THE STONE WALL

The Newsletter of the Bull Run Civil War Round Table P.O. Box 951 • Manassas, Virginia, 22111

March 1993

BRCWRT is Proud to Present Dr. Richard J. Sommers

Dr. Sommers, currently the chief archivist-historian at the U.S. Army Military Institute and a long time member and officer of the Harrisburg Civil War Round Table, will be our guest speaker at the March 11 monthly meeting.

His presentation is entitled, "Fury at Fort Harrison." it concerns the great onslaught by the Army of the James on September 29, 1864, which breached the outer defenses of Richmond and threw the Confederate capital into the greatest danger of capture by a major field army which had the potential of actually holding her (as opposed to a handful of cavalry raiders which might have entered the city but could never have retained her) which the city ever faced up to the day of her downfall. Ben Butler commanded the attacking army, with David Birney, Edward Ord, and Godfrey Weitzel as his major subordinates. The defenders included John Gregg's Texans, Richard Ewell's Richmond garrison, and Dick Anderson's veterans, all under the overall command of R.E. Lee. It is a story of opportunity gained and lost and of heroic defense against tremendous odds by a handful of outnumbered but determined Confederates. Together, these forces clashed in the "Fury at Fort Harrison."

Dick Sommers was born in August of 1942 in Hammond, Indiana and now resides in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. He received his B.A. from Carleton College in 1964 and his Ph.D. from Rice University in 1970. His professional positions since his college days include graduate instructor, editorial assistant, research historian, editorial advisory board member on the papers of J. Davis, board of directors member for the Society of Civil War Historians, instructor at the U.S. Army War College, and chief archivist-historian. His fields of competence include the American Civil War, American military history and military history.

Sommers' publications are too numerous to list in this space, it's hard to imagine anyone writing more about the Civil War than Dick has. In addition to contributing to many collections and journals, Dick is the author of *Richmond Redeemed: The Siege at Petersburg*.

★★★★★★★★★★

Dick belongs to many professional associations and has served as president or vice president of the Harrisburg CWRT four different times. His honors include the Bell Wiley Prize for the best Civil War book in 1980-1981, and the Distinguished Alumnus Award from Carleton College for scholarly achievement.

Don't miss this presentation on March 11, at 7:30 p.m., at the Manassas National Battlefield Park auditorium.

A "Mosby" February

Our thanks go out to Tom Evans and his associate Jim Moyer for the Mosby presentation on Feb. 11. These gentlemen are both good supporters of our Round table and we are grateful to them for responding so quickly and willingly to our need for a speaker in February. We look forward to taking the Mosby tour in April with these folks and that grand-old "Mosby-Maker," Virgil Carrington Jones, who will also be our guide.

GREAT PRESENTATION, TOM.

Mancini 1 1/2, Round Table 1/2

Our president, Dr. Armando Mancini, has stumped the round table one and a half times with his mystery quizzes. The first quiz was partially answered by Ralph Swanson. The second quiz stumped everyone. Here are the answer's to last month's photo quiz.

1) The gentleman's name was Charles Mason.
2) He was born in 1804.
3) He was born in New York.
4) His pre-war military achievement that he is known for is that he graduated first in his West Point class of 1829, just in front of Robert E. Lee.

After graduating from West Point, Mr. Mason became an attorney in New York and also practiced law in Washington D.C.

We were introduced to Mason by round table member Art Candenquist in his talk to our club on October 1991, during his show-and-tell on Civil War personalities.

Mancini will be back next month. Get your reference books ready.

