

# THE DISPATCH

The Civil War Round Table of New York, Inc.

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## The Fredericksburg Campaign: Winter War on the Rappahannock”

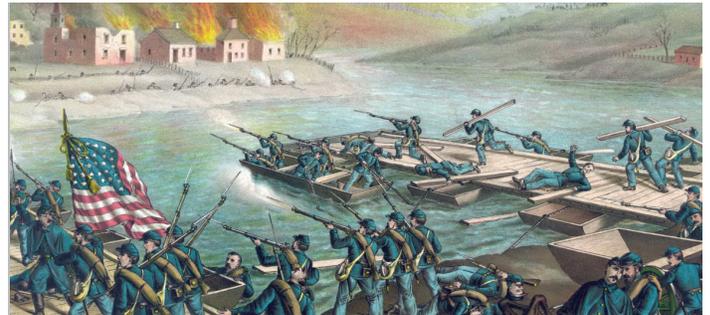
By Francis Augustíne O'Reilly

When the Battle of Fredericksburg is mentioned what comes to mind? The “Stone Wall” on Marye’s Heights? A bungling Ambrose Burnside? A lop-sided Confederate victory?

This book might leave you thinking differently about the battle. Yes, Burnside bungled by crossing the Rappahannock River directly under the Confederate guns. And the assault against the “Stone Wall” was a terrible waste of Union lives. The battle was a lop-sided Confederate victory, but there is much more to the story. The first two chapters suggest a few weeks in November 1862 could have been the beginning of the end for the Confederacy. Burnside stole a march on Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia, leaving the latter planning to fall back to the North Anna River (which Grant’s Overland Campaign reached only in mid- May 1864). Jackson’s Corps was in the Shenandoah Valley leaving Longstreet’s Corps facing the Army of the Potomac (AoP) alone along the Rappahannock. Multiple Union feints led Lee to believe the AoP would cross upstream of Fredericksburg. But Burnside marched down river, planning to cross at the town. He arrived by mid-November when only a few Confederate troops defended the town and the heights beyond. Communications screw-ups and poor weather led to delays, which resulted in the pontoons - and the engineers to construct them - being delayed several weeks, by which time Lee had unified his Army and... well, the rest is history.

Even then the story is not quite complete. Maj. Gen. William B. Franklin’s “Left Grand Division” crossed the river against minor opposition south of town. However, Burnside worried they could be trapped if the Rappahannock rose, so Franklin was called back until the pontoon bridges were completed. When they finally did cross, Jackson’s Second Corps manned the high ground south of the crossing point and prevented Franklin from making much headway. Despite this, George Meade’s Division was able to breach A. P. Hill’s Light Division line. The singular Union success that received no support (blame David Birney, among others) ended with Meade and Gibbon’s troops retreating to the river.

The Battle of Fredericksburg is much more than “that terrible stone wall”. It saw the first-ever American amphibious assault, the only instance of street fighting in North America, and the first use of the magnetic telegraph “as a means of communication to the field of battle”.



This is not to say, the action on the northern end of Fredericksburg is ignored. It is well covered (in five chapters) but it’s demoralizing to read about individual brigades repeatedly assaulting impregnable defenses and suffering astonishing losses (5,000 Union to the Confederate’s ~1,000). Many first-hand accounts tell the same story in different words. Soldiers disappeared like:

“...dew in the morning sun.”

“... grass [or wheat] before the scythe.”

“... snow melting on the warm earth.”

The final assaults against Marye’s Heights were, in Burnside’s mind, intended to prevent Jackson’s reinforcement to the south of town and to increase Franklin’s chances of a breakthrough. The sad fact is that Franklin’s Left Grand Division never launched an attack following Meade and Gibbon’s withdrawal earlier that day!

The book ends, much like Burnside’s AoP command, with the Mud March. I am left with the impression that even the forces of Nature conspired against him! All told “The Fredericksburg Campaign...” is a sad story, but the book is an excellent source for what history does not usually record: Burnside’s original plan and why it failed, the actions south of town, and the circumstances hindering Burnside.

