

# THE COURIER

## Northeast Ohio Civil War Round Table



### The NEOCWRT Summer Picnic

**Date: Sunday July 13, 2008 Time: 2:00 PM to Dusk**

**Where: 12611 Madison Road (Rt.528) Middlefield, Ohio**

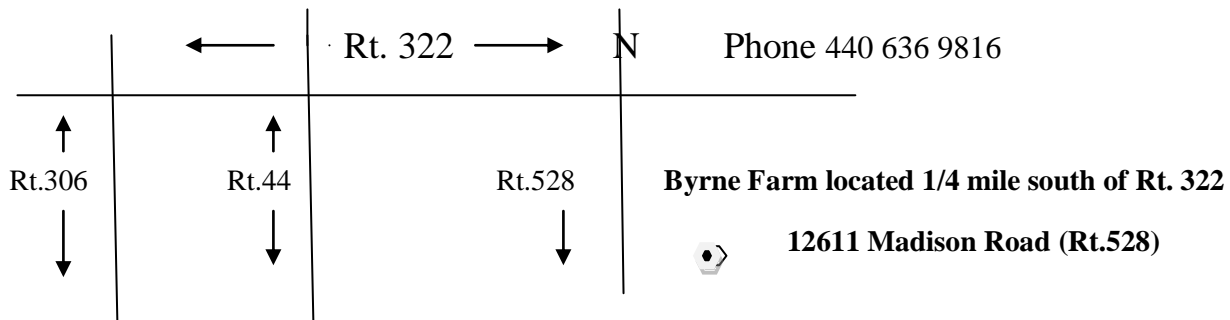
**Bring your choice of meats for grilling**

**Bring a dish and or desert to share**

**Please RSVP to Arlan Byrne by July 9<sup>th</sup> Ph 440 636 9816**

**All Members, Wives and Guests are invited**

**The 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Northeast Ohio Civil War Round Table Summer Picnic** will be hosted by **Pat and Arlan Byrne** at their farm in Middlefield, Ohio on **Sunday July 13, 2008**. Everyone is encouraged to attend and bring a guest. The Byrne farm is located at: **12611 Madison Road** just off Ohio Rt. 528 in Middlefield, Ohio. Everyone should bring your own entree and also a side dish and/or desert to share.



## **Civil War Minutes: by Franco M. Sperrazzo**

Our May 13<sup>th</sup> meeting was Ladies Night with about 4 dozen members and guests in attendance. Featured guest singer, musician and Ohio Historian, **Hank Arbaugh** was quite a talent and personable fellow. He sang and played some 18 tunes of Ohio related interests inviting our audience to participate. Highlights included Abe Lincoln's favorite "Dixie" and "15 Years on the Erie Canal". Mr. Arbaugh would like to return with his wife and perform an entire **Civil War** program providing song sheet lyrics to share.

On Saturday, May 17<sup>th</sup>, **Commander Karle** and **Captain Franco** lead a party of 20 explorers to the **Fort Le Boeuf Museum** at Waterford PA. Our purpose was to study the role of **George Washington** in the early events of the French and Indian War. A presentation by Reneta B. Wolyneec from the Department of History and Anthropology at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania was the highlight of this trip. While lunching at the historic Eagle Hotel, circa 1826, specializing in Amish cuisine, we raised \$100.00 as a donation toward the Fort Le Boeuf Museum on behalf of the **NEOCWRT**. In the afternoon we traveled to Erie Pa. to tour the **Erie Maritime Museum**, where Ted Karl has donated artifacts on display. We had the privilege to board the **U.S.S. Brig Niagara**, a replica of **Commodore Oliver H. Perry's** flagship during the War of 1812. This tall ship was rebuilt in 1988 to commemorate the 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the **Battle of Lake Erie** won in 1813. Our guide **Dennis Carlson**, also spoke to the **NEOCWRT** in 2004.

**Mr. Carlson** offered a historical background on the contribution the Erie area played in winning the war. Our club's generosity, approved by **President Bill Meissner**, paid the admission fees. This trip was well worth the time spent.

