

# THE DISPATCH

The Civil War Round Table of New York, Inc.

Volume 65, No. 9

600th Meeting

May 2016



**You must call 718-341-9811 by May 4<sup>th</sup> if you plan to attend the May meeting. We need to know how many people to order food for.**

- Guest:  
**James McPherson**  
The Fletcher Pratt Award
- Cost:  
**Members: \$50**  
**Non-Members: \$60**
- Date:  
**Wednesday,**  
**May 11<sup>th</sup>**
- Place:  
**The Three West Club,**  
**3 West 51st Street**
- Time:  
**Dinner at 6:00 pm,**  
**Doors open 5:30 pm,**  
**Cash Bar 5:30 – 7 pm**

## James McPherson

The Fletcher Pratt Award for *Embattled Rebel*

Our May guest is the dean of contemporary Civil War writers. Born in North Dakota, he received his BA from Gustavus Adolphus College (St. Peter, Minn.) in 1958 and his PhD from Johns Hopkins University in 1963. His most famous work is the one-volume study of the Civil War, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1989. Dr. McPherson is the George Henry Davis '86 Professor Emeritus of United States History at Princeton.

Some of his other books include: *For Cause and Comrades*, *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam 1862*, and *This Mighty Scourge*.



## Editor's Theater Review **BUTLER**

I saw a new play in Sarasota, Florida, called *Butler*, concerning Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler, in command at Fortress Monroe, Virginia. It deals with his treatment of runaway slaves and his famous decision not to return them despite the mandate of the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act. A Virginia slaveholder demands (a word Butler dislikes) the return of three runaways but Butler reminds him that Virginia is no longer part of the United States and that their request cannot be honored. Since the slaves had been building fortifications for the Confederate Army they are contrabands, or aids to the enemy, and that term stuck for the duration.

This show, performed at a small theater, was worthy of a Broadway production, and I can only hope to see it there soon.

## Election Slate

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## 2016 • MEETING SCHEDULE • 2016

• June 8<sup>th</sup> •

Chris Bryce

*Grant's Overland Campaign*

• September 14<sup>th</sup> •

TBA

• October 19<sup>th</sup> •

please note this change of date

## President's Message

This month of May, in our 65th Anniversary Year, we are quite pleased to celebrate another significant anniversary, by presenting the Sixtieth Annual Fletcher Pratt Award to the dean of American Civil War historians, Professor James McPherson, for the outstanding Civil War related non-fiction book of 2015, "Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander-in-Chief."

Just who was this Fletcher Pratt anyway? Born in 1897, he became a published writer in the 1920's, eventually becoming the military affairs analyst for *Time Magazine* and a regular reviewer for the *NY Times* Book Review. Prior to WWII, Pratt created a complicated mathematical formula to use in maneuvering fleets of model ships for wargames, which he soon published as "Fletcher Pratt's Rules for Naval Warfare." This led him to write a dozen subsequent books on this subject. Additionally, by now, a student of the Civil War, he produced a half-dozen books on our favorite conflict, including "Ordeal by Fire," "The Monitor and Merrimac," "The Civil War on the Western Waters," and "Stanton: Lincoln's Secretary of War."

In 1951, Pratt became a founding Charter Member of the CWRT of New York, and served as president in 1953-54. Just days after his unexpected death in June 1956 (at age 59), the Board of Directors unanimously voted to establish the "Fletcher Pratt Literary Award," to be presented to the author (or editor) of the best non-fiction book about the Civil War published during the course of the previous calendar year. It rapidly became one of the most prestigious and sought after awards in the Civil War community, and so remains in its 60th year.

Previous award winners are a veritable "Who's, Who" of Civil War literary lions. A partial listing includes such notables as Bruce Catton, Alan Nevins, Harry Hansen, Shelby Foote, Clifford Dowdy, Edwin Coddington, David Donald, William C. Davis, Stephen Sears, Edward Longacre, James I. "Bud" Robinson, Noah Trudeau, Wiley Sword, Steven Woodworth, Gary Gallagher, Gordon Rhea, Joseph T. Glatthaar, Allen Guelzo, Ed Bearss, and many others.

This month, we are proud to add a most distinguished and deserving name to that list, James M. "Jim" McPherson, who certainly needs no introduction to this group, as he is the author of over twenty books on the war, frequent speaker and TV commenter, and the most recent recipient (2014) of our "Bell I. Wiley Award" for his outstanding contribution for promoting a greater understanding and preservation of that which pertains to the Civil War.