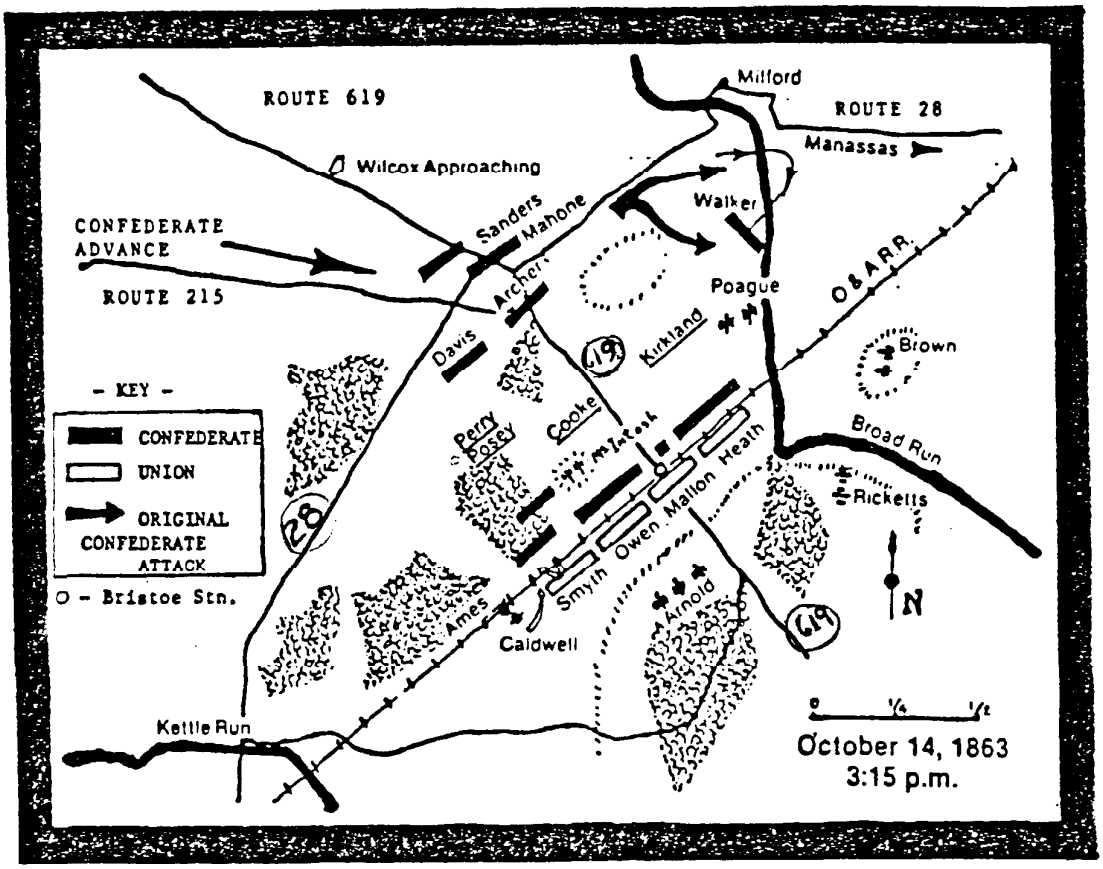
BATTLE AT BRISTOE STATION - 14 OCTOBER 1863

The following material is a summary of the battle of Bristoe Station (now Bristow) prepared by and used as a handout by the Manassas NBP. It was prepared from the book that we talked about at the Feb. meeting; namely, The Road to Bristoe Station, Campaigning with Lee and Meade, Aug. 1-Oct. 20, 1863 by William D. Henderson, 1st Edition, published by H. E. Howard Inc., Lynchburg, Va., 1987. It is provided as a basis of furthur discussion about Bristow at the March RT meeting.

Three months after the Gettysburg Campaign ended, Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and the Army of The Potomac, under Gen. George Meade faced each other near Culpeper, Virginia. Both armies were inactive and each had taken the opportunity to detach troops to bolster other armies operating in Tennessee. Lee, in an attempt to prevent further Union reinforcements from moving west, and to rid the area of Federal occupation forces, sent his troops north of the Rapidan River on October 9, 1863. His objective was to turn Meade's flank and then destroy the retreating army. Meade became aware of the Rebel offensive and attempted to escape towards the heights of Centreville. The Confederates followed, catching up with the tail end of the Federal army as they were attempting to cross Broad Run near Bristoe Station, a stop on the Orange and Alexandria Railroad.

At around two-thirty on the afternoon of October 14th, the vanguard of General Ambrose P. Hill's corps approached Bristoe Station from the west along what is now modern Route 215. Observing from the high ground overlooking the station, Hill noticed bluecoated soldiers near Milford, on the east bank of Broad Run, leisurely eating a meal, the men apparently oblivious to the approaching danger. Thinking he had caught the last of Meade's column vulnerable, the Confederate leader hurried forward two brigades of North Carolinians, led by Generals John R. Cooke and William W. Kirkland. The two brigades, part of Gen. Henry Heth's Division, deployed to the right of the road with Poague's artillery giving support from the left.

