

# On Richmond's FRONT LINE

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With a few notable exceptions, not many Civil War battlefields had steady demand for tours in the latter decades of the 19th century. Around Richmond, the unpre-served status of all the key sites further discouraged tourism. On occasion small groups of veterans visited sites of interest to them, often in connection with reunions. Without question Seven Pines was the most popular destination among the vet-

ern corner of the crossroads, and perhaps Lyne recognized the cemetery as a good platform for his relic and tour-leading business.

market on both tours and relic sales. His name, seemingly, was James E. Lyne, but even today mystery surrounds his biography. Sometime in the last quarter of the 19th century Lyne set up a relic shop very close to--possibly right at--the Seven Pines intersection, where the Nine Mile Road and the Williamsburg Road intersect. The Seven Pines National Cemetery sits there, nestled in the northeast-

made a living running his relic shop and piloting folks around the battlefields.

The precise date of Lyne's appearance at Seven Pines is unknown, but he was there as early as 1886. A South Carolinian touring that battlefield encountered him there, and reported that he "resides here in a house built on the battle field, and has collected numerous relics of the battle,--guns, swords, bay-

onets, bombs, fragments of bombs, minie balls, &c. He told me they frequently plowed them up now in cultivating the soil, and sad to relate, also human skeletons." Someone else toured the Cold Harbor battlefield with him in 1902, so Lyne's operation must have thrived.

Lyne had a fertile field for gathering relics. He encountered many battle-field graves in the course of his collecting. Those that man-

## CAPTAIN JAMES E. LYNE

A veteran soldier, government and battlefield guide, "one of the boys" of the Seven Pines fight, his relic shop is a veritable storehouse of interesting mementos which he has been gathering for the past 35 years.



erans, many of whom had seen their first combat there. The proximity of Seven Pines to Richmond (being closer than Cold Harbor or any of the Seven Days battlefields) probably also factored into its popularity.

Where there are tourists, there usually are folks waiting to capitalize on a money-making opportunity, and that was the case outside Richmond in the late-1800's. In this case one man cornered the

ifestly contained the remains of Union soldiers were excavated, with the bodies going to the nearby national cemetery. Sylvia and O'Donnell, in their *Illustrated History of American Civil War Relics*, describe an 1899 sale of a Confederate bowie knife, "found in a grave where several soldiers had been buried....Found by J. E. Lyne, who has taken many bodies from

Whatever the truth (if either), Lyne

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The non-publication of the final newsletter for 2010 means that some important news is a bit stale. At the top of that list is a report on the proceedings of "The Bearss Brigade" last summer, as they relate to the Richmond area battlefields. That organization has been around long enough, and is so outgoing, that many readers will be familiar with it. Its members are knit together by their fondness and respect for the famous Ed Bearss. Through six decades of battlefield tours and talks around the world, Ed has influenced countless thousands of people (probably more like hundreds of thousands, by now). Some of those people, embracing the message and the messenger with equal zeal, proudly wear shirts proclaiming themselves members of "The Bearss Brigade."

This unique association produces inevitable camaraderie among the participants. But the Brigade does more than rally around its namesake. It achieves substantial good for battlefield preservation, too. While affection for Ed and his distinctive brand of historical interpretation is the common denominator among the enthusiastic members of his "brigade," his fans well know that for Ed, battlefields and their preservation are his common denominator.

Therefore the "Bearss Brigade" puts together an annual birthday party for Ed in June. While the immediate purpose is a convivial gathering among friends, the larger goal is to honor Ed by raising money for Civil War battlefield preservation and interpretation.

Friends and attendees donate funds to Ed's Civil War charity of choice. As you may have guessed after this long explanation, Ed selected the RBA as his birthday project for 2010. He often chooses smaller non-profits, knowing that his birthday money likely will have a satisfying visible impact when directed to grassroots and all-volunteer organizations.

In June 2010, the clever theme was "four score and seven years ago," as it was Bearss's 87th birthday. The dinner just outside Washington, D.C., attracted a large

due to lightning in the area. Nonetheless his willingness to donate his time and the power of his name to help the fledgling organization undoubtedly elevated the RBA's profile and helped it gain traction in its infancy.

Now, a decade later, the Bearss Brigade rallied to their namesake's call for support. As a result of Ed's 87th birthday, the RBA received 64 separate checks totaling nearly \$7500. Most of those donations represent new members, many of whom hopefully will stick with the RBA. Those donations went

directly into our 2010 projects at Fussell's Mill (Second Deep Bottom), thus translating Ed's birthday wish into immediate action.



