

Monroe County Civil War Roundtable

The Sentinel

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Lincoln: Arms Expert of the Civil War

To honor Abraham Lincoln in the month of his 200th birthday anniversary, Roundtable member Charlie Matson spoke on a little known aspect of the man...his deep involvement in weapons development during the Civil War. Charlie's presentation began with the debatable point that mechanical aptitude and perseverance were two of the most important attributes that Abraham Lincoln brought to the presidency, and they were critical factors in the ultimate Union victory.

Lincoln is the only one of our 44 Presidents who holds a patent. In 1849 he patented a system to assist river boats cross shoals and snags. Another example of Abe's technical talent was his self taught skill as a surveyor. A lesser known, but perhaps more significant, evidence of Lincoln's know-how is a lecture that he prepared and presented to paying audiences in 1858 entitled "Discoveries & Inventions".

In early 1861, Lincoln wasted no time inserting himself into the testing and decision process for new weapons. These new weapon demonstrations for Lincoln were labeled the "Champagne Experiments" by some skeptics. During his first months in office, Lincoln learned that he could not rely on the advice or support for new technology from his very old Commanding General of the Army, Winfield Scott, or the elderly Chief of Army Ordnance, General James W. Ripley. In his search for good technical help, Lincoln posed several science questions related to new weapon ideas to the most noted scientist of the country at that time, Joseph Henry, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institute. Lincoln eventually settled on the relatively young commander of the Washington Navy Yard, John Dahlgren, to be his primary technical advisor for weapon technology and met with him frequently.

The North was home to thousands of inventors imbued with "Yankee ingenuity," so new concepts for weapons came flooding in to the President who used Captain Dahlgren to pick the ones that warranted testing and possible selection for development. In early 1861 Lincoln was asked to consider the use of large balloons for observation and signaling when Joseph Henry introduced Thaddeus Lowe to him. Using balloons in a time in when rifles could hit big targets as far away as 1200 yards seemed insane to most men, but Lincoln never assumed that an idea was mad just because madmen pursued it. He instantly saw how important good observations across the Potomac River would be to the vulnerable capitol. He authorized funding for an initial demonstration and within a week had received the first telegraphed message to be sent from an observation balloon. Within the month Lincoln had seen plenty of justification to order a fleet of balloons, but it still took a personal visit to General Scott to make it happen.

Lincoln is also remembered for his part in the smart decision to gamble on the bold recommendation by Gustavus Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, to quickly respond to expected launch of a Confederate ironclad on the Chesapeake. Abe approved of the unproven design of the arrogant engineer, John Ericsson. It was the small, low slung Monitor that was armed with only two cannons. Due to its simple design it was built in only 110 days and promptly brought a stop to the big Confederate ironclad. Another unconventional warship design from Fox that Lincoln evaluated and then championed was the river raft designed to carry the massive Dictator mortars for a low cost, a design that worked well at Ten Mile Island.

The last and most important of the new weapon technologies that Lincoln helped push to the front lines was the repeating, breech loading rifle. Lincoln personally inspected and helped test two versions of these Spencer rifles. The President's perseverance was fully tested by the reluctance of the very stubborn General Ripley to switch to the more expensive design with its special ammunition, but he prevailed in the end. MCCWR member, collector and veteran presenter

Bob Willey assisted Charlie by showing his own valuable Spencer and Henry repeaters to give hands-on evidence of how these weapons radically changed the odds where ever the Union troops showed up with them.

April Elections Update

Elections for the officers (president, secretary, treasurer) of the MCCWR will be held in April. A nominating committee has been appointed to select a slate of candidates and bring it to that month's meeting. The slate of candidates will be published in next month's *Sentinel*. If you have any interest in serving the roundtable next year in any capacity, or if you have input on someone who would, please contact one of the present officers or board members.