As the Confederates stepped off to attack, the lead Union units of Brig. Gen. Governeur K. Warren's II Corps were approaching Bristoe Station from the southwest. Alerted to the presence of the Rebels to their north, the Union troops placed themselves behind the railroad grade that crosses the road (modern Route 619). The Confederates soon noticed the increasing numbers of Yankees on their right flank and shifted their line of march from the previous target to meet this new threat. When the the Southern battle lines approached within one-hundred yards of the railroad, the bluecoats behind the embankment cut loose with a veritable hail of musket and artillery fire. Whole sections of Rebel troops were sliced away as the Federals lashed out at the easy targets crossing the open fields.



Through this leaden storm, the Confederate advance continued. Although the Rebels outnumbered their opponents, the Union strength lay in their strong position behind the railroad grade. In some places, the Confederates advanced to within forty yards of the embankment. Many of the men in Gen. Kirkland's Brigade succeeded in crossing the railroad near the bridge over Broad Run, but were soon driven back by Union musket and artillery fire. At around three-thirty, the shattered remnants of Cooke's and Kirkland's Brigades retreated amid heavy Yankee fire. They formed a line about 400 yards from the railroad embankment. Although the Federals had given their enemy a terrific mauling, their commanders feared a renewed Confederate effort by an overwhelming number of nearby troops. Gen. Warren gave the order for his forces to slip out of Bristoe as soon as darkness could hide the movement.

The Southern historian Douglas Southall Freeman has called the 4 hour long contest "as badly managed battle as had ever been fought under the flag of the Army of Northern Virginia." The casualties support this view. While Warren suffered 550 killed, wounded, and missing, Lee's losses numbered over 1900. Gen. A.P. Hill took full responsibility for the debacle in that he failed to reconnoiter the enemy before directing his assault against the Federals behind the railroad embankment. Hill would report, "I feel I attacked too hastily..." The next day Lee rode with Hill to the scene of the disaster and remarked to his crestfallen commander, "well, well General, bury these poor dead and let us say no more about it."

TO GET TO THE BRISTOE STATION BATTLEFIELD FROM THE MANASSAS N. B.; TURN LEFT OUT OF THE VISITOR CENTER DRIVEWAY. PROCEED ON ROUTE 234 FOR THREE MILES AND TURN RIGHT ONTO GODWIN DR.(ROUTE 661). PROCEED FOR THREE MILES AND TURN RIGHT AT THE STOP SIGN ONTO NOKESVILLE RD.(ROUTE 28 SOUTH). PROCEED FOR TWO MILES AND TURN LEFT AT THE TRAFFIC LIGHT ONTO BRISTOW RD.(ROUTE 619). PROCEED FOR ONE MILE TO THE TOWN OF BRISTOW (SPELLED BRISTOE AT TIME OF BATTLE). BEFORE CROSSING RAIL-ROAD TRACKS, TURN LEFT ONTO MILLFORD RD.(ROUTE 660) AND BEGIN READING THE TEXT.

Book Review
To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign
by William J. Miller

To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign, by Stephen W. Sears, (Ticknor & Fields, 215 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10003) 1992. Illustrations. Maps. Black & White Photos. Bibliography. Notes. Index. P. 468. $24.95 Hardcover.

In 1881, Gen. Alexander S. Webb published the first authoritative history of the Peninsula Campaign of 1862. At 219 pages, Webb's volume was far too small to attempt comprehensive coverage of the five-month-long campaign, which was as complex -- militarily and politically -- as any operation of the war. So completely have qualified historians ignored this major campaign, however, that Webb's inadequate book is arguably still the best. It is nothing less than astounding that, until now, no modern historian has published a serious study of Gen. George McClellan's dramatic attempt to take the capital of the Confederacy. Stephen Sears deserves our gratitude, for he has filled a major gap in Civil War literature. *To the Gates of Richmond* is a fine book, interesting to the buff and valuable to the student. It is by far the best overall study of the Peninsula Campaign, surpassing by a wide margin all previous studies. However, my enthusiasm for this book is not without bounds.