On July 13<sup>th</sup>, we hope to have our best turnout ever for our **4th annual NEOCWRT Picnic** at **Arlan Byrne's** Southern Plantation in Middlefield just off state route 528. Our special guest will be the **51<sup>st</sup> OHIO Volunteer Infantry**. They will encamp, teach and reenact for us. Above all they will educate our members and guests. Our gracious host, **Arlan** and hostess **Pat** will expect our arrival anytime between 2-3 pm. You may show up whenever you can. This is an open house and not a sit down dinner. We will fire up the grills by 4 pm. The 51<sup>st</sup> OVI program will run until 5pm. The day's activities will conclude with a bonfire and hayride from 6pm to dusk. Bring your main course and a dish to share. Beverages are provided and a large sheltered pavilion will be available in the event of in climate weather.

Thank you to **Brent Morgan**, on site in Richmond, Virginia coordinating our fall field trip for the **Richmond Campaign of 1862, Peninsula and the Seven Days**. At least 20 members and guests have confirmed reservations to attend this fall field trip September 18-21, 2008. Rooms are booking fast so mention **NEOCWRT** at the **Virginia Crossing Resort** in Glen Allen, Virginia. To secure your reservation, call **888-444-6553** or **804-727-1400**. The E-Mail address is: **virginiacrossingresort.com** and be sure to specify if you want single or double occupancy when you call.

Have a great, safe summer. If you know if any of our members are suffering health issues, please take it upon yourself to check in and give them a call. My number is (440) 442-4824, or email at **francomichael2414@yahoo.com** if you have any information on any of our comrades. We can pass this on to our executive committee and membership. Thanks for your continued support.

## The Plot to Burn New York City by Arlan Byrne

On Friday evening, November 25, 1864 at 8:45 P.M. a guest in the St. James Hotel in New York City thought he smelled something peculiar. He opened the door of his room, # 85 on the top floor, and found the hallway full of smoke. He immediately ran down the stairs calling for help. Within minutes another fire broke out at the St. Nicholas Hotel on Broadway and Spring Street. This was only the beginning, for before the night was over mysterious fires broke out in 12 hotels, **P.T. Barnum's Museum** and at the Hudson River docks. As the fire bells clanged and the volunteer fire companies raced through the streets from hotel to hotel panic and rumor began to sweep through the city. Crowds gathered in the streets and roamed about shouting "The Confederates are burning us out." "**They'll kill us all.**" "String 'em up and hang them from the nearest lamppost." Wise Southern sympathizers quietly slipped away to hide.

Actually the crowd had good reason to panic; for New York City had burned down three times in the past. In 1775, the night before the American Revolutionary War patriot, Nathan Hale was hung as a spy; fire broke out in downtown New York and threatened to overwhelm the city. The British occupation authorities blamed it on American arsonists. Then on the evening of December 16<sup>th</sup>, the great fire of 1832 began. The fire raged for 19 hours in sub-zero weather and destroyed over 700 businesses and homes. More recently on July 19<sup>th</sup>, 1848, fire again swept through virtually the same area, this time destroying more than 200 homes and businesses.

In 1864 New York City was still highly vulnerable to firestorms but this time the city did not burn. Besides luck and the absence of high winds, it can be said that the reason the city did not burn was the surprising competence of the volunteer fire fighting companies. For once the fire fighters spent their time fighting the fires instead of each other. Then there was the unbelievable incompetence of the arsonists. Note, almost all the fires were started inside hotels and 19<sup>th</sup> century hotel owners' greatest fear was fire! For that reason the New York Hotel Association insisted that all the city's hotels be equipped with fire-fighting equipment. Hotel employees were trained in the use of the equipment and therefore everyone knew just what to do in the event of an emergency.

