



THE DRUM & BUGLE
Voice of the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table
December 2024, Volume 21, Issue 12

Speaker: Rob Orrison
Topic: “Potomac Blockade”
When: Monday December 9, 2024
Location: Brock’s Riverside Grill
Times: Social Time Begins 6:00 pm, Dinner 6:45 pm, Meeting Begins 7:30 pm
Our Website: www.rappvalleycivilwar.org
Our Facebook: www.facebook.com/rvcwrt

Rob Orrison “Potomac Blockade”

Rob Orrison has been working in the history field for more than 25 years. He received his Bachelor’s Degree in Historic Preservation at Longwood University and received his Master’s Degree in Public History from George Mason University. Currently Rob serves as the Division Manager for the Prince William County Office of Historic Preservation. Rob also serves on the Board of Directors of the Frontier Culture Museum and serves as the Past President of the Virginia Association of Museums. His published works

include several articles and books focus on the Civil War and the American Revolution including A Want of Vigilance: The Campaign and Battle of Bristoe Station, October 14, 1863; Last Road North: Guide to the Gettysburg Campaign; To Hazard All: Guide to the Maryland Campaign of 1862; The Battles of Lexington and Concord and the Beginning of the American Revolution, April 19, 1775 and All That Can Be Expected: The Battle of Camden and the British High Tide in the South, August 16, 1780. Rob lives near Fredericksburg, VA with his wife Jamie and sons Carter and Grayson.

Potomac Blockade will include all associated skirmishes, battles, and personalities that relate to the Confederate blockade of the Potomac River, July 1861-March 1862."

**“Richmond Resistance: Spies of the Confederate Capital”
by Nathan Hall**

A Review of the November 2024 Program by Greg Mertz

Elizabeth Van Lew is widely recognized as the most prominent spy in the Confederate capital, but many other lesser-known Union sympathizers were clandestinely working in Richmond to the detriment of the Confederacy. Some of them have only recently been discovered. Nathan Hall explained the circumstances that enabled these people to carry out their subversive activities and highlighted some of their escapades.

Virtually all of the people that Hall discussed were residents of Richmond at the outbreak of the war; they were not outside Federal agents seeking to infiltrate Richmond’s everyday life. They had homes and businesses in Richmond and were all too some degree established citizens of the city that suddenly became the Confederate capital. They were not part of a federal agency to coordinate their efforts.

Most had a similar progression in the escalation of the level of benefit their activities provided to the United States government. They began by giving assistance to United States army prisoners of war sent to Richmond prison camps. They then helped some of those being held captive to escape. Next, they helped to sabotage supply trains enroute to the Confederate army. They helped to smuggle refugees, escaped prisoners and fugitive slaves to the Potomac River. Finally, they became paid espionage agents, working directly with Federal generals, supplying important information about troop

strengths, positions, movements, construction of ironclads and legislature discussions of the Confederacy.

When captured Federal soldiers from the first battle of Manassas began to arrive in Richmond and Confederate authorities pondered what to do with them, Unionists Franklin Stearns and his nephew E.W. Ross, offered up their factories as places to house the prisoners. They are friends of the Van Lew family, which also lived nearby and offered the soldiers such things as food, water and reading material. A newspaper article questioned why Elizabeth Van Lew and her mother were showing such kindness to enemy soldiers.

Richmond also suddenly had the need to set up hospitals for wounded Confederates, and soon constructed 150 barracks for the Chimborazo hospital. Dr. E.H. Smith, a supporter of the Union, served as the Confederate surgeon in charge of one of the five divisions. He has only recently been discovered to be a spy, with his appointment as the American consulate to Naples, Italy in the Grant administration as evidence of reward for his patronage.

German F.W.E. Lohman, lived in Richmond for twelve years before the war and ran a grocery store. He also served in a Virginia militia unit that witnessed the execution of John Brown, and was also a lieutenant in the first battle of Manassas before he resigned and helped to undermine the Confederacy instead.

Near the Lohman grocery was the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac (RF&P) Railroad station. The president of the RF&P was Samuel Ruth, a Pennsylvania born, and Union sympathizer, responsible for transporting supplies to Robert E. Lee's army. He operated the railroad during the Civil War as inefficiently as he could while still maintaining his position, despite a complaint from Lee with a recommendation of someone he was confident could do a better job.

When the Conscription Act was passed in the spring of 1862, requiring all between the ages of 18-35 to serve in the Confederate army, 21-year-old E. W. Ross pointed out his service running the jail in his factory. Ross became the clerk in charge of counting the Federal prisoners held in all of Richmond's POW camps. He had no role in February 9, 1864 breakout of Libby Prison via tunnel and was himself surprised by the escape of 109 prisoners. Accounts from remaining prisoners describe how the flabbergasted clerk

comically counted and recounted the inmates, but considering Ross's sympathies, Hall suspects that Ross was likely stalling to give the escapees a greater head start before reporting the incident.

