THE DRUM & BUGLE
Voice of the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table
October 2025, Volume 22, Issue 10

Speaker: Rick Barram
Topic: "Dear Uncles, the Civil War Letters of Arthur McKinstry, a Soldier in the Excelsior Brigade"
When: October 13, 2025
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
Our Facebook: www.facebook.com/rvcwrt

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Rick Barram "Dear Uncles, the Civil War Letters of Arthur McKinstry, a Soldier in the Excelsior Brigade"

Dear Uncles, is one young man's story from the beginning of the American Civil War. Taken from letters sent home to family and friends, including correspondence written for his uncles' local newspaper, this book gives an intimate portrait of Arthur McKinstry's journey from a small town in upstate New York to confront Confederate forces in Virginia. Articulate, confident,

and observant, McKinstry's letters are written with a journalist's eye and poet's heart, giving us a vivid, humorous, and ultimately heartbreaking view into his experiences of going to war. Whether slogging through rain and mud, waiting for care packages from home, or watching cannonballs land in camp, these dispatches place readers in a young soldier's boots and help them to imagine how family and friends experienced this crisis in American history. Dear Uncles also offers new insights into regimental organization, training, and the often-overlooked attempt of Confederates to blockade Washington, DC's Potomac River supply route. Dear Uncles will fascinate and entertain readers with an interest in American Civil War history.

Rick Barram lives in northern California and is a recently retired Social Studies and Theater Arts teacher from the Gateway Unified School District. A long-time student of history, Rick also enjoys Civil War Reenacting, which provided much of the background experience for his history of the 72nd New York. He also serves on the board of two Civil War related non-profit organizations and is a frequent contributor to "America's Civil War" magazine.

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“Union Intelligence: From Antietam to Chancellorsville”
by Gregory Elder

A Review of the September 2025 Program by Greg Mertz

When it comes to the advancement of military matters during the Civil War, few, if any were as significant or important as the improvements in United States intelligence. Our speaker, Greg Elder, described it as a truly remarkable military transformation. To demonstrate that point, his talk examined just how quickly the Union army turned from doing a very poor job during the Antietam Campaign to doing an extremely accurate and effective job in the course of the Chancellorsville Campaign. Those changes were made over a span of a mere eight months.

Among the most meaningful pieces of intelligence figures desired are the strength of the enemy forces that any army commander believes he confronts. Elder asked, how aggressive is a general going to be if he believes that he is badly outnumbered? The epitome of a general who thought that the enemy had far more troops than he possessed was Gen. George B. McClellan.

We began by looking at McClellan early in the war, in what would become West Virginia, including the perceptions that Gen. William S. Rosecrans had of his superior. Rosecrans described McClellan as being “energetic” in organizing his troops and preparing for combat, but “slow and timid” as the army neared the battlefield. In the battle of Rich Mountain, fought on July 11, 1861, Rosecrans led a successful attack on the rear of the Confederates, while McClellan failed to follow his own plan of also attacking the front. Rosecrans wrote of that “the size of the enemy army increased in his [McClellan’s] mind the closer he got to it” as just one of McClellan’s issues.

But McClellan claimed the victory at Rich Mountain for himself, and before his true role in the battle became obvious, he had been advanced to command the Army of the Potomac. The Pinkerton Detective Agency, which had discovered an assassination plot of Lincoln, was employed to gather intelligence and was tasked with determining how many Confederates were in the state of Virginia. In November 15, 1861 Pinkerton estimated that number to be 117,100. Actual Confederate returns show the number to have been 118,30 -- an amazingly precise accuracy of 98.98%! While Pinkerton has often been blamed for supplying McClellan with exaggerated numbers, Elder concluded that Pinkerton was capable of providing reliable numbers. However, Pinkerton quickly learned that McClellan wanted the inflated figures, and soon obliged him.

In February of 1862, when McClellan faced Gen. Joseph E. Johnston’s army of 56,392 on the Peninsula, the estimates of Confederate strength by the various entities were: 60,000 by the press, 80,000 by Pinkerton (probably purposefully inflated for McClellan), 87,180 by Union aids and operatives, and a whopping 102,500 by McClellan. Elder believes that McClellan knew that the Confederate strengths that he endorsed were inaccurate, but that he used them anyhow so he could both delay bringing on battle as well as obtain more men for his own army.

A pair of the most remarkable figures adopted by McClellan are for Confederate strengths just prior to and after the battle of Antietam. On September 16, the day before the battle, McClellan believed Lee’s army to number 100,000. Then on September 19, two days after the bloodiest day in American history, in which McClellan claimed the Confederates lost 20,000 men, McClellan asserted that Lee’s army somehow grew to 140,000 men!

The actual numbers, incidentally for the Army of Northern Virginia on September 16 was 45,000 men and for September 19 was about 35,000.

Elder also pointed out that some evidence exists to suggest that McClellan may have withheld committing troops that could have destroyed Lee at the battle of Antietam in order to prolong the war so he could become the president in 1864. If McClellan had destroyed Lee at Antietam and Lincoln's war efforts were successful, there would have been little reason for the electorate to consider a presidential candidate other than Lincoln in 1864.

The Confederates lost a copy of Special Orders 191 and McClellan received that copy of Lee's plans for the Antietam Campaign. Elder contends that McClellan placed so much credence in the expectation that none of Lee's subordinates would deviate from the plan outlined in Special Orders 191, that it hampered his acceptance of reliable information of Confederate commands moving in ways contrary to what the orders dictated. McClellan disregarded 29 intelligence reports simply because they did not conform to the movements dictated in Special Orders 191.

