

Vol LXII, #5

Michigan Regimental Round Table Newsletter—Page 1

May 2022

MEMBER RENEWAL

The MRRT celebrates its 62nd year in 2022 – and now is a great time to show your support by renewing your membership! (Or become a new member!).

Membership is \$25 a year – or \$5 for students. Checks should be made out to Treasurer **Jeanie Graham** (the bank does not like checks made out to the RoundTable) and can be mailed to her home at **29835 Northbrook, Farmington Hills, MI 48334-2326**

Please note that our meeting will be one week earlier, on Monday, May 23rd, because of the Memorial Day holiday. We meet in the basement of the Farmington Library at 6:30 PM with a short business meeting with our speaker beginning around 7:00 PM.



We are glad that our May speaker will be Civil War author Jack Dempsey, speaking on “Major General Alpheus Williams – Citizen-Soldier”. Jack has written numerous books and articles that have focused on lesser-known aspects of Michigan history. He has focused on the Civil War, the history of Michigan, and cultural heritage, including two books on Michigan authors through the years. One of the authors was Pulitzer Prize winning Civil War historian Bruce Catton.

Jack and Brian Egen of the Henry Ford Museum are working on a Michigan monument at the Antietam battlefield.

Jack will share with us tonight his most recent book, **Major General Alpheus Williams – Citizen-Soldier**. General Williams contributions to the Federal war effort have been overlooked and misunderstood through the years. Alpheus Williams’ statue is on Belle Isle, and he is buried in Elmwood Cemetery in Detroit.

Jack will be selling copies of his book and all proceeds will go toward the Michigan monument at Antietam.

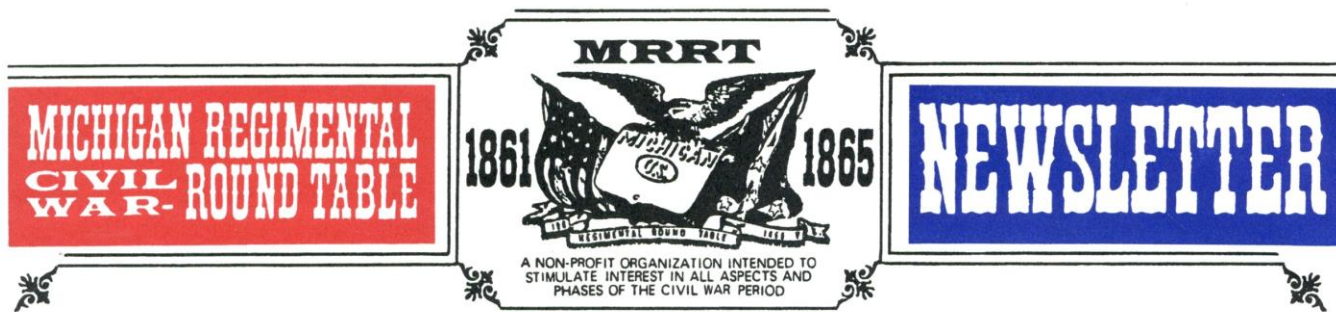
Come join us for what will be a very interesting evening!

Please visit our great website at <http://www.farmlib.org//mrirt>. Links to interesting Civil War programs are available. Gerald Furi of the Farmington Library is doing a terrific job keeping the website up to date.

Wearing a mask during our meeting is a personal decision. Masks will be available for your personal use.

The Roundtable thanks Tobin Buhk for his interesting and educational discussion of “True Crime in the Civil War”. Tobin discussed several topics, including:

- **Trial by Military Commission** Today there are 40 cubic yards of Civil War court-martial transcripts stored at the Library of Congress. Military commissions tried civilians during the war. No lawyers were present, and defendants did not testify. African Americans could not testify against whites until 1864. A judge advocate was present for both sides. President Lincoln reviewed all death sentences and cancelled several of them. During the war the authorities had to deal with crimes that were not criminal before the war, including smuggling and trading for tobacco. Post Offices were used extensively for smuggling.
- **Northern Prisons the North used Old Capital Prison in Washington, which was in great disrepair when the war began. It was said that there were a million ways into the prison with no clear way out.** Several men were incarcerated in the same cell. Henry Wirz from Andersonville Prison was executed in the walled area in the