This whole affair started in the **Queen's Hotel in Toronto, Canada** in a suite decorated with Confederate flags and emblems. By December 1863 it had become apparent to most observers, especially in Richmond that the war for Southern Independence was not going well. In the spring of 1864 Confederate Commissioners, Colonel Jacob Thompson and Clement C. Clay were dispatched to Canada by President Jefferson Davis to assist Commissioner James Holcome in his efforts to help escaped Confederate soldiers return to the South. The escaped troops were to carry out military operations against the Union while cooperating with anti-war Northerners in their efforts to force the Federal government to end the war. However, by the fall of 1864 the war situation had become nearly hopeless for the Confederacy. General Grant had unleashed Phillip Sheridan on the beautiful Shenandoah Valley in an operation that would later be called "The Burning." Sheridan Army set fire to barns, storage buildings, crops, and fields. The Yankees looted the private homes of the civilian population and destroyed everything in their path.

General William T. Sherman, after burning the city of Atlanta, torched everything in his path to the Atlantic Ocean. These were both scorched earth examples of modern warfare and total war.

Among the plotters in the Queen's Hotel in Toronto were sympathizers and hangers-on but things were not going well there either. Except for a small raid on St Albans, Vermont where the raiders robbed the bank, nothing of notable significance had been accomplished. Plan after plan had been discussed and discarded. Scheme after scheme had been tried and failed; until someone suggested why not burn down New York City in retaliation for the destruction of Southern cities?

Actually this was not such a bad idea for not only was New York City the largest city in the North it was also the center of the nation's business and commerce. In addition, New York had the largest number of Southern sympathizers or Copperheads of any city in the North. In fact some of those pro-Southern people were very prominent men. The owner of the New York Daily News, Benjamin Woods and his older brother Fernando, a New York politician, were outspoken Copperheads, as was James A. McMaster, owner and editor of the weekly "Freemans Journal" and "Catholic Register," Rushmore G. Horton, editor of "The Weekly Daybook" and Hiram Cranston, proprietor of the New York Hotel.

The grandiose plan devised in the Queen's Hotel suite was to set fires in various parts of New York City on November 8, 1864, National Election Day. This was to act as a diversion and in the resulting pandemonium, chaos and confusion, 20,000 Copperheads would seize control of the public and Federal buildings. In addition, Copperheads would take control of the police force and place **Major General John Adams Dix** under arrest in a jail cell. John Dix was in command of all military forces in New York (Department of the East) since the Draft Riots in July of 1863. By evening the

Confederate flag would be flying over the New York City Hall. Then in the most fanciful part of the plan, delegates from New York, New Jersey, and the New England states would meet and form a Confederate delegation that would co-operate with the Richmond Government to the end of the war. Even if the last part of the plan did not happen, at least the plotters could take satisfaction in the fact that fire and destruction had been brought to one of the cities of the North in retaliation for the burning of Southern cities and the cowardly actions of Sherman and Sheridan. As an editorial in the "Richmond Whig" put it, **"One New York City is worth twenty Richmonds!"**

On the morning of October 28, 1864 the plan was set and Colonel Robert M. Martin, his assistant; Lieutenant John W. Headley, Robert Cobb Kennedy, John T. Ashbrook, James T. Harrington, James Chennault and John T. Price all boarded a train in Toronto bound for New York City. There was another individual but he remains unknown at this time. The plotters were all officers in the Confederate Army.

The fire accelerant to be used was **"Greek Fire,"** a combination of phosphorus and bisulfate of carbon which will ignite spontaneously on contact with the air. There was some question as to how to use it, but the chemist that was preparing compound was expected to provide the necessary instructions. Arriving in New York City the Rebels were met by James A.



McMaster whose brother was a member of the Toronto Group. McMaster provided places for the men to stay in different parts of the city. He also arranged safe houses for meetings and a system of communications for the group. The plotters decided to see New York City just like any other visitors. They toured the sights visited saloons and a brothel, attended Broadway shows and even took in **P.T. Barnum's Museum** with its weird and unusual objects.

