

On Richmond's FRONT LINE

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"Civil War Christmas"

Modern students of the Civil War sometimes lose sight of the vast tide of suffering and loss that accompanied the era's dramatic events and tumultuous times. More Americans died in uniform from 1861 to 1865 than during all of the national wars combined, from the first blast of Capt. John Smith's musketoon in 1607 until well past World War II.

The death and horror of the war did nothing to dim ardor for the Christmas holiday. Instead, as a sort of anodyne for the suffering, Americans on both sides of the Potomac embraced Christmas celebrations with renewed fervor. During the war, the image of Santa Claus for the first time took center stage as a holiday icon.

Soldiers in 19th-century armies had a well-earned reputation for intemperance. The legendary army nurse Florence Nightingale declared disgustedly in 1863 (about a different army on a different continent), "If the facilities for washing were as great as those for drink, our Army would be the

cleanest body of men in the World." Civil War soldiers behaved in keeping with that tradition, especially for the holidays. A detachment of Jeb Stuart's cavalry north of Manassas at

no nothing," groused Mississippian Leander Woollard. By contrast, Jesse Sparkman wrote in a Christmas diary entry of "drunken men quite numerous."

The familiar graphic image of

Santa Claus first came before most Americans' eyes just after the Battle of Fredericksburg as part of a military scene. The classic poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" had appeared in 1825, but likenesses of Santa had not achieved wide currency. In its first issue for 1863, the tremendously popular periodical, *Harper's Weekly*, printed an oversized sketch titled "Santa Claus in Camp." The drawing shows a white-bearded, gaily (and patriotically) dressed Santa distributing Christmas packages to Union soldiers in a camp



"Santa Claus in Camp"

Christmas 1861 created a "shrine of Bacchus...a large bowl of punch and an eggnog." Some soldiers in the 17th Virginia, from Alexandria, found liquid holiday cheer at Christmas 1862 around Fredericksburg, but not enough to go around. Those left out grumbled bitterly of a "dry, dismal old time." "No parties-no nog, in fact

that has "Welcome Santa Claus" emblazoned on an archway. The *Harper's* Santa wears a countenance more wizened than jolly, and though he is not svelte by any means, he is not the portly "bowl of jelly" fellow so familiar today. Artist Thomas Nast created the

Continued on page 5

Brian Pohanka Gone But Not Forgotten

In June of this year cancer claimed the life of Civil War historian and preservationist Brian Pohanka. This sad news has received attention in historical circles all across the country. Brian's death prompted dozens of eulogies, many of them lengthy, emotional tributes.

Because of the long summer interval between issues of "On Richmond's Front Line," there has not been an opportunity to reflect upon Brian's commitment to the Richmond area battlefields. We can only belatedly remind the newsletter's readers that Brian worked with the organization from its earliest days. Before we saved battlefield land at Fort Harrison, before we raised the money to pay for that land, and before the board of directors evolved into a solid core of local preservationists, Brian Pohanka

loaned his time and influence to the RBA.

He eventually left the board of directors, citing the long travel distances and crowded schedule that prevented him from attending board meetings regularly. His reputation and advocacy helped to make the RBA a legitimate organization when it needed him the most.

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It should be easy to picture the astonishing moment one morning this summer when the RBA's secretary, Pat Walenista, went to the mailbox and found notification that Brian Pohanka had arranged a bequest of \$500,000 to the RBA. He also directed an identical amount to the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust in Fredericksburg. RBA president

Julie Krick noted then that Brian always reserved a special fondness for the battlefield of Gaines's Mill because his beloved Fifth New York Zouaves fought so well and so hard there. His interest extended to Richmond's other battlefields, too, but preserving the ground where the New Yorkers first saw heavy combat had become a priority with Brian in recent years.

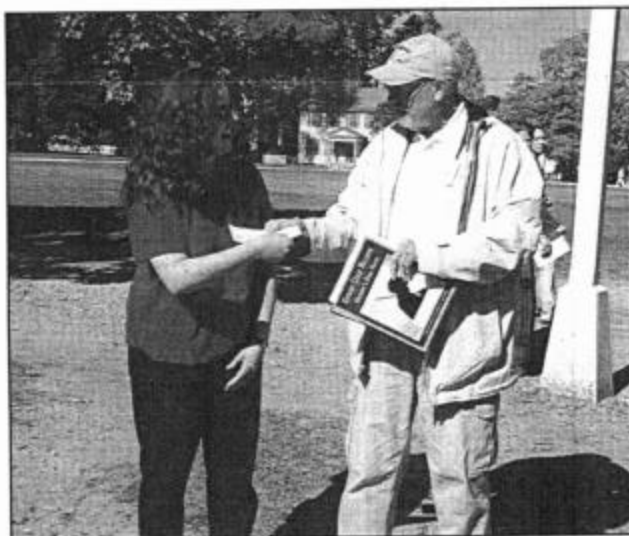
Anyone acquainted with Brian recognized that an especially deep sincerity fueled his devotion to battlefield preservation. His commitment to that principle is as evident today as it was during his life. It is too early to tell precisely where this part of Brian's legacy will take root, but certainly many acres of Civil War battlefield land around Richmond will enjoy permanent preservation as a direct result of his actions.