Mr. Sears is the widely read author of *Landscape Turned Red*, considered by many to be the best study of the Battle of Antietam. He is the author of two books on George McClellan, including the biography *The Young Napoleon*, and he probably knows more about that general's life and writings than anyone alive. Yet some who see Mr. Sears primarily as a writer are reluctant to accept him as an historian. This distinction implies he is a better handler of words and sentences than of documents and facts. This view has some validity, for I find myself unable to assess the book by any single group of standards. Should we judge it as scholarship, or should we take it merely as narrative history aimed at the casual buff and the broader market beyond? If we look at it as the latter, I can find few flaws. By casual standards, this is a very good piece of work. But Mr. Sears has gone to the trouble of including hundreds of citations, three appendices and a lengthy bibliography, so it seems fair to view his work as scholarship. Gauged by these higher criteria, *To the Gates of Richmond* falls short of first-rate in several areas.

There is an unsettling breeziness about the way Mr. Sears relates events. He is altogether too cavalier with facts, which may belie a lack of mastery of his subject. For example, when narrating the Battle of Beaver Dam Creek he says the men of Gen. George McCall's Pennsylvania Reserves division had never been in combat. This is not true. *Some* of those men had yet to See the Elephant, but more than one-third of the division had been in combat at least once. Similarly, Mr. Sears reports that two companies of the Pennsylvania Bucktails were captured in this battle because they did not receive their orders to withdraw. Both companies *did* receive their orders, but one was too stubborn to withdraw and the other too slow. These may be fine points, but it is attention to such details that separates middling scholarship from first-rate work. What is puzzling is that Mr. Sears made these errors despite using the correct sources.

On the matter of sources, as thorough as Mr. Sears' research appears to have been, he did not consult many, many valuable primary materials. They *are* out there. Historian Barbara Tuchman addressed the question of when historians should quit their research. She said she always gave young historians the same advice she gave her daughters about to go out on dates: "Go home half an hour before you want to." The danger in researching too much, of course, is that the historian may get bogged down in minutia or tire of the subject before sitting down to write. The good historians, however, the best ones, have the endurance to stay in the trenches until they have exhausted the material. Mr. Sears went home too early.

Mr. Sears' failure to commit to scholarship is most obvious in his favored format for citations. He does not key his notes to individual quotations or passages but instead "runs a tab," lumping several sources and several paragraphs together, listing them all under one citation. As a result we usually get less than one note on a page (.82 per page, to be exact). This format minimizes the occurrence of superscript citation reference marks in the text. Some authors and publishers consider these references distracting. Fewer marks might appeal to casual buffs and the mass market, but also make the endnotes extremely difficult to use. Citations are the bone and sinew of scholarship, and, by treating them so casually, Mr. Sears has done a disservice to students and historians interested in his sources.

Some of Mr. Sears' methods concern me. He is prone to making assumptions and drawing conclusions without presenting all the evidence. For example, he declares that the reason for "Stonewall" Jackson's oddly inert performance at White Oak Swamp is "obvious": The general was exhausted. This is not a new theory, nor is it satisfactory as an explanation. Mr. Sears presents no new evidence -- and not even all of the old evidence. He certainly is entitled to his interpretation of what ailed Jackson, but none of the many qualified historians who have addressed the issue have found the truth to be "obvious."

The most disturbing failing in Mr. Sears' method, however, is his treatment of George B. McClellan. Mr. Sears does not like the general, and he has been carrying on his campaign against McClellan's reputation through four books now. One need not be an admirer of McClellan, and this reviewer is not, to be bothered by Mr. Sears' attacks. It is an historian's role to gather facts, analyze and interpret them and then draw conclusions or offer hypotheses. An historian has an obligation to fairness and objectivity and must never leap too far from his facts. In *To the Gates of Richmond*, Mr. Sears abandons his objectivity and passes judgments on McClellan he has no right to make. For example, on the morning of June 30, 1862, with a battle -- perhaps the climactic battle of the campaign -- expected to begin almost any moment. McClellan left his army poorly aligned and unentrenched around a crossroads named Glendale and rode several miles to the James River, ostensibly to look for a refuge for his army (engineers had already found a refuge, and the general knew it). He boarded a Navy gunboat and remained afloat while his army, without a commander, fought a desperate battle for its existence. The reason for this dereliction of duty? Cowardice, says Mr. Sears. "The truth of the matter is that George McClellan had lost the courage to command," writes Mr. Sears (p. 281), and he reaffirms this judgment in several places in the text. Cowardice is not a charge to be tossed about, not only because it is so offensive but because the evidence is almost always circumstantial. Mr. Sears' portrait of McClellan as a vain, paranoid liar is can be justified by the large body of evidence from the general's own pen. But how Mr. Sears can look into the heart of a man long dead and be confident that the man lost his battle with fear on a summer day 131 years ago passes beyond the realm of history into clairvoyance. Mr. Sears was much fairer in his treatment of the same incident in *The Young Napoleon*, where he suggested, but did not affirm, that fear drove McClellan from Glendale. We may suspect fear mastered McClellan that day, but we cannot declare it as fact.

