massachusetts Governor John Andrew wrote to Navy Secretary Gideon Welles, "I pray immediate orders for pursuit to be made...and that proper requisition be made on British Government for the pirates[.]" Welles quickly ordered all available vessels to steam out in search of the *Chesapeake*. Braine's action in taking the vessel on the high seas caused the U.S. Navy to panic; orders went out to every port on the northeastern seaboard to dispatch any and all available warships to find the *Chesapeake*. In all, some fifteen ships were quickly readied to go. From New York harbor, the *USS Vicksburg*, *Sebago* and *Grand Gulf* went out; from Charlestown and Gloucester, Massachusetts, went the *Acacia*, *Cornubia* (a recently captured blockade runner) and *Magara*. From Portland the *Agawam* and *Dacotah* began their search. Yet another former blockade runner, the *Ellie and Annie* was also dispatched, but many of the vessels sent out were not ready for duty. The *Acacia* sent word to the Navy Department that they were sinking, while the *Sebago* found it necessary to return to port and it was thought best to recall the *Vicksburg* as well. The *Acacia* made it to a wharf where the local fire department assisted in pumping out water to keep her afloat.

The remaining ships scoured the areas thought to be likely havens, but the *Chesapeake* was on the move also. Braine didn't know it at the time, but his actions set off an international incident that would bring the United States and Great Britain to the brink of war. At St. John, He had sought money from the Confederate agent there, but had been refused aid. The *Annie and Ellie* (renamed the *U.S.S. Malvern*) came upon the *Chesapeake* near Halifax and as most of the Confederates had already fled, arrested the sole member aboard and put him "in double irons." A prize crew was then put aboard the *Chesapeake* and both ships began to make their way back to Boston (breaking several international laws.)

The *U.S.S. Decatur* found the two vessels and informed Lieutenant Nichols of the *Malvern* to bring the ship to Halifax, Nova Scotia instead. British feathers were immediately ruffled when, "Three war steamers bearing the flag of the United States having arrived here, and no officer belonging to either of them... reported...to the administrator of the government[.]" After the reason for coming to Halifax was explained (denying that they had captured any prisoners in Canadian waters,) the British took charge of the *Chesapeake*. When the U.S. Navy ships attempted to leave the harbor, the British demanded the release of the prisoners. When this request was ignored, the military governor had the forts at the mouth of the harbor readied for action! For a while, it looked like a battle might erupt. A Canadian lawyer wrote to Confederate Secretary of State Judah P. Benjamin that the prisoner, who, when given over to the British authorities, was charged by the Federals with murder and piracy. When he landed ashore, "one or two of our [sympathizers] stepped between him and the constables...[T]o the infinite amusement of the bystanders and the chagrin of the Federal consul and a few Yankee spies that follow in his train here [he was spirited away.]"

British and U.S. lawyers then took up the fight. Was it piracy or was it a legitimate act of war? Another sympathizer wrote George Davis (later to become the Confederate States Attorney General) of the case, requesting that the Confederate government be advised. If the men were acting on behalf of their government, the seizure was legitimate; if not, the men would be extradited to the United States and face murder charges. In addition, the *Chesapeake* and its cargo, said to be worth more than \$150,000 was also at stake. J. P. Holcombe, well-versed in admiralty laws, was sent as a special commissioner to Halifax to declare that the Richmond authorities assumed responsibility for the act. The case, which began in February, 1864 turned out to have several surprises in store. It was revealed that of



**The steamer *Chesapeake*, after her capture, landing passengers in the Bay of Fundy
(From *The Confederate Navy, A Pictorial History*.)**

all the men who took part in the seizure (some 14 or 15) only one could claim to be a citizen of the Confederate States. The main organizer of the affair, one Vernon Locke (also known as John Parker) had a Confederate "letter of marque," but that document was for another vessel, the *Retribution*. In addition, it was revealed that Locke, a Canadian, had enlisted the men in that country, a violation of neutrality laws. The fact also emerged that the men had sold a portion of the cargo (to try to purchase coal and food,) further painting them as pirates. The Confederate Commissioner, Holcombe, decided not to intervene in the case and admitted to Benjamin, "it appears to have been a capture made for the benefit of the Confederacy by a body of men without any public authority, and who, with [a] single exception...were British subjects." After reviewing the facts of the case, Benjamin agreed:

The case...seems to be simply that of men who, sympathizing with us in a righteous cause, erroneously believed themselves authorized to act as belligerents against the United States by virtue of Parker's...letter of marque[.]"

The British courts returned the captured steamer to its original owners and the men under Braine

and Locke were released from custody. Braine, who early in the war had spent six months in prison because of his Confederate leanings (he was released when he advised his captors that he was a British subject,) again embarked on his career when he took the mail steamer *Roanoke*, late in 1864. Once again he ran into Confederate bureaucracy. Even though he had a legitimate appointment as an acting master, from Secretary of the Navy Stephen R. Mallory and orders to, "proceed to Wilmington, and there make the necessary arrangements to capture upon the high seas the Federal steamer *Roanoke*," the agent at Havana declined to assist him and warned him against recruiting any Cubans for the operation! Forced to burn the steamer at St. George (Bermuda) he was arrested but escaped. He would continue to be a problem for the Union, capturing two schooners in the Chesapeake Bay, in late 1865. He made his way to England, remaining there until after the war, when he returned to the United States. He died in poverty in Tampa, Florida in 1906.

(Much of the above came from the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies and The Confederate Navy, A Pictorial History*, by Philip Van Doren Stern.)

The Lucky Winners

The winners of the raffle are: *Great Novels of the Civil War*, Richard Bellows; *Gods and Generals*, Ed Gibson; *With My Face To the Enemy*, Bob Quinn; *Arms and Equipment of the Civil War*, Larry Murray; *Chancellorsville*, Bob Cooke. If you have any items that you would like to donate as raffle prizes, please bring them to the next meeting and see Mike Budziszewski.

Well, the secret is out! At our September meeting we offered ball caps and golf-style shirts that display our new logo-The Cape Fear Civil War Round Table. The shirts are available in red, navy and beige and are 100% cotton. The caps are \$15 and also come in either beige or black. Please see Steve Gunter for ordering information.

The Tennessee-What General Sherman Says

General Sherman says the Tennessee was built cut sharp at the bow and plated to be used as a ram. She had heavy engines and sat well down in the water. But the heavy engines were then taken out and light ones put in, and when that was done, she stood above the mark of steadiness in the water. In other words she was top heavy, and the engines were too light for the vessel. As she had a very light load on this trip, the effect in a heavy sea can easily be imagined.

(From the *Wilmington Morning Star*, 17 February, 1871)



Next month, a day with an artillery unit!

The Civil War Along the Cape Fear Waters will be the N.C. Civil War Tourism Council's theme this year (October 25-27.) Speakers will include Steven Wise, Beverly Tetterton, Richard Lawrence, Dr. Peter S. Carmichael and Dr. Chris E. Fonvielle. For more information call (919) 876-6067 or e-mail at info@nccivilwar.com The cost for all sessions is \$135.