Robert Ford was a free African American, captured while driving a wagon for the US army in the Shenandoah Valley. He was impressed into slavery and was assigned to take care of the horses at Libby Prison. Union leaning Abigail Green, lived near the prison, and struck up a conversation with Ford, opening up a flow of information from the prison to Elizabeth Van Lew. Ford was blamed for the Libby Prison escape, nearly died from the punishment of 500 lashes, and later escaped. He died in 1869, primarily because of the beating he endured five years earlier.

Burnham Wardwell ran a coal and ice business near Libby Prison, and lived next door to prison hospital #21. A US army prisoner and con artist known as "H.S. Howard" was working at the hospital. "Howard" and a friend were approached by a teenage girl named Josephine Holmes who handed them a note asking if they would like to escape. In one of the best documented of the spy activities, "Howard" first went to Wardwell's house, then to the farm north of the city belonging to William Rowley, who knew the grocer F.W.E. Lohman, whose store was next to the train station where Samuel Ruth worked. "Howard" was taken to U.S. Secretary of War Edwin Staunton, who sent him to Gen. Benjamin Butler at Fort Monroe. "Howard" agreed to go back to Richmond, providing Elizabeth Van Lew with a cypher, invisible ink, and counterfeit Confederate money. She and others officially became paid Federal spies from that point on.

The Kilpatrick-Dahlgren Federal Cavalry Raid launched on February 28, 1864 in an attempt to free prisoners in Richmond, and apparently also to assassinate Jefferson Davis, was a direct result of early intelligence provided by the spy ring. The spies learned that the prisoners of war were about to be sent to prison camps further south, including Andersonville, and the raid was an attempt to free them while they were still in close proximity to the Army of the Potomac.

Hall has also uncovered information that likely provides clarity to one of the legends entailing Elizabeth Van Lew and whether she planted an enslaved person in the Confederate White House. The claim appeared in her obituary, and a reporter interviewing her niece, who was 10 years old in 1864, thought

the name of the person might be Mary Elizabeth Bowser. What did occur in 1864 was that Mary Jane Richards, and another of Van Lew's slaves Wilson Bowser escaped. Mary Jane Richards indicated that on one occasion, under the pretense of picking up some laundry at the residence of Jefferson Davis, she examined some papers there. It is likely this incident that has been exaggerated over the years.

Friends of Central Virginia Battlefield Trust

As you know CVBT is a land trust. We focus on purchasing endangered battlefield properties. We do produce a large three-day annual conference, standalone events and need to interpret and maintain our lands, we need help in all of these. In the past, CVBT has had individuals from organizations assist us, and we are grateful, but now we would like to create an official volunteer group who would enjoy being part of CVBT's volunteer core.

We have created "**The Friends of CVBT.**" The intent is for this all-volunteer group is to be the "On Call" core of CVBT's volunteer group assisting in events and battlefield related needs. Active volunteer members will have the unique opportunity to be involved with events hosted by nationally acclaimed historians, assist in tours, and work on preserved battlefields. Participating volunteers will also be enrolled in the membership ranks of CVBT every year they contribute. CVBT will provide each volunteer with a CVBT volunteer staff shirt and CVBT official hat to wear at events or whenever wanted. We will be limiting this new group to 18 volunteers.

CVBT is now beginning our 27th year of preserving our local battlefields, the very battlefields you study and walk upon. We would be honored to have you join the ranks of CVBT volunteers to help us further our mission of preserving our Nation's history.

If interested please email our Executive Director **Terry**

Rensel at executivedirector@cvbt.org .

Office: 540-374-0900

CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE OF FREDERICKSBURG (CWRTF)

CWRTF meets 9 times a year on designated Wednesdays at Mary Washington Jepson Alumni Executive Center, 1119 Hanover Street. They

offer a buffet dinner followed by a Civil War-themed presentation. Reservations are required. Speaker/topic schedule can be found on their website at www.cwrftf.org, and will be updated here when the schedule is released for 2025.

November 20, 2024 Frank O'Reilly - Ambrose Burnside's Military Career

January 22, 2025 Charlie McDaniel – Witness to History: The Sentry Box House

February 26, 2025 Zachery Fry – A Republic in the Ranks: Loyalty and Dissent in the Army of the Republic

March 26, 2025 John Coski – Hunter Davidson (CSN)

April 23, 2025 Kevin Pawlak – Bristoe Station

May 26, 2025 Barton Myers – General Winfield Scott

June 18, 2025 Patrick Schroeder - Forgotten Friday: April 7, 1865 Actions in Cumberland County VA

Who We Are

The Drum and Bugle Newsletter is published monthly by the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table, Post Office Box 7632, Fredericksburg VA 22404. The newsletter is available on our website at www.rappvalleycivilwar.org. Yearly membership dues are \$40 for individuals and \$50 for families. Students are free. Membership is open to anyone interested in the military, political and social history of the American Civil War.

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