The week before the National election disaster struck for the plotters. Somebody must have divulged their plan because General Benjamin F. Butler and several thousand front line troops from Virginia arrived in **(Robert Cobb Kennedy photograph from the Library of Congress)** New York City to set up security checkpoints prior to the election. This was enough for the 20,000 Copperheads for all their enthusiasm vanished. So did John Price and the man without a name. However, the 6 remaining conspirators did not want to give up. So a new plan was devised. On Thanksgiving Day November 25<sup>th</sup>, they met and divided up 144 glass bottles of Greek Fire and that night they set out to burn New York City. They returned to the hotel rooms they had rented under assumed names and placed all of the bedding in a pile. They then scattered turpentine, rosin

and matches around the pile, broke some of the bottles of Greek Fire, locked the door and headed for the next hotel. The following night the arsonists boarded a sleeping car of the Hudson River Express and returned to Canada.

The morning after the fire, the New York City Police rounded up the usual suspects for questioning, plus anybody who even resembled the description of the men who had rented the burned hotel rooms. However, nobody was arrested. **The New York Hotel Owners Association** offered rewards of up to \$25,000 for the conviction of those individuals responsible for the fires. Luckily, no one was killed in the fires and the monetary damages were less than \$10,000 at the heaviest damaged hotel. Business rapidly returned to normal but Sergeant John A. Young in charge of the New York City Detective Bureau wanted the culprits and he believed he knew where to find them. Young had deployed male and female detectives to Toronto to shadow, follow and observe the Southern visitors staying at the Queen's Hotel in Toronto. The detectives befriended the conspirators, sat at the bar with them, drank and dined with them. When Young wired descriptions of the hotel renters to Canada they were quickly identified and the man hunt was on. When detectives spotted Robert Cobb Kennedy and John T. Ashbrook getting on a train headed for Detroit they wired ahead for U.S. authorities to apprehend the men. Detectives met the train and arrested Kennedy but Ashbrook had vanished.

Kennedy was tried as a spy by a military tribunal and convicted. Robert Cobb Kennedy was hung on March 25, 1865. The only other Confederate arrest for the fires was the leader of the plot, Colonel Robert M. Martin who was apprehended as he traveled south with Jefferson Davis after the fall of Richmond. Since the War was over and martial law was no longer in effect, a federal judge ruled that there was not enough evidence to bring Martin to trial and the charges were dropped. He later ran a tobacco warehouse in Evanston, Indiana until he died in New York City on January 9, 1900 of an old war wound. Still, the question remains, after all the careful planning, why didn't New York City burn down? Because as any respectable arsonist can tell you; when the fires were lit in the closed hotel rooms, the fire and smoke soon depleted the oxygen supply

And most of the fires were smothered. If the Southerners had just opened the windows before they left the rooms, the whole thing might have ended differently.



(P.T. Barnum's Museum picture from the New York Historical Society)

Sources for "The Plot to Burn New York City":

*American Heritage*, October 1971 "[New York is worth twenty Richmonds](#)"

[The Man who tried to burn New York](#)" by Nat Brandt, Syracuse University Press

[The Plot](#), *the New York Times*, November 27, 1864, also November 28, 1864

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**The Courier** is the monthly newsletter of the [Northeast Ohio Civil War Round Table](#)

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## **Victory Rode the Rails: The Importance of Railroads during the Civil War by Bob Baucher**

The American Civil War witnessed the first large scale use of railroads for the movement of both troops and supplies. Railroads became the life lines of both the Confederate and Federal armies but the North benefited from a larger and more efficiently run Military Rail System. Many historians have noted that the Union's superior railroad system was a major factor that contributed to the Confederate defeat.

As each successive year ended it became apparent that the side that controlled the rails had a tremendous advantage. In the end, the Confederate loss of just two railroads, the Petersburg – Richmond line and the Chattanooga to Richmond line sealed the South's doom at Appomattox Court House.

The South failed to capitalize on one of their major advantages namely the presence of interior rail lines. Greedy owners, unbending states rights advocates and unpatriotic railroad personnel all contributed to undermining the Confederate rail system. When the end came at Appomattox Court House in April, 1865, the Northern railroad system was larger and stronger than it had been before the war while the South's rail system was in total ruin.



