



THE DRUM & BUGLE
Voice of the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table
February 2021, Volume 18, Issue 2

Speaker: Steward Henderson
Topic: Fighting for Their Freedom: USCT
When: Monday February 8, 2021
Location: Virtual Meeting Via Zoom
Times: 7:30
Our Website: www.rappvalleycivilwar.org
Our Facebook: www.facebook.com/rvcwrt

“Virtual February Meeting”

Steward Henderson is a seasonal park ranger at the Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park. Arriving at the park in February 2005, as a volunteer and becoming an interpretive park ranger in May 2007. He is also the Past President and Co-founder of the 23rd Regiment United States Colored Troops. Joining with other Civil War historians, he is an author with the EmergingCivilWar.com He is now also a battlefield guide with Fredericksburg Tours, with fellow members John Kanaster and John Roos.

Other memberships include the, John J. Wright Museum, African American Civil War Memorial and Museum, American Battlefield Trust, Central Virginia Battlefield Trust, and 54th Massachusetts Infantry Co. B. He retired in January 2005, as an Area Manager and Senior Vice President for Retail Banking, at SunTrust Bank (now Truist Financial) Greater Washington Region, after a 35-year career in the financial services industry. Mr. Henderson attended Howard University, the Institute of Financial Education, the American Institute of Banking, and the Consumer Bankers Association Graduate School of Retail Bank Management (renamed Consumer Bankers Association Executive Banking School).

Steward first became interested in the Civil War as a six-year old boy, when his father brought him to the Fredericksburg Battlefield. Two years later, he became a Civil War buff when he visited the Gettysburg Battlefield on a class trip. He originally learned about the United States Colored Troops when his Uncle Mac Campbell began the Organization of Afro American Culture in the 1960's. At the Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center, he learned about the 23rd USCT. In the fall of 2010, while working at the Spotsylvania Court House Battlefield, he assisted his friend and historian John Cummings measure trenches for one of John's books. They discussed forming the 23rd USCT living history organization, in order to celebrate the 150th anniversary of their first skirmish. In January 2011, they held the first meeting of the 23rd with three other men, at the John J. Wright Museum in Spotsylvania County. In March of 2011, the museum opened their exhibition on the United States Colored Troops of Spotsylvania County. Steward gave a talk about the 23rd, however, Roger Braxton introduced him as an expert on the US Colored Troops.

After that introduction, Steward had to learn as much about the US Colored Troops, as he could. At that same time Chris Mackowski and Kris White asked his to become one of the authors at EmergingCivilWar.com. Two of his first blogposts were ***African Americans in the Civil War*** and ***The United States Colored Troops Fighting for Their Freedom***. His presentation of ***Fighting for Their Freedom*** will discuss the history of blacks fighting in the Civil War, with some emphasis on the 23rd USCT and the 54th Massachusetts infantries. He will present some of the famous battles of the USCT, in which they played major roles. He will discuss some of the people involved in recruiting soldiers and a general who praised their fighting during the war, to the Congress of the United States. He will clear up a problem picture of a USCT regiment that caused a discussion after one of his posts, when a second copy of the picture was accidentally omitted.

He has presented this program as a 45 minute talk, as well as a 2 hour program for the Mary Washington Elder Study.

This month we will continue virtual Zoom programming with a presentation on Fighting for Their Freedom: USCT by fellow roundtable member and historian Steward Henderson. Watch for your invitation! Remember that you can watch all six previous RVCWRT virtual programs in their entirety by searching "RVCWRT" on YouTube. Our speaker lineup for 2021 is now available on our new website: www.rappvalleycivilwar.org.

**"General Ambrose Burnside and the Blame for the Battle of Fredericksburg" by John Roos
A Review of the January 2021 Virtual Program by Greg Mertz**

When our speaker first visited the Fredericksburg Battlefield, his experience was similar to that of many. John Roos admitted that he was a victim of the rhetoric. His initial impression of Union army commander Ambrose E. Burnside is that he was incompetent; that he was not fit for command.

