



**THE DRUM & BUGLE**  
**Voice of the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table**  
**November 2022, Volume 19, Issue 11**

**Speaker:** Frank O'Reilly  
**Topic:** William Barksdale and the December 11 Fight for the City  
**When:** Monday November 14, 2022  
**Location:** Brock's Riverside Grill  
**Times:** Social Time Begins 6:00 pm, Dinner 6:45 pm, Meeting Begins 7:30 pm  
**Our Website:** [www.rappvalleycivilwar.org](http://www.rappvalleycivilwar.org)  
**Our Facebook:** [www.facebook.com/rvcwrt](https://www.facebook.com/rvcwrt)

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**Frank O'Reilly "William Barksdale and the December 11 Fight for the City"**

The Battle of Fredericksburg on December 13, 1862, resonates through history as General Robert E. Lee's most resounding one-sided victory. But Lee said the battle had already been won two days earlier—on December 11, when a group of disruptive Mississippians and Floridians, led by an amateur soldier, altered the way soldiers do battle. General William

Barksdale opportunistically rewrote the rules for conventional warfare and transformed the military landscape of Fredericksburg—which led to one of the most unprecedented fights in American military history. We will talk about Barksdale’s battle along the Rappahannock and in the streets of Fredericksburg—and how it transformed the modern battlefield.

My latest book, “The Fredericksburg Campaign: Winter War on the Rappahannock,” received a 2003 nomination for the Pulitzer Prize in Letters. Released by LSU Press in December, 2002, it has won the 2002 Capital District (Albany, NY) Book Award; the 2003 James I. Robertson, Jr. Book Award; the 2004 Daniel Laney Book Award; and the 2004 Richard Barksdale Harwell Book Award. I received both my BA and MA in American History with a concentration on Early American Military History and Civil War Studies. I did my undergraduate work at Washington & Lee University before joining the National Park Service at the Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park. I worked briefly at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, and then returned to Fredericksburg as an historian in 1990. I have been an historian for the battlefields for 34 of my 35 years of service.

I have written numerous articles on the Civil War and Mexican War for national and international journals; and introductions to quite a few books. I released my first book on the Fredericksburg Campaign titled, Stonewall Jackson at Fredericksburg, in 1993. I have appeared in quite a few documentaries, on CSPAN, and have lectured extensively on military history to audiences around the world, from the Pentagon to numerous conferences in the United Kingdom at Oxford.

I am currently writing a book on the 1862 Battle of Malvern Hill and the Seven Days’ Battles around Richmond.

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**“America’s Buried History: Landmines in the Civil War”  
by Dr. Kenneth Rutherford  
A Review of the October 2022 Program by Greg Mertz**

Our round table often hosts speakers who have written multiple books. Usually, such speakers have authored books on different aspects of the Civil War, and address our group on one of those topics. Our speaker this month, Dr. Rutherford is recognized worldwide for his work regarding landmines, ranging from how and why they were built, to the impact they have on their victims. He has published five books on various aspects of the subject, including one that focuses on the landmines in the Civil War. While

Rutherford's main focus was on his Civil War book, he also shared pieces of his other experiences and work spreading word about landmine issues.

While working for the International Rescue Committee in Kenya and Somalia, Rutherford's vehicle struck a landmine and he lost his legs. The experience changed his life. His advocacy work includes escorting Princess Diana on her last humanitarian mission of her life for a visit with landmine survivors in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1997, and among his many honors, he was also awarded the Nobel Peace Prize that same year. One of the horrifying statistics about land mines is that despite being designed to injure enemy soldiers, 90% of the victims of these indiscriminate weapons are civilians. Today there are about 80 million mines still in the ground around the world, in 80 countries, despite the fact that most of these nations are currently at peace. The mines can still explode after being in the ground for a range of 20 to 100 years.

Rutherford dropped his sons off for a high school competition at VCU and decided to explore some of Richmond's history when he made an "accidental discovery." When visiting Fort Johnson, he learned that Confederate soldiers took unexploded Union shells and repurposed them into landmines. Despite working in the field for 25 years by that point and his unparalleled familiarity with landmines, Rutherford had never before come across a Civil War era account such as that. This proved to be the start of a nine-year journey to learn our nation's history regarding the development of this dreaded weapon now used all around the world.

Rutherford found that "the American Civil War was the first war [in which] landmines were used on a comprehensive basis." In 1854, landmines were used in one battle during the Crimean War, but the first person to ever die from a landmine was during the Civil War in Virginia in 1862. Because the Federal Navy enacted a blockade of ports in the South, the Confederacy countered by using various underwater explosive devices to either damage enemy ships, or force enemy naval vessels to slow down and present an easier target for Confederate artillery.

