



THE DRUM & BUGLE
Voice of the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table
Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table Newsletter
December 2020, Volume 17, Issue 12

Speaker: Brandon Bies/Ray Brown
Topic: Broken Lives and Shattered Bones: Discovering a Field Hospital at Manassas Battlefield
When: Monday December 14, 2020
Location: Virtual Meeting Via Zoom
Times: 7:30

“Virtual December Meeting”

Two Union soldiers were severely wounded at the Battle of Second Manassas in August 1862. They were evacuated to a field hospital and both died as a result of their injuries. Their bodies were buried in a shallow pit, intermixed with amputated limbs from others wounded in the battle. Then they were lost to history...until now.

This month we will continue virtual Zoom programming with a presentation on archaeology at the Manassas Battlefield by National Park Service staff. Watch for your invitation! Remember that you can watch all four previous RVCWRT virtual programs in their entirety by searching "rvcwrt" on YouTube. Our speaker lineup for 2021 is now available on our new website: www.rappvalleycivilwar.org.

The Passing of Ed Bearss

Our friend Ed Bearss, the legendary historian, author, tour guide and preservation pioneer, died peacefully on September 15, 2020 at the age of 97. Ed was a Life Member of our Round Table and lent his name to our annual sponsorship of a National Park Service intern. He graced us with his presence at every July meeting and took great pleasure in interacting with our local interns. He was the most frequent speaker at RVCWRT meetings over the past decade. You can read more about Ed and donate in his memory at the American Battlefield Trust website:

<https://www.battlefields.org/preserve/champions/rememberingbearss>

"Brown's Island Explosion and its Victims-March 13, 1863" by Bert Dunkerly

A Review of the November 2020 Virtual Program by Greg Mertz

Accessible only by a footbridge from Richmond, the Confederacy isolated a munitions laboratory on an island in the James River, just east of the Tredegar Iron Works and cannon foundry. The Brown's Island complex employed 600 workers. Because able bodied men were most needed in the army, half of the employees at the laboratory were young women – mostly immigrants.

Six different operations in the production of ammunition and devices for the ignition of black powder weapons took place in the temporary wooden structures on Brown's Island. Percussion caps used to fire most small arms and friction primers to fire cannon were assembled at Brown's Island. Chemicals for these ignition systems were also produced there. Ammunition for different types of artillery, for pistols and for breech-loading rifles and carbines were likewise made there. The facility

manufactured a million rounds of ammunition a month at a time when a Confederate army fired three million cartridges in a major battle.

On Friday, March 13, 1863, several different munitions activities were taking place in the same 100-foot by 50-foot room – activities that should not have been taking place at the same time in the same space. Some workers were preparing infantry cartridges. Others were taking apart damaged or defective cartridges. Both of these practices meant that explosive black powder was on tables and would be spilled on the floor. Others were sewing artillery cartridge bags. Boxes of black powder and assembled cartridges were also in this same room. And one of the sixty people in the room on this morning was Mary Ryan, working in a corner of the room putting together friction primers.

A friction primer was a small tube with an explosive material inside. On one end of the tube was a small brush that in the field would be attached to a lanyard. When an artilleryman pulled the lanyard, the friction of the brush scraping across the end of the tube would send a spark into the primer, which in turn caused an explosion that in turn extended into the barrel of the cannon, igniting the black powder that would propel an artillery projectile out of the cannon. One of the last steps in preparing friction primers was to place the tubes in holes in a wooden rack, holding the primers while a varnish was applied to seal it.

Mary Ryan was varnishing friction primers on that morning, and found that some of the friction primers had stuck to the wooden rack. On previous occasions Mary had slammed the rack down on the table to jar the primers loose, and she had been admonished that such a practice was dangerous. But on this morning, nineteen-year-old Mary Ryan reverted to her former perilous behavior, slammed the rack of friction primers on the table, and set off a huge explosion at about 11:00 am.

Ten people were instantly killed. The roof of the building blew up, while the walls of the structure blew out, and when the roof came back down, it injured and trapped other workers not already burned in the explosion.

General Hospital No. 2, which predominantly nursed sick and wounded Mississippi soldiers, was the closest medical facility and many of the victims were treated there. Many of the workers lived within walking distance of the laboratory, and were cared for by the family or friends in their homes. Medical practices of the time had very limited options for treating those who were burned. Those who were injured by the collapse of the building were treated

for broken bones, cuts and concussions. In addition to the care provided to the injured, various groups embarked upon fund raising efforts to help the victims.