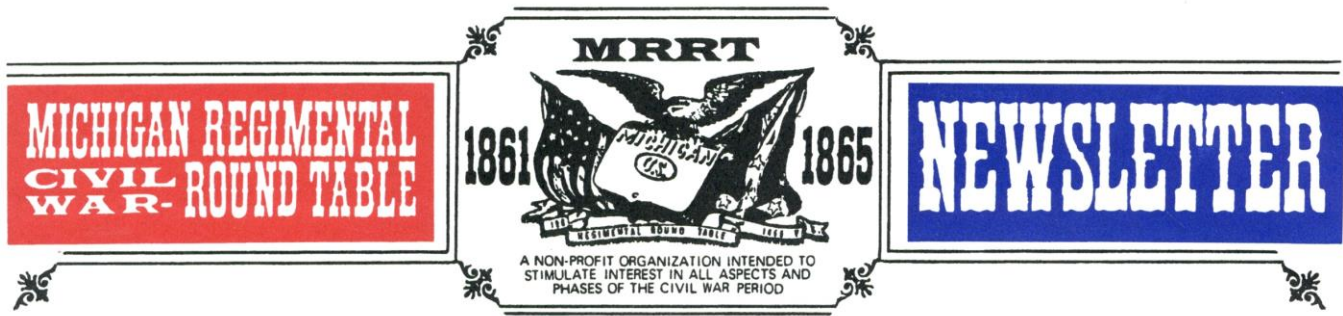


back of the prison. Rose O’Neal Greenhow, Confederate spy, allegedly sent coded messages through the windows of the prison. She provided information that helped the Southerners win the 1st Battle of Bull Run.

- **Southern Prisons** When the war began, the South had no plans for prisons. Libby Prison was used as a military prison which became over-crowded when prisoner exchanges ended. Castle Thunder, an old tobacco barn not designed as a prison, was used for civilians. Eventually, military prisoners were housed at Castle Thunder. Union doctor Mary Walker was arrested on the battlefield, she was considered to be a spy. She won the Medal of Honor.
- **Andersonville Prison** the Charles Curtis criminal gang of Union prisoners was transported to Andersonville. The gang was hanged by other Union prisoners with the blessing of the Southern guards.
- **Punishment** Soldiers were punished by their own army for being drunk and disorderly and other crimes. Common punishments in both the North and South included the ball and chain, bucking and gagging.
- **Crimes and “Contraband”** Slaves left their homes on their own and were also stolen to live in “*contraband*” camps. They were given jobs that no one else wanted to do. Union General Benjamin Butler helped start this early in the war.
- **Fort Pillow Massacre** Fort Pillow was located on a bluff over the Mississippi River at Henning, Tennessee. The Union Army had 1,000 men stationed there, almost equally African American, and white. Confederate General Nathan Forrest attacked the fort on April 12, 1864. Forrest’s men used Union guns on numerous trapped soldiers. Almost every African American soldier was killed as was the Union commander. The African American soldiers unsuccessfully tried to surrender.
- **Funny Money Samuel Upham was a successful printer in Philadelphia. He marketed patriotic items to support the Union cause and mock the Confederates, including cards showing the head of President Jefferson Davis on a jackass. During 1862, Samuel began to produce counterfeit Confederate money.** The first batch consisted of 3,000 \$5 notes, stamped at the bottom with the words, “*Fac-simile Confederate Note – Sold wholesale and retail by S.C. Upham 403 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia*”. Each note sold for a penny for copy. Cotton smugglers quickly bought Upham’s notes, trimmed off the notice at the bottom and flooded the South with the bogus currency. By late 1862 Upham was selling twenty-eight variations of Confederate currency and postage stamps. Today, his creations are highly prized by collectors.
- **The Wild West-1863** William Quantrill did not tolerate violence against women. He was the leader of Frank James (Jessie’s brother) and the Younger brothers. His gang sacked Lawrence, Kansas on August 21, 1863, to settle scores with the “*Jayhawkers*” from prior years. Jim Lane, leader of the pro-Union “*Jayhawkers*”, was number #1 on his hit list. He also wanted to kill President Lincoln.