Then John returned to the park again -- not as a visitor this time -- but as an intern preparing to share the story of the battle with visitors. Roos queried Chief Historian John Hennessy and recalls that he said that as the one with ultimate responsibility for the Union conduct of the battle, the loss was Burnside's fault, and furthermore, Burnside admitted that the disaster was his fault. Roos felt that Burnside's confession of his liability for the result of the battle may speak to his *character*, but that his words may not reflect a fair and proper assessment of his role and accountability for the conduct of the battle. Roos would change his initial perception of Burnside.

To provide some context to Burnside's tenure directing the Army of the Potomac, Roos felt it important to consider the impact of the Emancipation Proclamation upon the commander. Some five months before the December 1862 battle of Fredericksburg, President Abraham Lincoln argued that freeing the slaves in those areas still in rebellion would be catastrophic to the Confederate economy and help bring the war to an end more quickly. However, Lincoln was convinced that a declaration to emancipate the enslaved would seem to be a desperate measure in the aftermath of the

recent Union defeat at the Seven Days Battle near Richmond. Lincoln felt the victory at Antietam, Maryland on September 17, 1862 gave him the opportunity to make the announcement. The notice declared that the proclamation would go into effect on January 1, 1863.

The army that would next fight at Fredericksburg was commanded by George B. McClellan at Antietam, and he would stay in command for seven more weeks after the battle before Lincoln relieved him and elevated Burnside to army command. Lincoln was concerned that relieving the victor of Antietam before the 1862 fall elections would harm Republican candidates, but Lincoln's party lost thirty seats in Congress as well as two governors anyway. With the elections over, Lincoln proceeded to demand that all armies in the field scurry to bring on battle before the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect, and the armies now had less than two months to act.

Reflecting back on his original perception of Burnside, Roos asked the audience to consider that if Burnside was so bad, why did Lincoln want him to command the army? The overture in the aftermath of Antietam was the third time that Burnside was offered command of the army, but each time Burnside responded that his friend McClellan was the only man capable of leading such a large number of men.

The man Lincoln had tapped to lead the nation's largest army was a colonel in the first battle of Manassas, taking over a division when David Hunter was wounded, and subsequently being promoted to brigadier general. In January to March of 1862, while McClellan was reorganizing his army and inching up the Peninsula toward Richmond, Burnside was actively maneuvering in North Carolina. Burnside demonstrated a strong understanding of logistics while leading his force to victory at Elizabeth City, Roanoke Island, and New Bern. In the summer of 1862, he joined the Army of the Potomac along with his troops from the New Bern Campaign, now designated the IX Corps. Burnside fought under his friend McClellan over the most difficult terrain on the Antietam battlefield. By late October McClellan had finally moved deep enough into Virginia to reach the vicinity of Warrenton.

Near there on November 7, Union General Catharinus P. Buckingham arrived from the War Department with a pair of envelopes. One relieved McClellan of command. The other elevated Burnside to take his place. Once again Burnside declined, but after being informed that such a decision would not result in keeping his friend in command but would advance General Joseph Hooker to the post instead, Burnside relented.

On McClellan's last full day of army command, he had ordered the army's pontoon bridges to be transported. Three days later Burnside also issued orders regarding the floating bridges, but rather than the pontoons having a head start enroute to him, the transport was delayed even longer. Captain Wesley Brainerd served with one of the pontoon trains and indicated that when McClellan's orders arrived, they were set aside until it was determined what the new army commander wanted to do. General David Woodbury, in charge of the engineers present with the army, argued to delay the march until the pontoons arrived. Burnside, who wanted to act quickly to beat potentially early winter weather, moved his army to Fredericksburg for an advance on Richmond, only to find that pontoons he expected to meet him there, were tardy.

Once Confederate army commander Robert E. Lee had learned that Burnside was opposite Fredericksburg, he realized that his new opponent had stolen a march on him. Lee directed troops to the North Anna River with plans to attempt to intercept Burnside about midway between Fredericksburg and Richmond. But when Lee realized that Burnside had yet to cross the Rappahannock, he instead started concentrating his forces at Fredericksburg. By the time the pontoons arrived in the Union camps, Confederates were on the ridge behind Fredericksburg – Marye's Heights.