(Many of you will recall the author was the tour guide for the 2015 CWRNTNY’s 58th Annual Battlefield Tour “Grant’s Overland Campaign - Part 1” covering The Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House battles).

Reviewed by *John Allen*

2022 • MEETING SCHEDULE • 2022

• March 9<sup>th</sup> •  
NO MEETING

• April 13<sup>th</sup> •  
TBD

• May 11<sup>th</sup> •  
TBD

## President's Message

As Emily Dickenson wrote; "March is the month of expectations" - especially true during the Civil War.

In March 1861, Texas became the seventh state of the lower South to be admitted to the Confederacy, while losing their legendary Governor, 67 year old Sam Houston, a strong, stubborn Unionist, who refused to take the oath of allegiance to the new nation.

Abraham Lincoln was inaugurated as the nation's 16th President, trying to convince the seceding states that he was not the threat to their society that they believed him to be: "In your hands, my dissatisfied fellow countrymen, and not in mine, is the momentous issue of civil war. The government will not assail you. You can have no conflict without you yourselves being the aggressors. You have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while I have the most solemn one to "preserve, protect, and defend" it. . . . Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will again swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched as they must be, by the better angels of our nature."

Alas, we now know, Lincoln's eloquence was all in vain.

After the first winter of the war, in March 1862, there were signs of the great battles to come. General Grant, victorious at Forts Henry and Donelson, was ordered to move his army south, using the Tennessee River, and he chose the area around Pittsburg Landing in South Tennessee to concentrate his forces. Shortly after, Confederate General Albert Sidney Johnston ordered his troops to move to the railroad junction town of Corinth, Mississippi, just a dozen miles south of Grant's chosen position.

In the East, General McClellan – who recently lost his position as the Union General-in-Chief, but retained command of the Army of the Potomac – began embarking the Army on ships for transport to the portion of Virginia between the York and James Rivers – "The Peninsula". In an epic encounter that forever changed Naval Warfare, two ironclad warships, the CSS Virginia (née Merrimack), and the USS Monitor, fought to a draw, but which left the Union blockade in place.

In the Shenandoah Valley, at Kernstown, a small, relatively insignificant battle signaled the start of the soon to be legendary "Valley Campaign" of one General T. J. "Stonewall" Jackson. In the far, far, West, the Battle of Glorietta Pass in New Mexico – although a Confederate tactical victory – would result in the end of their ambitious campaign to win the west (including California!) for the South.

March 1863 saw the passage of the Federal Draft Act, which would spur recruitment, but resulted in only providing about 162,000 men for the Union cause – only about 6% of the total troops eventually needed. After months of frustration around the Confederate fortress city of Vicksburg, General Grant would start sending his troops marching south, down the Louisiana side of the Mississippi, in anticipation of Federal gunboats and transports running the fearsome River batteries of Vicksburg to a rendezvous with just troops, and with destiny.

The two most important pieces of the team that would lead the Union to victory were put in place in March 1864: General Ulysses Simpson Grant (promoted to Lieutenant General - three stars) as Union General-in-Chief; and General William Tecumseh Sherman as commander of the Western Theater.

With the end of this most brutal war actually in sight, President Lincoln delivered his timeless Second Inaugural Address: "With malice toward none, with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive 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 orphan – to all which may achieve a just and lasting peace, among ourselves and among all nations."

(We certainly cannot end better than that!)