New Books on "The Late Unpleasantness"

John Schmutz, the author of a new book entitled *The Battle of the Crater: A Complete History* has asked us to consider his efforts. The book delves into the military and political background of the battle by tracing the rival armies from the early months of 1864, through their bitter conflicts of the Overland Campaign, and ends with the crossing of the James River and the onset of the siege of Petersburg. A hard look at the way the war was perceived by both sides after over three years of bloodletting is carefully laid out in order for the reader to appreciate the relative impact the battle had on the body politic of both sides. Thus, according to the author, while his work is lengthy for an analysis of a battle which lasted less than ten hours, he invested a considerable amount of time in placing the battle in its proper perspective in history. No work to date, he asserts, has so treated this important, intriguing conflict which has received far less than its due in serious academic analysis. For further information, check:

<http://www.amazon.com/BATTLE-CRATER-Complete-John-Schmutz/dp/0786439823>

You might also want to note the recent publication of a book entitled *Georgia's Confederate Soldiers Who Died as Prisoners of War 1861-1865* by James Stallings. The book is a result of more than six years research in identifying over 3600 Georgians who died in United States Prison Camps and Hospitals during the War Between the States. You can visit the author's website at www.jamesstallings.com where you can view a photo of the book as well as a description of the contents, with price and ordering information.

Last Month's Quiz Answers

1. How many wives did Captain David "Big Dave" van Buskirk of the 27th Indiana have? - **three**
2. Identify the battle of 10/14/1863 where A.P. Hill was caught between the Union II and III corps and which resulted in the death of CSA General Carnot Posey. - **Bristoe Station**
3. Name the Union general and former Army of the Potomac commander who, while in charge of the Department of Ohio, ordered the arrest of Vallandigham and the closing of the Chicago *Times*. - **Ambrose Burnside**
4. During the March to the Sea, Sherman divided his army into two wings. Name their commanders. - **Oliver O. Howard and Henry Slocum**

Now try these (easy ones) in the spirit of Lincoln...

1. Lincoln and his wife, Mary, had four sons. How many lived to adulthood?
2. How many steps are there leading up to the Memorial Building at the Lincoln Birthplace National Historic Site in Hodgenville, KY?
3. Most people know about Lincoln's two principal secretaries in the White House, John Hay and John Nicolay. But he had a third lesser know assistant. Who was it?
4. Lincoln was the only president (to date) to hold a patent. What type of device was it for? (If you were at the February meeting, you should know!)

Do You Have Anything for *The Sentinel*?

If you have anything you would like to share with the other readers of the newsletter, let us know. It could be an announcement of an upcoming CW-related event, a question you don't know the answer to, a really good book you would like to share a brief review on, or even a comment on the content of the newsletter... anything. If so, just send the information to Steve Rolfe, current MCCWR president, at strolfe@indiana.edu, or mail it to 2421 N. Fritz Dr. Bloomington, IN, 47408. We must, of course, reserve the right to edit as necessary, and, while we will not print names if requested, a name must accompany any item.

March Program on Fort Pulaski

Join us on March 10th to hear David Wiley speak on “**The Fall of Fort Pulaski: Revenge for Fort Sumter.**” David is a long-time member of the Sons of Union Veterans, the secretary of the MCCWR and has presented to the roundtable in the past, most proudly on his family “home” unit, the 8th Maine.

April: April 14- Tony Trimble on his ancestor, General Isaac R. Trimble, CSA.

New Event in Kentucky Needing Help

[We recently received this request over the “CW Hotline” and thought we would pass it on- ed..]
“Hello, my name is Marietta Napier. I am on the board of "Friends of Dumont Hill". Dumont Hill was a Union encampment site in Allen County, Kentucky. We are in the process of preserving this site. As one of our annual events we have a summer festival. I am looking for re-enactors, crafters, and sutlers that might like to participate. It will be June 27 - 28. I would be very grateful for any contacts you might be able to give me. We are still a very young organization and are trying very hard to get established in the Civil War community. Any suggestions would also be greatly appreciated. Thank you for any assistance you might be able to offer.”

Marietta Napier napiers@nctc.com

Contact Information

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Or on the web at <http://mypage.iu.edu/~rawatson/roundtable/> .