History America & Ed Bearss

Legendary historian and battlefield guide Edwin C. Bearss is another friend of battlefield preservation. Some readers will recall his appearance on behalf of the RBA for a walking tour at Gaines's Mill on the 140th anniversary of that battle in 2002. A violent thunderstorm—the only measurable rain around Richmond for virtually the entire summer severely curtailed the tour. Ed gamely signed books and fielded questions under a tree and from the back seat of a car, in between lightning strikes.

Jack Waugh's short biography of Bearss, entitled *History's Pied*

Piper, recently appeared in a limited print run. The booklet unveiled details of Bearss's early



life in Montana, and examined his World War Two career and his early work as an historian for the

National Park Service. Waugh's book now is out of print. Peter and Julia Brown, the proprietors of Texas-based History America Tours, oversaw the production and publication of the book. They also admirably directed all of the book's proceeds to Civil War preservation. Recently Pete Brown gave the Richmond Battlefields Association a check in the amount of \$4500, which represents the final income from the Bearss book. Brown is seen here handing the check to RBA President Julie Krick. Thanks to everyone involved in this project.

"Civil War Christmas" (cont.)

Continued from page 1

benchmark full-color painting of the now-traditional Santa in 1870.

A Confederate soldier composed a Christmas song almost as deeply entrenched in holiday lore as Northerner Thomas Nast's Santa Claus. James L. Pierpont, son of a Boston Abolitionist, moved to Savannah in the 1850's. There, about as far from snow-sleigh country as one readily can get on the east coast, he wrote "Jingle Bells," copyrighted in 1857 as "One Horse Open Sleigh." Five years later, Bostonian Pierpont enlisted in the 5th Georgia Cavalry and served with that Confederate unit.

Gen. Lee's own Christmas menu in 1864 fell far short of a toothsome repast. The commanding general and his five guests, who included Gens. Kershaw and Gordon, gathered in a headquarters tent around "a rough, pine table, without a cover." They made a meal of boiled cabbage, 10 sweet potatoes, and a dish of rice. A story, probably apocryphal or at least embellished, spread through the army that a captured Yankee officer boasted soon after that Union intelligence divined Lee's every move. Grant knew what Lee had had for supper, the fellow insisted. Lee's response, army lore declared, was that the story obviously must be false, "for I know

Grant to be a humane man, and if he had known what I had for my dinner yesterday, he would have sent me a part of his own."

Soldier letters from that bleak Christmas of 1864 featured less whimsy and much pure misery. The most serious Christmas-week fighting of the war in Virginia swirled around the Rapidan River north of Gordonsville (the key railroad town that Yankees casually ignored for four years). Men insulated from that conflict but hungry and cold found little Christmas cheer: "I never spent a duller," wrote Capt. R. H. Parker of North Carolina, echoing a sentiment expressed in innumerable letters to loved ones at home.

A captain from rural North Carolina enjoyed in Richmond on Dec. 25, 1864, the most festive Christmas of his life. He marveled at the "magnificent spectacle" of rich decorations that festooned St. Paul's Church in Petersburg. That evening, though, he wrote morosely in his diary of the future: He could not muster much hope that "before another Christmas Day comes" he would be home again, "our country free from the hated foe, our independence secured."

The pensive Carolinian's musings proved accurate, of course. The Christmas of 1865 surely dawned more cheerily in a victorious North, luxuriating in a boom-

ing economy fed by war profits, than in the desolate South. The *Harper's Weekly* Christmas image that year encapsulated the North at prosperous, self-contented peace. "After the War Was Over—Christmas Morning, 1865," [see below] depicts four cheery generations, among them a returned soldier hero with an empty sleeve; a boy still playing at war after all of the nation's ghastly experience with it (the South might, after all, turn fractious at some future date); a domesticated servant; and a baby and its parents.

[this Christmas article by RBA board member Robert K. Krick first appeared in the *Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star* on December 22, 2001. The version printed here is significantly shorter because of space considerations.]

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2005 Annual Meeting

The RBA's annual meeting went off without a hitch in June. Noted historian Gordon Rhea

original road traces, the ruins of the Allison House, a string of artillery lunettes, infantry para-

a very large, nearly square fort constructed for Union cannon. All of those sites are privately owned.

gave a well-received talk for those in attendance at Beulah Church, on the Cold Harbor battlefield. From there he led a lengthy walking tour that followed in the footsteps of the Union Eighteenth Corps on both June 1 and June 3, 1864. Participants saw several highlights that included



pets built by the Eighteenth Corps, and "Fletcher's Redoubt,"

talk publicly or privately with the board of directors.

The usual business meeting followed the tour. Julie Krick delivered a brief "state of the RBA" address. David West, the group's treasurer, reported on the RBA's financial situation. Members also had an opportunity to

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