



# **SOUTH BAY CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE**

## **South Bay Civil War Roundtable Meeting Minutes September 28, 2021**

**Meeting Location:** Holder's Country Inn – Cupertino, CA

### **Special Activities & Events:**

None

### **Officer Reports**

#### **President**

- **Presentation Format Changes**
  - Looking for ways to vary the methodology for making presentations
  - Exploring the use of ZOOM to reach out to other Roundtable organizations
  - Use of videos will be explored for topics that are not frequently presented
- Available Art
  - Slide presentation of pieces of art work that are available for purchase
  - Contact Abby Eller if interested
- Civil War in the News
  - No Report
- Book Review
  - No Report

#### **Vice President**

No Report

#### **Treasurer**

No Report

## Secretary

- Civil War Quiz: What Do You Know About Generals Killed During The Civil War? Mark Costin
- Book Raffle: \$18
- Meeting Attendance: Total: 17 (14 in-person; 3 via ZOOM; two southern California Civil War Roundtables)

## Preservation

No Report

## Historian

### Story of the Forgotten Explosion of the Sultana

- In late April, 1865, steamboat Sultana steamed up the Mississippi River
- U.S. Government paid steamship captains several dollars a head for every soldier transported north.
- Sultana carried over 2000 passengers, 1900 of whom were Union prisoners returning home from camps like Cahaba and Andersonville
- A leaking boiler on board had been quickly patched to allow the steamer to take on the massive load of passengers. With decks sagging under the weight and the boiler crack ominously nailed together with a metal plate, the Sultana continued on its way
- At 2 am on April 27th, the leaking boiler exploded and took out two more boilers. Blast tore steamer apart just north of Memphis, Tennessee, and within twenty minutes the ship was burning to the water line
- Survivors of the blast found themselves trapped on the fiery decks or thrown into the river; those in the river either drowned or watched in horror as the ship burned with their friends still on board
- Around 1200 passengers perished; it remains the worst maritime disaster in U.S. history

## **This Day in the Civil War: September 28**

**1861:** Confederates evacuate Munson's Hill, VA after a brief clash with Federals at Vanderburgh's House

**1862:** President Davis writes Genl Lee of concern over enrolling conscripts "to fill up the thinned ranks of your regiment." Fighting near Lebanon Junction, Ky, Friar's Point, MS, and Standing Stone in western Virginia

**1863:** Federal Maj Genl Alexander McCook and Maj Genl Crittenden are relieved of their commands and ordered to Indianapolis for a court of inquiry into the conduct of the Battle of Chickamauga. Federals begin a limited

bombardment of Ft Sumter, which will last 6 days but with only 100 rounds fired. Skirmishing at Buell's Ford, TN

**1864:** In the Shenandoah Valley, Sheridan falls back towards Harrisonburg after action against Jubal Early at Port Republic and Rockfish Gap. From West Point, GA, President Davis wires Hood, ordering him to relieve Lieut Genl Hardee from the Army of Tennessee, and send Hardee to command the Department of South Carolina, Georgia and Florida. Federal Admiral David Dixon Porter leaves the Mississippi Squadron to replace Admiral SP Lee of the North Blockading Squadron off the coast of Wilmington, NC. Admiral Lee, in turn, will now assume command of the Mississippi Squadron. Skirmishing near Decatur, GA, Brownsville, MS, and Wells Hill, TN

### **Person of the Month: Jefferson Davis as Secretary of War 1852-1856 Background**

- New Hampshire native Franklin Pierce, US President 1852-1856, was what was derisively called a “dough-face”, that is, a Northerner sympathetic to Southern slaveholders
- Pierce signed into law Kansas-Nebraska Act; the ensuing “Bleeding Kansas” was one of the causes of the Civil War
- Ironically, Pierce helped ensure the North would win the war by choosing Mississippi slaveholder Jefferson Davis to be his Secretary of War
- Stubborn self-righteousness that would make Davis so ineffectual as Confederate president, made him effective as Secretary of War, invigorating a small, stagnant US Army just in time to fight a long, costly war just a few years later
- Much has been made of how unprepared the US Army was at the outbreak of the Civil War. But the Army would have been far more unprepared had it not been for Jefferson Davis
- Was West Point graduate; served in Mexican-American War.
- As US Senator, he'd served on Military Affairs and Pensions Committees
- Davis and Pierce had been friends for 15 years when Pierce appointed Davis to his cabinet; and they were both Democrats
- Back then, government jobs and tenure, civilian and military alike, were ruled by the political spoils system: If a Whig President was succeeded by a Democrat, it was acceptable for the new President to oust the Whig appointees and replace them with those favored by the Democrats.