Finally, the quality of the prose in this book disappointed me. I do not believe the writing in *To the Gates of Richmond* is of the same high caliber as we enjoyed in *Landscape Turned Red*. Mr. Sears seems more committed to passive sentence construction and too willing to rely on hackneyed expressions (far too many of the U.S. Regulars in this book are "hardbitten" veterans). Rarely in this book does Mr. Sears' prose sparkle as we have seen it do elsewhere. Still, he knows how to tell a story, and he has a good eye and ear for the telling quote from a letter or journal.

I think many of the problems with this book stem from its scope being too large. From a student's standpoint, I am not sure a campaign of this length and complexity can be satisfactorily handled in one volume. The Battles of Seven Pines, Gaines' Mill and Glendale all merit books of their own. But, if one were to set out to write a one-volume study of the campaign, I doubt anyone could make a much better job of it than has Mr. Sears.

Ultimately, all criticisms will probably prove moot, for *To the Gates of Richmond* will find a broad readership, and it deserves to, despite its failings. Mr. Sears has written an undeniably good and valuable book. *To the Gates of Richmond* may disappoint some students, but at least they now have a solid foundation from which to begin their own investigations into this fascinating and neglected campaign.

This review is reprinted courtesy of the publishers of *Civil War Regiments: A Journal of the American Civil War.*

MOSBY'S CONFEDERACY

Spring Tour

As mentioned at the last meeting, you must sign up for the April 24 Mosby Tour by our next meeting. Please have your checks in by then. The cost is $30, payable to the BRCWRT.

In History....

The General Nearly Loses His Lady

Ralph Swanson

George B. McClellan is best remembered for his difficulties in leading Union armies against southern foes. Five years before the Civil War he nearly lost in love too--also to a well-known southern general.

In April, 1854, Lieutenant McClellan met Ellen Marcy, the 18-year-old daughter of Captain Randolph B. Marcy (later a brigadier general and McClellan's chief of staff). Young George was immediately smitten by the lovely "Nelly." He proposed marriage in June of that year, only to be rejected.

Determined to bide his time and hope for a change of heart, McClellan initiated extended correspondence with Mrs. Marcy, Ellen's mother. He wrote to her as would an old friend of his assignment to survey the Dominican Republic as a potential naval base and coaling station, and from the Crimea while on his 1855 assignment to study European military methods. he continued to correspond even after leaving the Army in 1857 for a job as chief engineer on the illinois Central Railroad.

Meanwhile, another West Point graduate, posted to Washington in 1855, was introduced to Ellen. In the spring of 1856 he, too, proposed marriage. Ellen accepted and the young officer immediately wrote to Captain Marcy, then stationed in Texas, for her hand. The captain objected; the lieutenant was a mere line officer with few prospects. he warned Ellen that life with him would bring only impoverishment and unhappiness at wilderness posts.

Mrs. Marcy was even more adamant in her resistance. Her objections were due to "a youthful indiscretion" on the part of the suitor, about which she had become aware. this euphemism referred to a venereal disease which the young man had contracted during his West Point years. As he himself described it, "my health and constitution had become so impaired, so weakened, that no mother could yield her daughter to me, unless to certain unhappiness." Alas, Ellen ended the engagement.

After more than five years, McClellan's persistence, and the elder Marcy's ardent support, paid off. In the fall of 1859, the Marcy family visited McClellan at his home in Chicago. There McClellan proposed again and this time his proposal was accepted. The couple was married in 1860, just one year before the outbreak of war which would pit McClellan against the luckless young officer who had to forego the hand of the beautiful Ellen Marcy.

His name? A.P. Hill.

The unsuccessful suitor
A.P. Hill

LAST NOTICE
You May be Discharged!

This is the last issue of *The Stonewall* that will be mailed to you if you have not re-enlisted for the 1993 season. Don't let your membership expire. Mail your check with this form, today. If we don't hear from you, you won't hear from us.

Dues Payment Form January - December 1993

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