The victims of the explosion would succumb to their injuries over an eleven-day span. On March 14, the day following the explosion, the death toll rose to 29. Among those who died on that day was 63-year-old Reverend John Woodcock, the supervisor of the laboratory room, as well as ten-year old Eliza Willis, the youngest victim.

On March 15, the total deaths from the explosion reached 36. It was on this day that Mary Ryan died, and also the first funeral was held for any of the victims. On March 17, St. Patrick's Day, Mary was buried in Hollywood Cemetery. By March 19, the death toll had risen to 42. On March 23 a ball was held which raised \$200 for the victims. A total of \$8,000 was raised for the casualties by various means. On March 24, Sarah Foster became the 50th and final death from the explosion.

Meanwhile construction of new laboratory building progressed and by the end of March, a call for 200 girls to work in the facility was announced. As a safety precaution, applicants had to be at least fifteen years old. (The laboratory had been employing children as young as ten.) Other safety corrections had also been made.

Bert's research has focused on being able to share what can be found about the fifty victims, including where they are buried. He found the graves of thirty of those killed in the explosion in Hollywood, Shockoe and Oakwood Cemeteries.

Among those buried in Hollywood Cemetery, Rev. John Woodcock is buried in a family plot, but most of those who died in the explosion are buried together. Among them are Sarah Marshall, who at age 67 was the oldest victim, and one of the few young men, Robert Chaple, a fifteen-year-old who suffered terribly for five days with a crushed skull.

In Shockoe Cemetery, twelve-year-old Alice Johnson, who was killed instantly, was buried in a family plot, but many others were buried among the soldiers who died during the war. Bert noted that the soldiers and those who died from the explosion were apparently buried in the order that the bodies were brought into the cemetery.

Oakwood Cemetery contains 15,000 Confederate soldiers and contains a memorial to the victims of the explosion, but only one who died from the Brown's Island accident is buried there – 13-year-old James Curry from Fredericksburg, who died the day of the explosion.

That left the graves of 20 victims unaccounted for. Knowing that many of the victims were Irish and German and that many from those countries were Catholics, Bert looked for Catholic cemeteries as logical locations for burial of the victims.

Bert found the location of a historic Bishop's Cemetery, but it is now public housing and a playground. All of the graves had been moved from that cemetery to either Holy Cross or Mount Calvary cemeteries. Holy Cross has a section containing the unknown from Bishop's Cemetery. Mount Calvary, however, has a section containing stones that pre-date the establishment of the cemetery and among them is a stone to the grave of thirteen-year-old Bridget Grimes, who died eleven days after the explosion. At least one of the unaccounted-for victims, and quite possibly others as well, was originally buried in Bishop's Cemetery.

The site of the laboratory is now a location where concerts are held and a nearby historical marker located where the bridge leads out to the island informs the passerby of the disaster. The building in which Mary Ryan died actually stood until the 1950s when it was torn down, and is now a vacant lawn.

Gary Gallagher and Confederate Monuments at Gettysburg

Civil War historian and author Gary Gallagher wrote an insightful article in the October 2020 issue of Civil War Times. He discusses the Confederate monuments at Gettysburg National Military Park and their important role in illuminating "controversies relating to secession, slavery, and reconciliation." He describes monuments from several Confederate States in detail and their collective value as an "instructive memorial landscape." The title and byline of the piece sums up his conclusions nicely:
LEAVE THEM STANDING: Confederate monuments must remain at Gettysburg to help interpret the Civil War's causes and consequences

You can read the full text of the article at:

<https://www.historynet.com/leave-them-standing-confederate-monuments-must-remain-at-gettysburg-to-help-interpret-the-civil-wars-causes-and-consequences.htm>



From the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States (MOLLUS)- Massachusetts Photograph Collection.

Lots of Civil War Content on Youtube

Searching the following items on YouTube will lead you to many hours of informative and entertaining Civil War-related videos:

- (1) "emerging civil war" Lectures, battlefield tours and short takes on a variety of subjects from this innovative blog site
- (2) "cwrt congress" An organization formed to help round tables nationwide, Civil War Round Table Congress has begun uploading lectures by prominent Civil War historians.
- (3) "civil war battle series" Lectures on Civil War battles sponsored by the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum
- (4) "Tony Willoughby" this channel on Youtube includes 150th anniversary tours of Chancellorsville, Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House.

The same channel also has videos of 150th anniversary tours of Shiloh, Chickamauga, 2nd Manassas, and much more.

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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. Each month, The Drum and Bugle newsletter is also placed on our web-site, www.rappvalleycivilwar.org. Yearly membership dues are \$35.00 for an individual, \$45.00 for families, and only \$7.50 for students. Membership is open to anyone interested in the study of the Civil War and the ongoing preservation of Civil War sites.

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