Some of that same technology was later applied to landmines, which were first used in North America at Columbus, Kentucky. Columbus was a key Confederate fortified position along the Mississippi River. Soldier journals indicated that Confederates placed mines in roads along two land

approaches to the river defenses. These were “command detonated mines” meaning it was exploded by someone who made a decision to ignite it, either by simply pulling a string or by sending an electrical impulse through a wire. These landmines produced no casualties because Columbus was evacuated by Confederates after another position along the same line of defense -- Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River – fell on February 16, 1862 and made Columbus untenable. When the Federal forces then occupied Columbus, the soldiers stepped on the landmines and found the wires running to the Confederate defenses, but with no enemy soldiers present to detonate the mines, the Union soldiers were unharmed.

In the spring of 1862, Union forces advanced up the Peninsula, approaching the British constructed earthworks of the American Revolution, then improved and held by Confederates at Yorktown. The landmines used there by the Confederates were “victim detonated mines” that were activated by the victim stepping on or riding over the mine. On the evening of May 4, 1862, the Confederates withdrew from Yorktown to Williamsburg. The next day, as Federal troops advanced to occupy the abandoned earthworks, they were surprised to find that some of them were blown up. As the Confederates retreated from Williamsburg, they also placed landmines along the roads to slow the Union pursuit.

One of the challenges of researching Civil War landmines comes from the labels given them during the war. They were instead known variously as “torpedoes,” “subterranean devices,” “infernal devices,” or “deceptive devices.”

The mines used on the Peninsula were developed by brothers, Gabriel and George Rains – both West Point graduates who grew up in New Berne, North Carolina. When Union generals declared that landmines were not humane, Confederate generals Joseph Johnston and James Longstreet agreed, directing the Rains brothers not to use the weapons anymore. But by the end of 1862, the Confederate president and congress funded \$100,000 to the Torpedo Bureau under the Secret Service to develop such weapons with the caveat that they could only be used for military purposes. It resulted in the first facility for the manufacture of landmines in the world.

In 1863, Confederate soldiers enduring the siege of Port Hudson, Louisiana along the Mississippi River used both command detonated mines and victim

activated mines. It was the first time in history that both types of landmines were used in the same battle, and the only time it occurred during the Civil War. Many of the mines were made from repurposed Union shells that had not exploded when initially fired.

At Fort McAllister, Georgia, during Sherman's March to the Sea in 1864, Union troops were killed or wounded by landmines. Sherman was so angered by it that he wanted to send carts of Confederate prisoners to drive over the mines. His men convinced him to march the Confederates in front of the Union troops instead, and as Sherman noted, the use on land mines on the approach roads suddenly stopped.

On January 14, 1865, the largest known landmine field of the war was used at Fort Fisher, near Wilmington, North Carolina. But a huge naval bombardment raked the mine field prior to an attack and the artillery inadvertently broke up the wires of the command detonated mines. Consequently, the subsequent Union infantry assault across that ground endured few casualties and was successful.

In the April 2-9, 1865 fight at Spanish Fort, Fort McDermott and Fort Blakely Redoubt #4 near Mobile, Alabama, Confederates also used landmines. At Fort Blakely, United States Colored Troops made arguably the last frontal assault of the war, and most of their casualties were suffered via landmines.

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## **Ball's Bluff**

I recently made a quick trip to the Ball's Bluff Battlefield Park in Leesburg. I was up there for a class, and I had never been there before. Forgetting that the anniversary of the battle was coming up, I was happy to spend a few minutes at the start of the park. I did not venture down any interpretative trails, as I had to get home. I do look forward to getting back soon though.

Enjoy this article by Sarah Kay Bierle on Ball's Bluff, which features some first person quotes of well-known Civil War figures.

<https://emergingcivilwar.com/2021/10/21/under-fire-balls-bluff-you-have-established-your-reputation/>

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## **CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE OF FREDERICKSBURG (CWRTF)**

CWRTF meets 9 times a year on designated Wednesdays at Mary Washington Jepson Alumni Executive Center, 1119 Hanover Street. They offer a buffet dinner followed by a Civil War-themed presentation. Reservations are required. Speaker/topic schedule can be found on their website at [www.cwrftf.org](http://www.cwrftf.org). As with our round table, things are subject to change due to the ups and downs of Covid.

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## **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. The newsletter is available on our website at [www.rappvalleycivilwar.org](http://www.rappvalleycivilwar.org). Yearly membership dues are \$40 for individuals and \$50 for families. Students are free. Membership is open to anyone interested in the military, political and social history of the American Civil War.

**Newsletter Editor and Webmaster:** John Roos

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