Burnside communicated the problems to Washington, and his doubts that an attack could now succeed. Lincoln responded that if Burnside attacked, he *might* fail, Roos explained, but if he did not attack, he absolutely *will* fail. Burnside concluded that Lee would least expect an attack directly in front of him, so that became the basis for his plan. The attack would strike at two points. One attack would be against Marye's Heights. The most important attack, though, was against Prospect Hill, some four miles south of Fredericksburg. The terrain at Prospect Hill was not as intimidating as at Marye's Heights, and a successful attack at that southern end of the Confederate line could cut the line of supplies for virtually all of the army to the north of the hill.

Burnside's subordinate on the southern end of the battlefield was Gen. William B. Franklin. In conversation the night before the battle Franklin expressed confidence in the upcoming fight provided his orders permit him to form up under the cover of darkness for a sunrise attack. Franklin was also promised reinforcements be sent to him to cover his rear and protect his bridges, enabling him to launch a powerful assault with the rest of his troops.

Dawn of December 13, 1862 – the day of the battle – came and went with no orders. Gen. James Hardie then delivered the written orders about 7 am. Not only were the orders late, making a dawn attack impossible, and the promised reinforcements not where Franklin anticipated them, but the language of the order are not what he expected. The orders were vague, and they certainly did not authorize a huge assault. While Franklin boiled with rage, Hardie, who had the ability to clarify the orders, cowered. Once the orders were issued, Roos explained, Franklin was out of the picture. Franklin and his subordinates considered their orders in hand to attack with at least a division. They concluded that they would send two of the twelve divisions available to them against the Confederate line. Despite breaking through a weak point of the Confederate line with this relatively small force, the success was not reinforced. Burnside's main attack never materialized and failed, concluding about 2:30 pm.

On the northern end of the battlefield, Union force moved against Marye's Heights. Even though the fighting at Prospect Hill had ended in mid-afternoon, and even though the main attack was over, the Union attacks against Marye's Heights continued until dark. Roos reasoned that Burnside continued these series of futile assaults long after they had any chance or success or had any possibility of supporting the Prospect Hill fighting because Lee was an aggressive opponent whom Burnside wanted to keep on the defensive. Burnside's goal for continuing the battle was to prevent Lee from launching a counterattack against the broken Union troops scattered on the plain between the town of Fredericksburg and Marye's Heights. The battle has gone down as the most lopsided Union defeat of the war, largely because Union casualties in this sector of the battlefield numbered some 8,000 men when Confederate losses were about 1,000. Prospect Hill casualties totaled about the same numbers, but the ratio was different: Union losses were about 5,000 and for the Confederates about 4,000 fell.

Many students of the war only view the battle of Fredericksburg from the perspective of the disastrous Union onslaughts in front of Marye's Heights but Roos stressed that the battle made no sense unless one also considered the southern end of the field. Many people likewise view Burnside as the Union army commander at Fredericksburg in simplistic black and white terms. Roos concluded that there is a gray area regarding Burnside's performance that needs to be considered to properly judge his tenure as army commander.

Lincoln's Words Have Relevance Today

Abraham Lincoln's eloquent words at his two inaugural addresses are worth remembering.

March 4, 1861 – “We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.”

Despite these words, Lincoln ultimately faced the enormous challenges of a bloody Civil War and internal political strife. Four years later, he again offered hope to a divided nation beginning a long healing process.

March 4, 1865 – “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan -- to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

The Civil War had come with unanticipated and terrifying results, forever changing the American landscape. The war gave rise to important moral and political questions involving slavery and race, states' rights, historical interpretation and collective memory. These questions still resonate today, and are worthy of our continued study, discussion and debate.

The Mud March

Below is a link to an article done by the American Civil War Roundtable UK on Burnside's Mud March. The Mud March anniversary just recently passed us by. While looking for an interesting article on the topic, I could not help but to be struck to see what an overseas roundtable thought of a moment in our own neighborhood. Enjoy the article and be on the lookout for more.

<https://www.acwrt.org.uk/post/burnside-s-mud-march>

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. Each month, The Drum and Bugle newsletter is also placed on our web-site, www.rappvalleycivilwar.org. Yearly membership dues are \$35.00 for an individual, \$45.00 for families, and only \$7.50 for students. Membership is open to anyone interested in the study of the Civil War and the ongoing preservation of Civil War sites.

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