So, do yourself a favor and PLEASE attend the meeting on Wednesday, May 11, so you may join us in honoring a SPECIAL man with a SPECIAL award. This is a once in a lifetime occasion you definitely do not want to miss!

RIGHT NOW – CALL (718) 341-9811 TO RESERVE YOUR SEAT FOR WHAT WILL BE AN UNFORGETTABLE EVENT!

Thanks, and hope to see you on the 11th!

*Paul Weiss*

## 59th Annual Battlefield Tour

*Join Us As We Continue Down The "Bloody Roads South" For...*

### Grant's Overland Campaign 1864 — Part 2!

Friday to Sunday...October 14-16, 2016

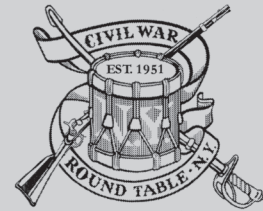
This year the Round Table will continue to travel the same roads South to **NORTH ANNA, COLD HARBOR** and **PETERSBURG** with the already battered, bruised and bloodied armies of Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee after their colossal struggle in The Wilderness and Spotsylvania. This year's Tour Guides **BOB KRICK** from the Richmond National Battlefield and **CHRIS BRYCE** from the Petersburg National Battlefield will complete the dramatic story of Grant's Overland Campaign and dig deeply into the offensive strategy and defensive tactics of its heroic commanders.

#### To Reserve Your Place:

Send your \$100 check (made out to "CWRTNY Tour") and your complete contact information with your phone number, cell phone and email address to:

Martin Smith/CWRTNY Tour,  
158 West 81 Street #24,  
New York, NY 10024.

# THE DISPATCH



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## May During the Civil War

### 1861

**14** – The Great Train Robbery. The ever audacious T.J. Jackson heists a large number of B & O trains, sending many of the locomotives to Winchester and Strasburg.

**24** – The Federals, with partially trained troops, occupied Alexandria. 154 years later, their most famous citizen, one Edwin C. Bearss, is picked up by car and spirited away to NYC to receive his Fletcher Pratt award. Thanks to Pat Falci and his brother-in-law.

### 1862

**4** – Little Mac declares “The success is brilliant” as his battle-hardened troops (not) storm into an evacuated Yorktown.

**8** – Stonewall Jackson no longer stands there like a stone wall as his troops begin their legend as foot cavalry by routing their enemy at McDowell, Va.

## Yellow Fever Fiend

By Jacob Roberts, From *Chemical Heritage*  
Spring 2014

Thanks to chemist Vic

One hundred and fifty years ago a Kentucky doctor and Confederate agent worked tirelessly through the summer heat on the island of Bermuda. By day he treated men and women stricken by yellow fever; by night he collected and hid away the soiled clothing and bedding of the dead.

Even as this well-known humanitarian worked to save lives, he was concocting a scheme he hoped would decimate the Union army’s ranks and change the course of the American Civil War.

Luke Pryor Blackburn was born into a politically well-connected family, but after spending an undistinguished term in the Kentucky General Assembly in 1843, he left politics for a career in medicine. In the years that followed, Blackburn established himself as an expert in treating yellow fever and gained prominence for his humanitarian impulses. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Blackburn sided with the South. But at age 44 the doctor was too old to enlist in the army. Instead, his political connections and professional expertise were put to use as an envoy and a doctor for the Confederacy. His duties eventually led him to Canada, where he helped organize Southern blockade runners bringing supplies to the rebel army.

In Toronto, Blackburn met Colonel Jacob Thomson, a Confederate spy and former member of President James Buchanan’s cabinet, and Godfrey Joseph Hyams, an impoverished English shoemaker displaced by Northern troops from his Arkansas home. In 1864 the South was in retreat, and the Confederates were desperate for a way to turn the tide. Blackburn, who knew firsthand how yellow fever could ravage a population, hatched a plan: infect Northern cities and Northern-occupied cities in the South by unleashing the fever on Union troops using the vomit-and blood-soaked clothes of ill and dying yellow-fever sufferers. He had only to wait for a new outbreak to acquire the infected clothing. Thompson agreed to help fund the scheme, and Blackburn promised Hyams \$100,000 for distributing the clothes.

