



**THE DRUM & BUGLE**  
**Voice of the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table**  
**December 2022, Volume 19, Issue 12**

**Speaker:** Jim Smith  
**Topic:** “The Most Successful in the Works” Orlando Wilcox’s Division and the Final Attack at Antietam  
**When:** Monday December 12, 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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**Jim Smith “The Most Successful in the Works” Orlando Willcox’s Division and the Final Attack at Antietam**

“The most successful in its work”: Orlando Willcox’s division in the Maryland Campaign”. Newly released from a Confederate prison, West Point graduate Orlando Willcox took command of a division in the IX Corps less than a week before the Battle of South Mountain. His troops fought hard at Fox’s Gap and formed the right end of the Final Attack

at Antietam, falling back under orders that Willcox received three times before obeying.

A native of Miami, FL, Jim Smith is a lifelong student of the Civil War. He has volunteered at Antietam National Battlefield since 2017 and has been a certified battlefield guide since 2018. Jim is a member of the Antietam Institute and lives with his family in Millersville, MD.

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**“William Barksdale and the Battle of Fredericksburg”  
by Frank O’Reilly**

**A Review of the November 2022 Program by Greg Mertz**

Most people associate the battle of Fredericksburg with the December 13, 1862 fighting at the Sunken Road and Marye’s Heights, and most associate that fight with such adjectives such as unimaginative, futile, and doomed. Few would describe the battle of Fredericksburg as creative or innovative, yet Frank O’Reilly urged our group to consider applying those terms to the December 11 fighting, while also challenging us to contemplate whether that initial action determined which side won or lost the battle.

The person whose actions were arguably the most influential regarding the December 11 battle was Confederate Gen. William Barksdale. The former newspaperman, politician, and Mexican War soldier experienced more combat while serving in congress than in the Mexican War. During a brawl in the halls of congress, someone tried to pull Barksdale by the hair, only to wind up with his toupee in their hand with an observer shouting that Barksdale had been scalped.

In 1861, Barksdale became the colonel of the 13<sup>th</sup> Mississippi, and was drunk so often that many of his men signed a petition demanding he resign. Barksdale refused, and his men responded by shaving his horse and cutting off its tail. The colonel curtailed his drinking to some degree, but also showed concern for his troops on the march by allowing stragglers to ride his horse while he walked. Barksdale eventually became a father-like figure to his men.

Barksdale’s position was along the banks of the Rappahannock from the north end of the city to Deep Run on the eve of the battle of Fredericksburg. His assignment was first to report when and where the Union army attempted

to cross the Rappahannock River, and second to delay the crossing. Barksdale's men were never expected to prevent the Federals from crossing the river, only to slow them down. On December 10, Barksdale's Mississippians made observations suggesting the Union army was preparing to do something. Though a Florida brigade came to relieve them, the 1,500 Mississippians stayed in the city, but impressed the 8<sup>th</sup> Florida to stay and help.

The Mississippians had prepared a defense in depth, placing loopholes in buildings, putting rocks and dirt in barrels and boxes, and digging trenches between the homes and shops through the first couple of blocks of the riverfront. This was unique. The men had not been trained to fight from buildings. Neither had they been trained to fight as individuals. But Barksdale spread the 17<sup>th</sup> Mississippi along the entire one-mile edge of the city, with his men fighting in small cells, rather than as a regiment or even as companies. The Floridians were assigned to positions to the north and south of the city's structures.

Union army commander Ambrose Burnside counted on the elements of surprise and speed for success. He planned to construct pontoon bridges across the river under the cover of darkness at three locations – two of which were at old ferry crossings near the north and south ends of the city. Then by advancing quickly, he could seize the heights west of Fredericksburg before the Confederates could concentrate on that geographic stronghold. While the Union engineers building the bridges were quiet at first, the Confederates inevitably heard the commotion and spread word of what was happening before actually seeing the first Federal soldier on a bridge.

Union bridge builders were startled when two Confederate cannon fired – a pre-arranged signal for troops to begin concentrating. It may have also been a signal for Barksdale's men. Shortly after the cannon shots, the Mississippians open fire on the bridge builders. Those Union engineers not killed or wounded fell back to the Stafford County end of the bridge.

