

My Fellow Roundtable Members: Our next meeting is on Wednesday, March 14, 2018 at 7 pm at La Navona, 154 North Hamilton Road, Gahanna, Ohio 43230. We are VERY fortunate to have Dr. James I. "Bud" Robertson as our speaker. Dr. Robertson spoke to our Roundtable once before in 2003. I know that many of our members have become interested in the Civil War more recently than Dr. Robertson's last trip to Columbus, so let me provide you some information on Bud.

*One of the most distinguished names in Civil War history, Dr. Robertson served as Executive Director of the U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission in the 1960s and worked with Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. He then taught 44 years at Virginia Tech, where his upper division course on the Civil War era attracted 300 or more students per semester and made it the largest class of its kind in the nation. He received every teaching award given by Virginia Tech. At his retirement in 2011, the University named him Alumni Distinguished Professor Emeritus of History. Dr. Robertson was also a charter member (by Senate appointment) of Virginia's Civil War Sesquicentennial Commission, and was actively engaged in the state's sesquicentennial observances.*

*A Danville, Virginia native, Dr. Robertson is the author or editor of more than 40 books, including three studies written for young readers. His massive biography of Gen. "Stonewall" Jackson won eight national awards and was used as the base for the Ted Turner/Warner Bros. mega-movie, "Gods and Generals." Robertson was chief historical consultant for the film. Dr. Robertson's annotated edition of John B. Jones's A REBEL WAR CLERK'S DIARY debuted at MOC in Appomattox on September 26, 2015 in two volumes published by the University of Kansas Press. His latest books are AFTER THE CIVIL WAR (National Geographic Society, 2015) and CIVIL WAR ECHOES: VOICES FROM VIRGINIA, 1860 -1891 (Library of Virginia, 2016).*

*He is the recipient of every major award given in Civil War history, as well as a lecturer of national acclaim. Dr. Robertson holds a Ph.D. degree from Emory University and honorary doctorates from Randolph-Macon College and Shenandoah University. He is the Father of the traditional state song, "Our Great Virginia," approved by the General Assembly in March, 2015.*

Dr. Robertson will talk to us about Water in the Civil War. He describes his talk this way: "Water is the basic essential of life--so much so that we take it for granted. But water is more than something we drink. Especially was this so in the Civil War. It provided a route of transportation for both sides and a defensive barrier for many battles. It produced mud that hampered movements and dehydration when it was lacking. It could be a source for cleanliness, just as it was a source for deadly disease. In short, it would be impossible to discuss the Civil War without encountering water all along the way."

I have attached Tom Ayres' Report of Mark Laubacher's excellent presentation at the February meeting.

Here is our Treasurer's Report:

#### Treasurer's Report for February 2018

Beginning checking account balance 2/1/2018 = \$3235.93

February receipts = \$267.00 (\$170.00 from dues; \$97.00 from book raffle)

January expenses = \$250.00 (for speaker fee and expenses)

Ending checking account balance 2/28/2018 = \$3252.93

January started a new fiscal year for the Roundtable, so dues are once again due. Our dues are:

- *Single* \$25.00
- *Family* \$35.00
- *Student* \$15.00

We have not raised our dues for many years, and I have no plans to do so in 2018. Please continue to support our book raffle. Once again, I will match raffle sales up to \$50 if everyone at the meeting buys at least one ticket. Please make a point of getting your dues in to Dave DeLisio or me as soon as possible; don't make me channel my debt collection attorney doppelganger!

Battlefield Tour Report: Please save the dates of April 12 2018 through April 15, 2018 for a trip to Chickamauga. I am in a pickle regarding this trip because our Trip Coordinator has run into some personal problems. I know I will eventually get the information from him, but in the meantime I would like to ask someone to step forward and agree to be responsible for some of the administrative duties in connection with this trip. I would do it myself but I am committed to be at the bachelor party for one of our members that weekend and will be unable to attend. All the reservations have been made and the work has been completed; I simply need someone to act as trip coordinator for those members attending.

This is a message I received from Tom Ayres: **By pure chance yesterday I met and spoke with Sarah Aisenbrey, archivist of the Dawes Arboretum. She was wearing a jacket with the arboretum name and logo. I told her of my interest in Rufus Dawes and the entire remarkable Dawes family. In the course of the conversation she mentioned that the arboretum will hold a special program at the visitors center from 2-3:30 p.m. Saturday, March 31 (\$5 attendance fee for non-members). The program features rarely displayed memorabilia of the family from the Civil War through WWII. As you likely know, Beman Dawes Jr. dropped out of Marietta College to serve in the army before the U.S. entry in WWI.**

Finally, I am passing along the following information regarding the Columbus Barracks Civil War Roundtable:

The meeting for next month will be held on Thursday, March 8, 2018 and the topic will be "**The Trans-Mississippi Theater in the Civil War**" by Roy Nichols. The meeting will run from 7:00 P.M. until 8:45 P.M. in Meeting Room B in the Upper Arlington Public Main Library, which is located at 2800 Tremont Road in Upper Arlington, Ohio (at the northeast corner of Northam Road and Tremont Road). After you come in the main entrance, turn right at the first hallway past the Circulation Desk and follow it to the end to Meeting Room A and then turn right at the first opportunity and take either the steps or the elevator down to the lower level to Meeting Room B.