*Hanover Junction, Pennsylvania 1863. Library of Congress photograph*

The iron horse had eclipsed the river boat as the carrier of farm products, manufactured goods and personnel by 1850. At that point, there were 9000 miles of rail lines in the United States. By 1860 there were 21,000 miles of rail lines, more than in the rest of the entire world combined. The railroad reduced the travel time from New York City to Chicago from two weeks to 2 days while going just 30 miles per hour!

In 1840, the South had 44% of the nation's railroad mileage; by 1850 it was down to just 26%. The South got into the railroad transportation business early on primarily to move cotton, tobacco, lumber and other farm products to the nearest port cities. The rail lines often did not link up because state officials were reluctant to lose business to neighboring cities or states. For example, North Carolina feared losing commerce to South Carolina. The North Carolina Legislature established a rail line gauge that was different than their neighboring state to the south! Southern rail lines also suffered from poor quality iron rails that were often made of soft iron. In some cases wood rails were "capped" with an iron jacket but this process was more apt to break under heavy use. The light duty construction of the Southern railroads could not sustain the beating presented by the demands of war time traffic. The soft iron rails wore out, the railroad ties were rotting away and the rail bridges were becoming more

dangerous.



*(Tredegar Iron Works Richmond, Virginia 1861 photograph National Achieves)*

The Tredegar Iron Works located in Richmond, Virginia was the major source of rails for the South's railroad system. However the advent of the Civil War changed the priority of the Tredegar Iron Works. Cannon replaced rails as their primary product. Therefore the South faced the daunting task of maintain 9000 miles of rail lines with little chance of replacement. One of the Southern Confederacy's main sources of locomotives and box cars was to capture them from



*General Herman Haupt photograph from the Library of Congress*

the Union. When the Civil War broke out in 1861 and while the state of Maryland debated which side they would cast their lot with, John W. Garnett, President of the B&O Railroad, and a staunch Unionist, offered his railroad to the Federal Government for their military use. In January of 1862, the United States Congress granted President Lincoln the power to take over control of any railroad if he deemed it necessary. In February of 1862 Secretary of War Stanton established the United States Military Railroad Command. He then hired David McCallum, President of the Erie Railroad, to be the head of the military railroad system. There never was a comparable position in the Confederacy.

Another very big advantage for the Union came when McCallum hired a true genius, Herman Haupt as Chief of Construction and Transportation. Haupt was a wizard at construction and repairing railroads and bridges in record time. Haupt's biggest achievement was building a 400 foot long and 80 foot high railroad bridge with unskilled labor. He used green lumber and saplings, and it took him less than two weeks to build it! President Lincoln upon seeing the bridge remarked: "I have seen the most remarkable structure that human eyes ever rested upon. Haupt has built a bridge over which loaded trains are running every hour and upon my word running every hour and upon my word gentlemen there is nothing in it but bean poles and cornstalks."

Haupt used combat soldiers and contraband on his work crews. The awe struck contrabands described Herman Haupt's management skills as such; "the Yankees can build bridges quicker than the Rebs can burn em down!" Meanwhile the Confederates constantly struggled with the

efficient control of their rail line schedules. Herman Haupt made sure there were no empty trains and no delays of his trains. He also perfected the removal of casualties from the battlefields on trains that were making return trips. The South had no such practice. They continued to cede control to the respective states and thus hand tied the Confederate military operations.