Take care and stay well,

Paul Weiss



## THE DISPATCH



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## Question of the month:

**What Union commander was first to receive significant information from observation balloons?**

## Civil War Events During the Month of March 1864

- 1 **Federal cavalry raid by Judson Kilpatrick and Ulric Dahlgren on Richmond, Virginia**
- 5 **Confederate government orders all vessels to give half freight capacity to government shipments**
- 9 **U.S. Grant promoted to Lieutenant General**
- 12 **Red River Expedition begins in Louisiana**
- 20 **Confederate raider CSS Alabama arrives at Cape Town, South Africa**
- 21 **Nevada and Colorado territories admitted into the Union**
- 22 **Fighting at Bald Springs Canyon on Eel River, California**
- 25 **Attack on Paducah, Kentucky by Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest**

From: *battlefields.org*

### Hugh J. Kilpatrick

Hugh Judson Kilpatrick, or Judson Kilpatrick as he was more commonly known, began his military career after graduating from the United States Military Academy in 1861 at the outbreak of the war. On May 9, 1861, he became captain of the 5th New York Infantry after serving shortly as a commissioned second lieutenant. On June 10, 1861, he became the first officer of the Union army to be wounded during the war, while leading men at the Battle of Big Bethel. In September of 1861, he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel of the 2nd New York Cavalry, and fought during the Battle of Second Manassas. In December of 1862, he was promoted to Colonel. In February of 1863, Kilpatrick took command of a brigade in the newly formed Cavalry Corps of the Army of the Potomac. He led his brigade throughout the Chancellorsville Campaign, during which he harassed Lee's army and destroyed Confederate supplies. He took part in most of the major engagements of Union cavalry in the Eastern Theatre, including battles at Beverly Ford and Stoneman's Raid. During the Gettysburg Campaign, Kilpatrick took part in the largest cavalry battle of the war on June 9, 1863 at the Battle of Brandy Station. On June 14, 1863, Kilpatrick was promoted to Brigadier General. He commanded troops at the Battle of Gettysburg, and clashed with Confederate forces numerous times, including one charge after the failure of Pickett's Charge that led to great Union casualties amongst his ranks. He continued to attack the Confederates forces throughout their retreat to Virginia.

In February of 1864, Kilpatrick commanded the 3rd Cavalry Division during a very unsuccessful raid on



Born - January 14, 1836

Died - December 4, 1881

Richmond intended to free Union prisoners of war. This caused Kilpatrick to be transferred to the forces of General William T. Sherman. He was wounded on May 13, 1864, at the Battle of Resaca during the early days of the Atlanta Campaign, but returned in July to continue harassing Confederate forces on Sherman's "March to the Sea" as well as during the Carolina Campaigns, where he accompanied General Sherman to surrender negotiations with Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston. His reputation during the war for launching foolish cavalry charges and dangerous attacks led many to refer to Kilpatrick as "Kil-Cavalry."

After the war, Kilpatrick was involved in politics, and served as the United States ambassador to Chile.

From: *battlefields.org*

## FREDERICKSBURG *by Thomas Bailey Aldrich*

The increasing moonlight drifts across my bed,  
 And on the churchyard by the road, I know  
 It falls as white and noiselessly as snow...  
 'T was such a night two weary summers fled;  
 The stars, as now, were waning overhead.  
 Listen! Again the shrill-lipped bugles blow  
 Where the swift currents of the river flow  
 Past Fredericksburg: far off the heavens are red  
 With sudden conflagration: on yon height,  
 Linstock in hand, the gunners hold their breath:  
 A signal-rocket pierces the dense night,  
 Flings its spent stars upon the town beneath:  
 Hark! — the artillery massing on the right,  
 Hark! — the black squadrons wheeling down to Death!

From: *discoverpoetry.com*



### SUGGESTIONS

The Dispatch welcomes articles,  
 book reviews (non-fiction only)  
 and suggestions.

Just send them in to our mailing  
 address.



### Quotes - Quotes - Quotes

The following quote was sent in by *Stan Weinstein*.

Abraham Lincoln once asked General (Winfield) Scott this question:

“Why is it that you were once able to take Mexico City in three months with five thousand men, and we have been unable to take Richmond with one hundred thousand men?”

“I will tell you,” said General Scott. “The men who took us into Mexico City are the same men who are keeping us out of Richmond.”

*Confederate Veteran Magazine*,  
 September 1913, page 471.

### Answer:

Ambrose P. Burnside, near Fredericksburg,  
 Virginia, December 1862.