



THE DRUM & BUGLE
Voice of the Rappahannock Valley Civil War Round Table
March 2025, Volume 22, Issue 3

Speaker: James Hessler
Topic: “How Dan Sickles Got Away With Murder”
When: Monday March 10, 2024
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

James Hessler “How Dan Sickles Got Away With Murder”

On February 27, 1859, Congressman and future Union General Daniel Sickles shot and killed Philip Barton Key, the United State Attorney for the District of Columbia and the son of Francis Scott Key in Lafayette Square across from the White House. Congressman Sickles had discovered that Key was having an affair with Sickles's wife and murdered Key after a brief altercation. The resulting murder trial was labeled "the trial of the century." Join us as we revisit the entire scandal-filled episode that shocked American

society and inadvertently led to Congressman Sickles becoming a controversial general in the Army of the Potomac.

James Hessler has worked as a Licensed Battlefield Guide at Gettysburg National Military Park for two decades. Jim has authored or co-authored three full-length books on the Gettysburg campaign: *Sickles at Gettysburg* (2009), *Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg* (2015), and *Gettysburg's Peach Orchard* (2019). His books received several distinguished book awards. His fourth book, "*The First Day at Gettysburg*," will be released in April 2025. Jim also currently co-hosts the popular *Battle of Gettysburg Podcast*. He has made numerous media appearances. In addition to Gettysburg, he leads tours at several other battlefields and historic sites across the country.

**“When Hell Came to Sharpsburg”
by Steve Cowie**

A Review of the February 2025 Program by Greg Mertz

The largely farming community of Sharpsburg, Maryland and the neighboring communities along the Potomac River hosted armies whose numbers rivaled that of the population of Pittsburgh in the fall of 1862. Between the prelude, the battle of Antietam, and the Federal army continuing to stay in their communities for another six weeks following the battle, the civilians suffered terrible hardships. The small towns lacked the infrastructure of transportation and the few businesses had no stockpiles of supplies. As a result, the armies ravaged the countryside of food, kitchen ware, and any type of cloth for bandaging.

The communities had been in the process of gathering their fall harvests of wheat, rye, oats, hay, corn, potatoes and apples. Many barns were full of the fall yield when the soldiers arrived. Most farms contained between 20-60 hogs, cattle or sheep and 200-300 poultry. Miles of fencing kept animals out of the crops. These farms were smothered when the armies arrived. Foodstuffs were appropriated and fences were convenient firewood. An estimated 4,000 tons of hay and grains, 1,600 head of livestock, 3,000 fowls, and 600,000 fence rails were consumed by the armies in the Sharpsburg area. The Federal soldiers, thinking that they might be going into the winter encampment after the battle of Antietam, also chopped down thousands of trees to construct log cabins.

Many citizens fled their homes when war arrived on their doorstep. Some gathered in the basements of the stone and brick buildings in Sharpsburg. One man reported being among some 75 people who stayed in the basement of one such structure for three days. When the shelling escalated, the babies cried and the dog's barked, reported someone who sheltered in the Kretzer cellar.

When the battle erupted, nearly every building in Sharpsburg was damaged by artillery fire. When shells struck barns full of dry hay, they caught fire and quickly burned. The Reel's barn was believed to have been occupied by wounded Confederates who reportedly burned to death when it caught fire. The Mumma farmstead was purposely set on fire by the Confederates to deny its use by Federal sharpshooters.

After the battle, rotting flesh and human excrement created an unhealthy environment in which disease ran rampant. Graves were so shallow that storms exposed dead bodies and foraging animals spread bones. Dr. Augustin A. Biggs, Sharpsburg's doctor, kept a journal throughout his career. It documented a spike in sickness and deaths among Sharpsburg citizens following the battle. Jacob Miller reported that several members of his family died of "army disease." Cowie estimates that dozens of Sharpsburg civilians died from the poor health conditions the battle of Antietam brought to Sharpsburg.

Soldiers plundered, not just for the necessities like food, but citizens reported that things such as jewelry and musical instruments were gone when they returned home. Some found their homes occupied, often as hospitals, and were forced to live as refugees for months following the battle.

Three different acts of Congress passed in 1864, 1883 and 1887 outlined the procedures for civilians to be compensated for damage and losses suffered during the Civil War as a result of the Union army. Federal agents went into the field gathering information covering two essential categories. One set of data determined the merits of the case. The agents gathered and verified the facts, quantifying what the civilians lost, determining just who did the damage and how the damage occurred. The second type of information collected pertained to the loyalties or political leanings of the claimant. Not until the mid-1870 did the agents begin visiting the citizens of Sharpsburg to start the claims process.

Cowie concluded that the Sharpsburg petitioners only received about 15% of the amount of loss they claimed. Actual battle damage or ordinary damages of war, were not covered by the claims process. Only the deliberate taking of food or supplies, or rent for confiscating a building for use as a hospital was eligible for compensation. Citizens could only be reimbursed for purposeful losses by the hands of the Federal army; any damages caused by the Confederates were not the responsibilities of the Federal government. While the army was supposed to issue receipts for anything it confiscated from civilians, which was rarely done. Amazingly, claimants were asked to provide the names (and addresses) of officers who authorized the seizure of their property.

Only citizens loyal to the United States were eligible to be compensated, and under the 1864 act, it was possible that just one report by a neighbor that a claimant had Confederate leanings was enough for their claim to be denied. The 1883 and 1887 acts allowed for witnesses of loyalty to be cross examined, and made the process more lenient for the claimants in other respects as well. It was not until 1915 that the last of the claimants of the Sharpsburg area was closed.

Cowie concluded the program by sharing an example of a witness who realized that the attorneys taking her testimony were asking her the same things in slightly different manners in an effort to catch her making contradictory statements. A frustrated Angelina Jackson lashed back: "I remember all these things distinctly. It seems to have been burned into my mind and I shall remember it as long as I can remember anything."

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.cwrtof.org, and will be updated here when the schedule is released for 2025.

March 26, 2025 John Coski – Hunter Davidson (CSN)

April 23, 2025 Kevin Pawlak – Bristoe Station

May 26, 2025 Barton Myers – General Winfield Scott

June 18, 2025 Patrick Schroeder - Forgotten Friday: April 7, 1865
Actions in Cumberland County VA

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

President: Charlie Seifert

Vice President: Paul Stier

Treasurer: Jay Oakley

Secretary: Melanie Jordan

Members at Large: Dee Tugman, Rick Horner, Greg Mertz, Dennis Olsen, Peter Rasmussen, Jon Burrell