Union infantrymen and artillerymen were prepared for such an occurrence. They opened fire on the Confederate soldiers and structures across the river from the bridge sites, and sent the engineers back out on the bridges to continue their work. But the Confederates had not left the riverfront. They had simply taken shelter during the artillery bombardment and emerged from

their cover once the cannons fell silent. Time and again this sequence occurred that morning: Confederates drive Union engineers from the bridge, Union cannon fire on the town, Union engineers attempt to continue, and Confederates again open fire on the bridges.

Failing in the targeted shelling on the banks opposite the bridges, a frustrated Burnside ordered a general bombardment of the town. Union chief of artillery, Gen. Henry Hunt protested. Only the portions of town adjacent to the bridges were legitimate military targets, Hunt argued. But Burnside prevailed and the largest concentration of cannon on the continent to date, some 183 guns, were arrayed along Stafford Heights. At its peak, 100 shots were fired in a minute. But even this massive barrage failed.

Burnside was exasperated. Barksdale's innovation with how he fought his men had worked perfectly. "The entire army is being held by the throat by a couple of sharpshooters," Burnside complained. But it was the Union army's turn to be innovative. The engineers had an idea which Hunt shared with the army commander. Union infantry might be ferried across the river in pontoon boats and secure the far bank. No troops had ever done that before, nor had any troops ever been trained in doing so. Burnside felt the scheme would not work, but it was the only option on the table. He would consent to giving it a try, but only if the troops attempting the crossing volunteered for the mission.

The first unit Hunt encountered was the brigade of Col. Norman J. Hall, who wanted to give it a try. Burnside wanted Hall to understand the hazards and practically tried to talk him out of taking the risk, but the colonel turned to his troops asked if they wanted to make the attempt, and after a cheer, the army commander conceded. A portion of Hall's 7<sup>th</sup> Michigan would board six pontoon boats at the Upper Crossing and some men of the 89<sup>th</sup> New York would cross in four boats at the Middle Crossing. Following another artillery bombardment of 20 minutes to drive the Confederates back to their cover, the ten boats pushed off and successfully made it across the Rappahannock with minor losses.

The 7<sup>th</sup> Michigan was immediately tasked with another assignment for which they had no training – house to house fighting. Believing that the Mississippians had violated the accepted rules of warfare by fighting from the homes of civilians, the Michigan troops were ordered to take no quarter,

though not all obeyed the instructions. But the Wolverines did clear out the first row of houses, some capturing 30 Confederates, while others carried out the black flag order. The 7<sup>th</sup> Michigan had achieved two novel accomplishments. They have made the first riverine crossing under fire and had secured the first bridge head in American history, while also engaged in the first urban combat by American soldiers since the battle of Monterrey, Mexico.

Soon the bridges were completed, but the Confederates had not left. They were just one block further west of the river. The 20th Massachusetts was called upon to press forward and clear the way. Instead of fighting in small groups as the Mississippians and Michiganders had done, the Massachusetts boys advanced up Hawk Street in a column, and while successful, they suffered heavily for it. They lost 157 men out of 307, casualties of more than 50%. Their commander, Capt. George Macy, admitted in a letter to his wife "I scarcely knew what to do" as he tried to figure out how to fight in a city. Subordinate Capt. Henry L. Abbott figured that the Union forces would have to fight in a built-up town again, writing to an aunt beseeching her to go to the Boston Public Library to see if they had any sources on warfare among buildings.

After losing 350 of his 1500 men, Barksdale fell back to the main Confederate line under the cover of darkness. Both army commander Gen. Robert E. Lee and corps commander Gen. James Longstreet credited the Confederate victory of December 13 to the work done by Barksdale and his men on December 11. His masterful job of harassing the Union forces all day long not only gave the Confederates additional time to consolidate troops, but it shattered the Union plan of surprising the Confederates and quickly seize Marye's Heights.

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## **Thanksgiving and Abraham Lincoln**

This time period is crucial to the Civil War. During 1862, armies were around the town of Fredericksburg, and Grant was attempting his first try at getting to Vicksburg. During 1863, the campaigns for Chattanooga and Mine Run were happening. During 1864, Franklin, TN was going to become a town of slaughter, and Sherman was on a march to immortality. It is a wonder that Lincoln sought this time for a proclamation of giving thanks.

Below is a link to a short description of Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation, as well as the actual proclamation as published by Harper's Weekly. Enjoy, and we here wish you and your family a safe and Happy Holiday Season!

<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-resources/spotlight-primary-source/thanksgiving-proclamation-1863>

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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.cwrft.org](http://www.cwrft.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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