Tobin is the author of “*True Crime in the Civil War*” and other crime-related books, particularly about Michigan. He teaches eighth grade in Jenison, MI, near Grand Rapids.



Civil War Essentials – Abraham Lincoln and the *USS Monitor*

The revolutionary warship, the *USS Monitor*, was the brainchild of John Ericsson but its construction in time for its legendary duel with the *CSS Virginia* in March 1862 was largely due to President Abraham Lincoln.



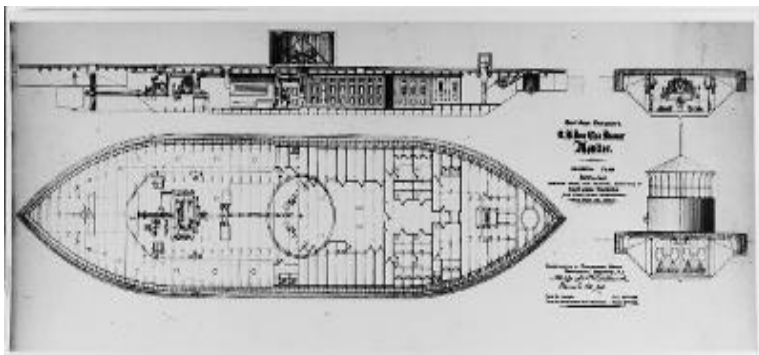
Unlike the present situation, the mid-19th Century presidents were fairly accessible to visitors particularly if they came with a recommendation from another official. During the fall of 1861, a man named Cornelius Bushnell told the President that he recently had a meeting with John Ericsson (picture at left) in Brooklyn at which the Swedish American inventor had shown him both plans for and a model of a radical new warship.

Ericsson had been the victim of an outrageous coverup in the 1840's for which he bore a grudge against the U.S. government. He had designed the *USS Princeton*, a new propeller steam warship, for the Navy. The Navy Ordinance Dept. had a cast iron gun designed which, mounted on the *Princeton*, had exploded killing a number of people including two U.S. Cabinet members. Although Ericsson had nothing to do with the design or manufacture of that particular cannon, the Navy made him the scapegoat for the accident.

The President was fascinated by technology. He had been issued U.S. Patent No. 6469 earlier in his life for a flotation system to lift boats over sandbars, the only President to earn a patent. He often visited the Washington Naval Yard to watch test firings of the big guns. During August 1863, he would meet with Christopher Spencer, fire his repeating rifle, and ask him to disassemble one and explain its mechanism (the “inwardness of the thing” as Lincoln called it). As a result, the President pressured the army to adopt the Spencer rifle. **When Bushnell showed him Ericsson’s model and explained how it worked, Lincoln was impressed.**

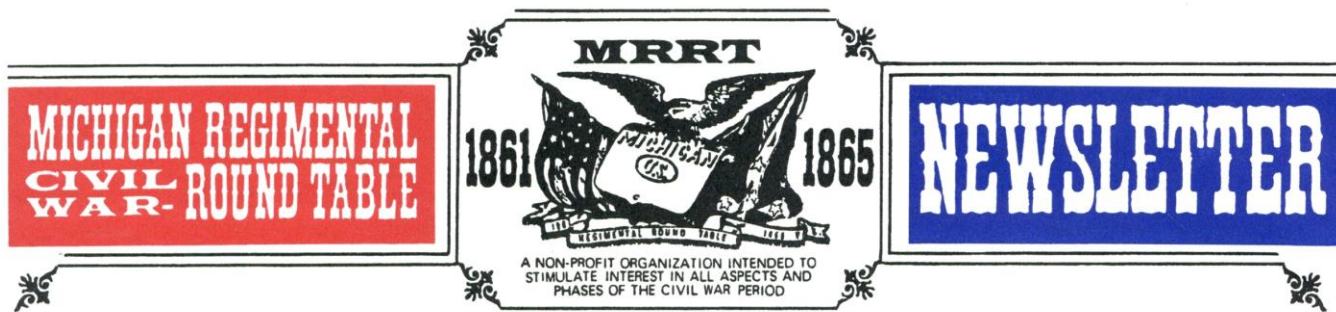
In April 1861, the panic-driven and shameful abandonment of the Gosport (Norfolk) Navy Yard had allowed the rebels to seize ships and equipment vital to their goal of challenging the Union Navy and its blockade. A partially burnt ship, the 40-gun propeller steam frigate *USS Merrimack* had been raised and was being modified to become the ironclad *CSS Virginia*. Rumors and articles from southern newspapers about the ship had been circulating but were not specific enough to define the threat,

