



THE DRUM & BUGLE
Voice of the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table
January 2026, Volume 23, Issue 1

Speaker: Eric Mink
Topic: "1921 USMC Maneuvers on the Wilderness Battlefield"
When: January 12, 2026
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

Eric Mink "1921 USMC Maneuvers on the Wilderness Battlefield"

Eric Mink is a historian for the National Park Service with over thirty years of experience on the battlefields of the American Civil War. He has worked at Richmond National Battlefield Park, Manassas National Battlefield Park, Gettysburg National Military Park, and currently serves as the cultural resource specialist at Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park.

In 1921, 4,000 United States Marines arrived on the Wilderness Battlefield of Spotsylvania County. The maneuvers were the largest assembled force of United States troops since the end of World War I, three years earlier. The exercises were open to the public and were witnessed by thousands, to include President Warren G. Harding. NPS historian Eric Mink will discuss these maneuvers, explain what the Marines were attempting to achieve, and will unpack some of the stories and legends that surround this event.

**“Christmas in the Civil War”
by Kristopher White**

A Review of the December 2025 Program by Greg Mertz

Kris White, Deputy Director of Education at the American Battlefield Trust, is not only an authority of multiple aspects of the Civil War, but he loves Christmas and often travels to other countries during the Christmas season to experience their traditions first-hand. Kris feels that the Civil War soldiers brought the traditions of their culture -- as largely immigrants and first or second-generation Americans from around the world -- along to the army. This merger and sharing of beliefs and rituals helped to shape the American Christmas customs we practice today.

Many of the things that have become engrained in our Christmas traditions were introduced to America over the decade or two prior to the Civil War. In 1843, Christmas cards, as we would recognize them today, appeared. The first Christmas tree lot in America opened in 1851.

St. Nicholas was born 240 AD, and while not much is known about him, he apparently gave away gifts of gold to poor families so they would not need to resort to compelling the girls of the family to becoming prostitutes. Once when throwing a piece of gold through a window, it landed in a stocking hung by the fireplace to dry. When St. Nicholas intended to leave a gift at a home he discovered to be all locked up, he came up with the solution of throwing the gold down the chimney.

The counterpart of St. Nicholas is found in the Krampus Runs where people dress as horned, devil-like figures that playfully punish naughty people. They include ghost stories and remembering the dead, with the plot of Scrooge and the ghosts of Christmas drawing on some of the themes of the Krampus Runs.

During the twelve days of Christmas, decorating was done on the first day. The Christmas tree tradition originated from the Strasburg region in the sixteenth century --which was sometimes controlled by Germany and sometimes by France.

A key to our Christmas traditions in America was the 1823 publishing of a poem called "A Visit from St. Nicholas," that we now know of as "Twas the Night Before Christmas." The

poem greatly shaped our understanding of what Santa Claus looked like and what he did. The poem went viral, and by the time of the Civil War, everyone in America was familiar with the story.

In 1839 the Christmas carol "Silent Night" was written. Kris noted that if you wanted to listen to every recording of "Silent Night" currently available on Spotify, it would take 79 years to play every version. President U.S. Grant declared Christmas to be a federal holiday in 1870. Many states had already declared Christmas to be state holidays, with Abraham Lincoln voting against such a measure for the state of Illinois in 1834 when he served in its legislature.

Some Christmas traditions have demands embedded in them. The song, "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" contains the lyrics "Oh, bring us some figgy pudding" and "We won't go until we get some, So bring it right here!" During the Civil War, Federal Gen. John W. Geary reported that some drunken soldiers appeared at his door during the Christmas season demanding that he give them something good.

Illustrator Thomas Nast was employed by Harper's Weekly, which called itself a "Journal of Civilization." Nast did not shy away from propaganda, even for his Christmas related sketches. The January 1862 issue contained "the Christmas Tree of the Federal Army" showing soldier's dancing around a large tree decorated with leaders of the Confederacy hanging in effigy by the neck, topped with the United States flag.

The January, 1863 issue depicted Santa Claus patriotically showing his support for the Federal cause as he wore what was clearly meant to be a blue jacket with white stars, and red and white striped pants as he visited the soldiers in the Federal army. Nast drew Lincoln giving Jefferson Davis a choice of which Christmas box he might select that appeared in the January 1865 issue. One box was labeled "Peace and Union" while the other was marked "Four Years More War" with descriptions of just what each alternative entailed, as Davis was supposed to select one or the other.

Probably the most famous Christmas dinner of the war was the one held at Gen. Thomas J. Jackson's Moss Neck Headquarters in 1862, with Gens. Robert E. Lee and J.E.B. Stuart in attendance. Perhaps the most prominent Civil War gift was from Federal Gen. William T. Sherman to Abraham Lincoln as he had just captured Savannah, Georgia and gave it to the president as his Christmas present.

Christmas for the common soldier varied. Federal Gen. J.H. Hobart Ward organized a day of activities including a variety of races, a greased pole, a turning cage, with \$200 worth of prizes, and skits with men dressed as clowns and monkeys. So, some had a rather joyous Christmas.

The most miserable experience was reserved for those who drew picket duty, lacking comradery with their fellow soldiers, and those undergoing their first Christmas away from home. Samuel Firebaugh of the 10th Virginia drew picket duty, declaring "If I ever had the

blues, have them now. Most lonesome day I have spent in the service.... 'Bully' for Christmas.”

Important Information about the Park's Buildings

Just a side note on the rehabilitation projects: I took a tour to Chatham the other day, and we could see the people in there working hard. These two locations are going to be fantastic when they reopen. Even though most of us live in this area, go visit these places again. It might feel like the first time.

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!

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

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.

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

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

The RVCWRT Executive Committee

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