### **As Secretary of War**

- After only 2 weeks on the job, Jefferson Davis did the unheard of thing: he announced there would be no spoils. Only death, resignation or incompetence would remove an officer or War Dept clerk from office
- On Davis's watch, officers' commissions and War Dept jobs would be given on basis of merit. Davis turned a deaf ear to the howls of protest

- Wife Varina had long recognized he simply took for granted that once he decided something, it must be right therefore everyone must agree.
- Jefferson Davis was not a delegator by nature; delegation means you must accept that someone else, independently of you, might be right too
- Davis was a micromanager, to the point where he was exhausted. But, there are times when a self-righteous workaholic micromanager is just what's needed to bring about change in an organization as outmoded and set in its ways, as the US Army was at the beginning of the 1850's.
- In 1852, the US Army on paper numbered 13,821 enlisted men and officers, though it mustered only 10,000 at any given time
- Congress had always spent as little money as possible on the military, except during war. Davis saw this had to change
- Military technology was rapidly changing and in the territory acquired after the Mexican-American war, settlers needed protection from mounted Native Americans intent on keeping this territory for their own.
- During his 4 years as Secretary of War, Davis oversaw the increase in effective strength of the Army from a little over 10,000, to a total of 15,562. For the enlisted men, Davis succeeded in getting a \$4/month pay increase, with bonuses to encourage reenlistments
- For the first time, a Secretary of War pressed for pensions to be paid to widows and orphans of enlisted men who died while in service.
- The Army had no clear policy for the retirement of officers; it developed an increasing number of superannuated officers, whose function was to stick around and continue collecting their pay even if they were clearly no longer fit to command in the field or administer at a desk. Davis saw the problem, he attempted easing these men out, but with limited success
- Davis was more successful in bringing into the officer corps young men on the basis of merit. The inevitable cries of favoritism arose, and sometimes Davis had to appoint political officers, in deference to Pierce and Congress. But records show that overall, Davis was remarkably free of personal, political, or sectional bias in granting officers' commissions
- Davis's personal experience as a field officer in the Mexican-American War motivated him to implement new arms and equipment
- For foot soldiers, he standardized rifled shoulder weapon that used the new minie bullet and priming system for speedier and more accurate fire
- He ordered the older flintlock muskets still in widespread use, to be rifled and renovated if possible; otherwise, to retire them. Davis introduced ongoing experimentation in new weaponry, for example possible improvements in the metal composition of cannons.
- One short-lived experiment of War Secretary Jefferson Davis deserves mention: his Camel Corps, intended for service in the hot arid Southwestern territories; he imported 54 camels from the Middle East in

1855, plus 10 Arabs to instruct the US troops in how to use the camels. The camels in fact would have been well-suited to the Southwest. Unfortunately, the American troops took an instant dislike to the beasts, and the Arabs and Americans did not get along well.

- Davis began construction of new arsenals and armories, strengthening of coastal fortifications, and building new roads/forts on Western frontier
- By 1856, 60 new forts had been built; Congress was now loosening the purse strings on military spending. Settlers were demanding that every foot of ground be protected as much as possible from Indian attacks. It was a lesson Davis wouldn't forget.
- To make sure his innovations were implemented, Davis personally inspected many fortifications, arsenals and training grounds. He wrote and had distributed up-to-date training manuals for state militias.
- He maintained an ongoing stream of correspondence with field officers

### **Conclusion**

- Jefferson Davis has to be ranked as one of the most innovative and effective Secretaries of War the US Army has ever had
- He not only expanded and updated the Army, he opened the door to real innovation, in effect setting in motion the beginning modernization of the US Army...just in time to fight what would turn out to be the first modern war.

### **Other Topics**

None

### **September Presentation**

Speaker: Jim Rhetta

Topic: Tennessee, the Strategic Value of the State

### **October Presentation**

Speaker: Robert Sweetman

Topic: Book Presentation via ZOOM: The Loyal, True, and Brave.

Covers the period between the beginning of the battle of Chancellorsville to the end of the battle of Gettysburg.

### **November Presentation**

Speaker: Kristin Patterson

Topic: United States Tax Stamps Used to Raise Funds for the Civil War