During the winter of 1863-64 General Grant formulated a new strategy of concentrating on the Rebel Armies and their bases of supply. He worried less about conquering Confederate territory. Grant raided the Rebel rail lines and isolated them from the farms, factories, foundries and ports that helped to sustain the Confederate Armies. Grant planned three all out raids to break the South's will to carry on the war:

- 1. Move from Southeast Virginia through North Carolina and break the 2 railroad lines to Virginia then capture the port city of Wilmington, North Carolina.**
- 2. Capture the port city of Mobile, Alabama then move inland and destroy all the railroad lines that supply Atlanta, Georgia.**
- 3. Capture Atlanta and move to the Atlantic Coast destroying Georgia's railroads along the way.**

This had the effect of drying up the Rebel supply system and breaking the morale of the Southern troops as well as the private citizens of the Confederacy. Food and the basics of life came to be in short supply. After this was completed the Federal Army besieged Lee's Army at Petersburg, just 25 miles south of Richmond. Petersburg was the key railway hub that led to Richmond and the end of the war. This strategy also helped to increase the desertion rate to 40% of the Confederate troops east of the Mississippi River. The slaves who were doing most of the labor on the Southern railroads deserted to the Union Army and north in great numbers.

Did victory ride the rails? The formation and management of the United States Military Railroad Command had everything to do with the success of the Union Army and the defeat of the Southern Confederacy. Victory did ride the rails!

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Sources: *Victory Rode the Rails* by George Edgar Turman

*Why the South Lost the Civil War* by Beringer, Hathaway, Jones and Still  
*Battle Cry of Freedom* by James McPherson, 1980 Oxford University Press

*The Effects of Southern Railroads on Interior Lines during the Civil War*  
by Thomas George Ziek Jr. Texas A&M University, 1992



## Northeast Ohio Civil War Roundtable Fall 2008 Field Trip

**Richmond, Virginia September 18<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup>**

**The Confederate Capital and the Seven Days Battles**

**Hotel accommodations at the Virginia Crossings Resort**

**Thursday Sept. 18<sup>th</sup>** Check into the hotel and enjoy dinner with NEOCWRT Friends

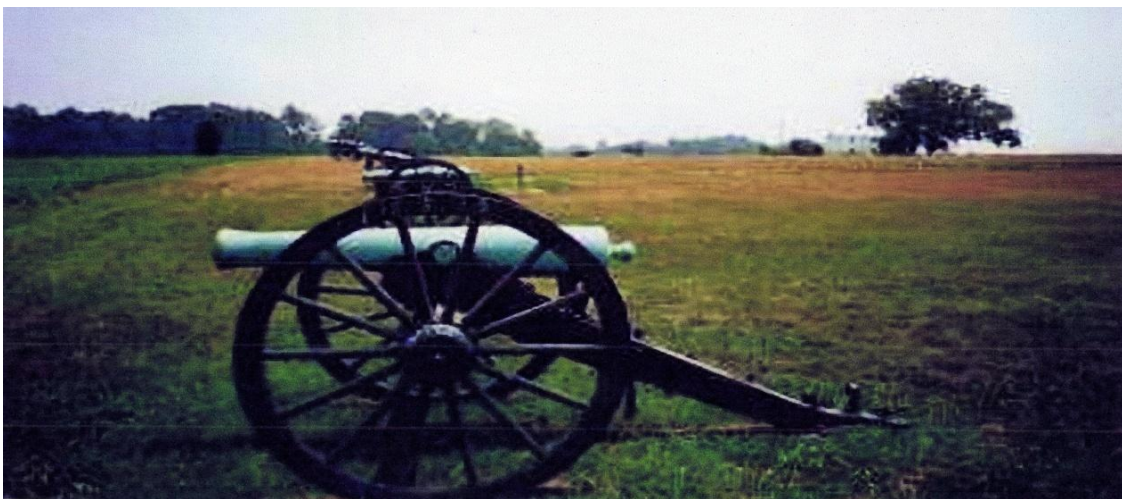
**Friday Sept. 19<sup>th</sup>** visit the Confederate White House, Museum of the Confederacy, Hollywood Cemetery, Monument Boulevard and the Tredegar Iron Works.

**Saturday Sept. 20<sup>th</sup>** National Park Service Guide Mike Gorman will present a tour of the Battles of the Seven Days sites.



Confederate White House above

Malvern Hill below



**Call Norty London at 216 321 7695 to make your reservations**