The Navy Secretary, Gideon Welles, had instituted a three-man committee known as the Ironclad Board to consider potential warship designs to counter the possible threat from the *CSS Virginia* and any other ironclads the CSA might develop. Seventeen proposals reached the Board – most were fairly conventional being basically wooden ships



with a covering of wrought iron along the sides. This was the concept that created the term “Ironclad” to describe all armored warships and was consistent with newly commissioned French ironclad *Gloire*. Bushnell’s visit to Ericsson in Brooklyn had actually been to ask his opinion on another armored ship design which would become the *USS Galena*.

Once the President saw the value of the *Monitor* design, he promised Bushnell that he would actively



support the proposal if Bushnell would present it to the Ironclad Board. Bushnell would need all the help he could get – the senior officers of the Navy, including the three Board members, were risk-averse men who had been brought up in the peacetime navy of the nearly 50 years since the War of 1812. Lincoln actually attended the first meeting where Bushnell pitched the design to the Board. He was careful not to order the Board to approve Ericsson’s ship but instead simply said *“All I can say is what the girl said when she put her foot into the stocking. It strikes me there’s something in it”*. **Lincoln’s support was enough to prevent an initial outright rejection by the Board, but they remained skeptical of a ship that was breathtaking radical (drawing on Page 3).** Bushnell returned to New York and persuaded Ericsson to meet with the Board and answer their questions. Secretary Welles was impressed with Ericsson’s technical analysis and asked him how much the proposed ship would cost. The inventor replied, *“Two hundred seventy-five thousand dollars”*.

This, being far less than anticipated, clinched the decision and the Board approved the construction of the *Monitor* – **to be completed in 100 days!** Just as well, because Secretary Welles received hard, reliable intelligence in February 1862 that the *Virginia* was real and near completion. **On March 3rd, the *Monitor* was turned over to the Navy in New York, just a few days over the 100-day target!**

A few days later, the CSS *Virginia* rampaged through the Union fleet at Hampton Roads, Virginia and threw the Lincoln administration, particularly Secretary of War Edwin Stanton (who had replaced Simon Cameron a few months before) into a panic. Stanton was certain that the *Monitor* had no chance against the *Virginia* – *“a little vessel with two guns”* could not prevail against an ironclad frigate. He was terrified that the *“Merrimack”* as it was called in the North, could steam up the Potomac and shell the nation’s capital and then proceed up the coast to attack the northern port cities. Stanton tried to have the Potomac blocked by sunken barges full of stone but was challenged by Welles. Lincoln backed the Navy Secretary in his usual non-confrontational way.

Word arrived in Washington on the evening of March 9, 1862, that the little vessel with only two guns had indeed fought the mighty *Virginia* to a draw and protected the other wooden Union vessels in the Roads from destruction. What none one in Washington yet realized was that the *Virginia* mounted only ten guns of which no more than four could be brought to bear on an opponent at any time. Further, the *Monitor* had two 11-inch Dahlgrens while each of the *Virginia*’s broadsides consisted of one 6.4-inch rifled gun and three 9-inch smoothbores; the larger number of guns on the original *USS Merrimack* could not be mounted because of the great weight of the *Virginia*’s armor, **in a close-range slugging match such as the Hampton Roads battle, the *Monitor* was not really outgunned.**

The *Monitor*’s single day of ship-to-ship combat justified her cost and set in motion the design and construction of improved versions, the *Passaic* and *Canonicus* classics, which featured heavier armor and larger guns as well as a permanent smokestack and relocated pilothouse. These newer ships were sufficient to curb the threat of subsequent Confederate ironclads and ensure that the Union continued to control the coasts. **None of this would have happened if Abraham Lincoln, who had admitted he knew little about naval affairs, had not his subtle influences to ensure that the *Monitor* got a fair hearing in Washington.**

Wooden warships were now obsolete!

The monthly quiz will be back next month!