During Ambrose E. Burnside's tenure as the army commander, the issue of reforming army intelligence was discussed and John C. Babcock, a scout and Pinkerton expert, developed a plan. When Joseph Hooker succeeded Burnside at army command, he started implementing Babcock's proposal for what is now called "all source intelligence" within a Bureau of Military Information consisting of 18 people under Col. George Sharpe.

They established a method of professional interrogation of released Federal prisoners, former slaves who escaped from areas where Confederates were camped, and enticed Confederates to desert with the promise that if they provided intelligence information they would not be sent to prison. For the first time in world history, Elder proclaimed, the Federal army implemented vigorous operational security to make sure information was not leaked to the Confederates, including stringent expectations of behavior of the press. When the Federals learned that the enemy had broken some of their signal codes, they took advantage of it to send out disinformation that they hoped the Confederates could decipher and accept. Discovering that some of the Indiana cavalrymen had accents similar to that of some Confederates, they recruited men from that regiment who possessed the right dialect to serve as scouts.

Importantly the BMI placement of the Confederate forces and reports on their size were exceedingly accurate. On April 28, 1863 the Confederate army actually numbered 56,492 men. The BMI approximation of enemy strength was 55,300. They had underestimated the size of Lee's army by a mere 2%. Notably, unlike McClellan, Hooker had confidence in the intelligence provided to him and proceeded with his audacious plans with a high level of certainty. When the battle was over, the BMI estimated Confederate losses at Chancellorsville to be 14,348, with the actual casualties of Lee's army being 13,460 – a 93% accuracy rate.

"Creation of the BMI enabled the Union to wield the full might of its sword," concluded Elder, "unfortunately, the sword was in the wrong hand at Chancellorsville." Hooker would fail at Chancellorsville for reasons other than breakdowns in intelligence.

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Important Information about the Park's Buildings

I would like to thank Alan Zirkle for putting this message out with his History Alert emails. If you are not subscribed to Alan's emails, here is some important maintenance and hours information for the Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center and Chatham Manor. Upcoming maintenance projects will cause Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center and Chatham to close on August 4, 2025. Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center will close for 6 to 7 months while the building undergoes multiple construction projects including the installation of a fire suppression system, a waterline upgrade project, and an electrical system upgrade. The Park Store next to the Fredericksburg Battlefield Visitor Center will remain open daily, 9 am-5 pm, and park staff will be available to provide education and orientation to the battlefield through mid-October, after which park staff will be available on a reduced schedule.

The Chatham gate will remain open 9 am-5 pm through the duration of the project. Chatham will close for about a year for an interior rehabilitation project that will include lead paint encapsulation, new carpet, and plaster repair. Chatham underwent a fire suppression system installation this past year, but it has been partially open throughout the summer for increased visitation in the interim between these two large projects.

To explore these locations independently, check out the self-guided audio tours of the Sunken Road and Chatham available on the NPS App and online at go.nps.gov/frsp-tours. Park staff look forward to welcoming visitors to our upgraded facilities in spring and summer 2026!

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Friends of Central Virginia Battlefield Trust

As you know CVBT is a land trust. We focus on purchasing endangered battlefield properties. We do produce a large three-day annual conference, standalone events and need to interpret and maintain our lands, we need help in all of these. In the past, CVBT has had individuals from organizations assist us, and we are grateful, but now we would like to create an official volunteer group who would enjoy being part of CVBT's volunteer core.

We have created "**The Friends of CVBT**." The intent is for this all-volunteer group is to be the "On Call" core of CVBT's volunteer group assisting in events and battlefield related needs. Active volunteer members will have the unique opportunity to be involved with events hosted by nationally acclaimed historians, assist in tours, and work on preserved battlefields. Participating volunteers will also be enrolled in the membership ranks of CVBT every year they contribute. CVBT will provide each volunteer with a CVBT volunteer staff shirt and CVBT official hat to wear at events or whenever wanted. We will be limiting this new group to 18 volunteers.

CVBT is now beginning our 27th year of preserving our local battlefields, the very battlefields you study and walk upon. We would be honored to have you join the ranks of CVBT volunteers to help us further our mission of preserving our Nation's history.

If interested please email our Executive Director **Terry Rensel** at **executivedirector@cvbt.org** .
Office: 540-374-0900

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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.cwrtf.org, and will be updated here. Below is the schedule starting in September 2025 and going to June 2026.

September 24, 2025
Common Misperceptions of the Civil War in 2025
Speaker: Gary Gallagher (via Zoom)

October 22, 2025
Admiral John Worden
Speaker: John Quarstein

November 19, 2025
The Pathfinder and the President: John C. Fremont, Abraham Lincoln, and the Battle for Emancipation
Speaker: John Bicknell

January 28, 2026
Disaster in Pursuit of Lincoln's Killer
Speaker: Karen Stone

February 25, 2026
Meade and Lee's Commanding Machines at Gettysburg
Speaker: Doug Douds

March 25, 2026
The Richmond Bread Riots
Speaker: Ashley Whitehead Luskey

April 22, 2026
John Brown: Igniting the Keg
Speaker: Dennis Frye

May 27, 2026
The Appomattox Campaign
Speaker: Hampton Newsome

June 17, 2026
Teacher, Preacher, Soldier, Spy: John R. Kelso
Speaker: Christopher Grasso

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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**. 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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The RVCWRT Executive Committee

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