*Blowing out birthday candles on one's 87th birthday can be daunting.*

*Fortunately, lung capacity is one of Ed's strengths.*

*Photo by George Evans.*

crowd. As RBA president Julie Krick reminded the listeners that evening, this was not the first time Ed had so visibly assisted the RBA. In addition to directing other preservation money toward the group in past years, he kindly agreed on short notice to be the central figure at the RBA's first-ever public gathering some 10 or 11 years ago. Thunderstorms aborted his tour that evening at Gaines's Mill, disappointing the 75 or 80 folks who had shown up to walk the field with Ed. Adverse natural elements rarely deter Ed (he seems to enjoy them, in fact), but in this case an officious National Park Service ranger prevented him from leading the tour,

## Annual Meeting 2011

Keep the date open. The annual meeting this year will be held on June 11, 2011. Stay tuned to hear the details. But it should be a good one as we are hoping to be on a newly purchased piece of RBA property. No, I will not tell you what it is until we close on the property. Sorry.

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the battlefield for burial..."

Lyne's name is spelled in various sources as Lynne, Lyne, Lynes, Lyon, and Lyons. He called himself a captain, and appears to have been of the right age to have participated in the Civil War, somewhere. A search among the Union service records produced no likely candidates, though it is hard to be sure with so many variable spellings in play.

The "captain" told one visitor that he was a veteran of the 7th South Carolina Cavalry, which is somewhat plausible. That regiment operated around Richmond in 1864 and 1865, and some of its recruits came from the area, despite the difference in state affiliation. The service records do not reveal anyone in the 7th South Carolina Cavalry with that precise name, but there are three close options, any of which might be the pioneering relic dealer. A man named John E. Lyon served in the 7th South Carolina Infantry, of Kershaw's brigade. Someone named J. E. Lyons joined the 4th South Carolina Cavalry at Grahamsville, South Carolina, in 1862, and came with that regiment to Virginia in 1864. A third choice, and possibly the best, is a man shown as J. E. Lyon/Lyons who enlisted in Virginia in 1862, joining a cavalry company that eventually became Co. G, 2nd South Carolina Cavalry. None of the three men have records that provide any useful clues that would connect them to the Seven Pines relic man. At the very least, Lyne's rank of captain was a post-

war self-promotion

Whoever he really was, Lyne influenced many of the local battlefields' earliest visitors. He created his own special trademark collectible that lives to this day: hand-cut walking sticks from various Richmond battlefields. Items of that sort enjoyed great popularity in that era, and Lyne supplied specimens from every battlefield. He may have cut them from his own backyard, or perhaps he really did journey to the separate sites to harvest armloads of appropriately sized branches and sticks. It is not clear whether he gave them away or sold them in his shop. In every known case he cut an inscription into the wood, usually tailored to meet the special interests of the recipient. The only common denominator was the sticks' lack of historical accuracy, together with Lyne's poor punctuation and bad spelling.

Surviving examples say things like: "Cut in the center of 7 Pines where 15,000 soldiers were killed May 31st & June 1st 1862"; or, "Cut in the center of the Gaines Mill Battlefield where 14,000 soldiers were killed June 27, 1862. Battle fought by Lee & McClellan. Battlefield Guide J. E. Lyne"; or, as a third example, "Cut in the Center of the Cold Harbor Bat-Field. No. killed 15,000...." On occasion he would carve in the wrong commanders, and his grasp of casualty figures consistently erred.

These sticks appear today at auction houses and on Ebay from time to time. Most are approximately 4 feet tall. The wood always is knotty, and usually the

sticks have been polished to a shiny smoothness.

Were he around today, "Captain" Lyne might not be the man we would want on the microphone leading a battlefield bus tour. But in his day he did important work in publicizing the Richmond battlefields. By stimulating interest among veterans and tourists, Lyne took some of the earliest steps toward drawing attention to our favorite battlefields.

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FRONT LINE

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Any of you assiduously maintaining an archive of past issues of "On Richmond's Front Line" probably noticed that the final scheduled issue of 2010 (volume 9, #3) never appeared. It was intended for late-November, but underwent repeated and frustrating delays because we seemed just on the verge of announcing more preservation success, and the newsletter is an economical way of spreading that word. When this occasional publication becomes a collectible in years hence, perhaps antiquarians will consider the non-existent volume 9, #3 as desirable as a Honus Wagner baseball card, or the stamp with the upside-down airplane on it.

The five daily newspapers published in Richmond during the Civil War are a fountain of vital information. They also contain an incredible amount of bizarre material, some of it virtually incomprehensible to 21st century readers. Consider the following, from November 1863, under the heading "Greatest Curiosity of the South."

Corner of 1st and Broad  
Miss Sawyer, Manager  
For three days only  
Major J. J. Vorhines, a refugee from Tennessee, will exhibit himself to the citizens of Richmond. He especially solicits a large attendance of ladies, as the intention of his visit is to select a wife. Age 25 years; height, 2 feet 4 inches--being two inches less than the celebrated Tom Thumb. Boasts of his heavy beard and fascinating imperial.

Admission: \$1; Gentlemen unaccompanied by a lady, \$1.50

Five days later "Miss Sawyer" appeared in court and was fined "for exhibiting a dwarf...without a license." Sadly, just eight weeks later, the same newspaper gave notice of the death of "the Major," at Lynchburg, where he died "in extreme poverty."

**Yes!** I WANT TO HELP PRESERVE OUR NATION'S HERITAGE, PLEASE SIGN ME UP.

*(Please print)*

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