Yellow fever is a viral infection transmitted by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito and, when severe, can put its sufferers through days of hemorrhaging, vomiting and pain before killing them. It gets its name from the sickly yellowish hue a victim’s eyes and skin take on. During epidemics yellow fever can kill up to half of those who develop its severe form. Even today the disease is life-threatening to the unvaccinated. At a time when viruses had yet to be discovered and mosquitoes were considered a nuisance rather than a vector of disease, Blackburn erroneously expected the sweat, blood, and vomit on dead men’s clothes to transmit yellow fever, and most important, disrupt the Union army.

### 1863

**1** – At Chancellorsville, Lee and Jackson, disregarding the laws of strategy and tactics, score a mighty victory over a hapless Federal 11th Corps and Joe Hooker’s Union army. Unhappily, out scouting in the twilight, Jackson, mistaken for Federal cavalry, is mortally wounded by North Carolina troops.

**27** – Nathaniel Banks, after failing to win the battle for Port Hudson, settles into a siege which also does not work against the stubborn Rebels. However, when Vicksburg surrenders in July, Port Hudson gives up the ghost, too.

### 1864

**11** – The Battle of Yellow Tavern and Lee’s second great loss as Phil Sheridan’s men mortally wound the Southern peerless cavalry leader James Ewell Brown Stuart.

**15** – 217 VMI cadets pitch in as John Breckinridge bests Franz Sigel at New Market. If you are in that neck of the woods, don’t fail to visit Luray Caverns. Spooky but fun.

In April 1864 Blackburn learned of an outbreak in Bermuda. He volunteered to sail to the island and treat the sick for free, instructing Hyams to stay in Canada and await his orders. Once in Bermuda, Blackburn spent weeks treating patients ill with yellow fever; all the while he secretly collected victims’ bed sheets and clothing and stored them in trunks. When the epidemic ended in July 1864, Blackburn returned to Canada with more luggage than he had left with.

Blackburn passed the trunks to Hyams, instructing him to auction them off in cities occupied by Union troops. He warned Hyams that the clothing was contagious, cautioning him to handle the contents of the trunks with care and to always wear gloves.

Hyam’s final stop was Washington, D.C., where he sold the trunk Blackburn had called “Big no. 2,” containing goods Blackburn had said, “will kill them at sixty yards distance.”

Eager for payment, Hyams returned to Canada, and met Blackburn. The Kentucky doctor would only give Hyams \$50 for his work, claiming he wanted confirmation the clothes had been sold before giving Hyams the rest of the promised \$100,000. After trying repeatedly to get his money, Hyams realized that Blackburn would not pay up.

Frustrated and desperate for cash, Hyams revealed the conspiracy to the U.S. Consulate in Toronto on April 12, 1865. In exchange for testifying against Blackburn, Hyams was granted full immunity and paid (a fact that Blackburn would later use in his defense). Blackburn was arrested by Canadian police in May 1865 for plotting an act of war against the United States while living in Canada (violating the nations’ neutrality agreement) but was acquitted when the court found only circumstantial evidence. Most of the trunks were lost and not all of Hyam’s testimony could be confirmed.

But Blackburn wasn’t out of trouble yet. U.S. authorities still had a warrant out on the doctor for conspiracy to commit murder with his yellow fever plot.

Blackburn denied ever hatching a scheme to spread yellow fever. But Hyam’s testimony was reinforced by word from people in Bermuda at the time of Blackburn’s visit, and there were records of Hyam’s auctions. Details may be lost to time, but clearly Blackburn was up to something.

In 1872, seven years after the war, a homesick Blackburn quietly crossed the border, returned to his Kentucky home, and began doctoring again. He was never arrested on the murder charges.

Eventually, Blackburn’s prestige from fighting yellow fever eclipsed his infamy. He ran for governor of Kentucky in 1879. Leaving the campaign for a time to battle against another outbreak of yellow fever. Despite a resurgence of bad press, Blackburn won the election.



## TO CABINET MEMBERS

Executive Mansion,  
Washington, May 3, 1864

Sir,

It is now quite certain that a large number of our colored soldiers, with their white officers, were, by the rebel force, massacred after they had surrendered, at the recent capture of Fort Pillow. So much is known, though the evidence is not yet quite ready to be laid before me. Meanwhile I will thank you to prepare, and give me in writing your opinion as to what course the government should take in this case.  
Yours truly

A. Lincoln

## NEW Recruits

**Robert Mandell**, a retired banker from So. Salem.

**Maurice Lefkort**, a former member, from Short Hills, N.J.

**Meg Hogan**, an archivist from Hastings-on-Hudson.

**Matt George** from the Capitol District CWRT.

**Dennis Miller**, a physician from Old Greewich, CT.

## Ad of January 17, 1865

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