James G. Ryan  
President COCWRT

## Biological warfare plots in the Civil War

Almost the entire student body of the University of Mississippi — 135 of 139 male students — enlisted in Company A of the 11th Mississippi infantry regiment, known as the University Greys. During Pickett's Charge on July 3, 1863, at Gettysburg, the Greys suffered 100% casualties.

This level of annihilation, on both sides, typifies the horrific carnage suffered by soldiers in combat. But disease and infection took a higher toll. For every three soldiers lost on battlefields, five combatants lost their lives to disease, with dysentery the most prominent, but also typhoid fever, malaria, pneumonia, smallpox and yellow fever.

Seeking to inflate the level of non-combat casualties and deaths was a rogue's gallery of amateur scientists, crackpots, oddballs and nefarious characters who came up with all manner of weapons of mass destruction and biological and chemical agents.

Mark Laubacher, a registered nurse, paramedic and certified specialist in poison information at the Central Ohio Poison Center in Columbus, presented this gallery of characters and their methods at the February meeting. Laubacher is also a member of the Roundtable.

Private Isham Walker of the 9th Mississippi regiment, a millwright and balloon enthusiast, wrote to Confederate President Jefferson Davis and Secretary of War Leroy Walker in 1861 of his proposal to have a manned balloon drop "deadly bombs" containing gunpowder and poison onto Union forces holding Fort Pickens and the Union fleet at Pensacola, Florida. This scheme was not acted on.

Many plotters proposed to alter artillery shells with compartments filled with red pepper, cayenne pepper, chloroform, hydrocyanic acid (prussic acid), chlorine and other agents. The mysterious Greek fire was also a popular agent favored by plotters.

Hundreds of plots were proposed to disable the crew of the CSS Virginia (Merrimack). On the other side one rebel notion was to drop chloroform into the turret of the USS Monitor. How? Access was the problem. It never happened.

In 1863 Levi Short of Buffalo, New York, added sulfur and perfected a less volatile solidified form of Greek fire. He proposed that it be used to rout rebels holding Fort Sumter. Again, never happened.

In 1862 an idea was floated on the Union side to have eight men operate a fire engine to spray chloroform on rebel troops. Another non-starter.

The list of other chemical agents bandied about as weapons included alkarsine, arsenic, arseniurated hydrogen, potassium cyanide, hydrochloric acid, phosgene gas and strychnine.

Fearing reprisals from the other side, President Abraham Lincoln issued General Order 100 on April 24, 1863, forbidding the use of unconventional warfare. Jefferson Davis concurred.

But that did not deter the most ardent practitioners of the dark arts of warfare from their shady pursuits.

The undisputed reigning practitioner of germ warfare was Luke Pryor Blackburn of Kentucky. Born June 16, 1816, in Woodford County in the heart of Blue Grass country, Blackburn would go on to earn a medical degree from Transylvania University and become famous as a generous philanthropist and expert, for his day, on yellow fever and in managing epidemics and quarantines.

Having moved to prosperous Natchez, Mississippi, in 1847, where he befriended future Confederate President Jefferson Davis, Blackburn spent his own money to build a hospital for boatmen on the Mississippi River.

When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Blackburn was too old for combat. Instead, he turned his attention to blockade running and devising plots to infect Northern cities with smallpox and yellow fever.

Mississippi Governor John Pettus asked Blackburn to travel to Canada to secure provisions for blockade runners. Blackburn and his wife moved to Nova Scotia in August 1863. Blackburn was aboard a rebel ship carrying ice from Halifax to Mobile, Alabama, when it was overtaken by a Union warship. Thinking he was a mere passenger, the Union commander let Blackburn go.

When yellow fever struck Bermuda, a major base for Confederate blockade runners, in April 1864, Blackburn was sent to aid victims. He remained there until October 1864. It was in Bermuda where Blackburn conspired to infect Northern cities with yellow fever by smuggling clothing of patients and selling them to used clothing merchants in several major cities. At time the cause of the fever was unknown (that would not be known until Walter Reed made the connection to mosquitoes in 1900). And it was also thought, incorrectly, that the disease could be spread by contact.

Blackburn was more successful in an earlier effort in 1863. He had clothing contaminated with smallpox virus sold to a consignment shop in Washington, D.C. Lieutenant Charles W. Randall of the 17th Vermont regiment, at age 16 the youngest

officer in the Union army, was an unfortunate purchaser of some contaminated clothing. This is a passage from the 17th's regimental history: Randall "...contracted small-pox, as he believed from infected underwear which he purchased in Washington, came so near dying that his health was utterly broken and on the 9th of March, 1863, he was discharged for disability. He opened a country store in East Montpelier, but in the course of a year or two passed away."

In another plot Blackburn came up the idea of poisoning Croton Reservoir in midtown Manhattan in New York. His choices included strychnine, arsenic and prussic acid (cyanide). As with other plots, gaining undetected access to deliver the deadly agents proved problematic. Hence, it did not happen.

The U.S. Bureau of Military Justice charged Blackburn with attempted murder for his yellow fever machinations. But he was still in Canada and was able to evade the charge. The New York Times branded Blackburn as "the yellow fever fiend" and "a hideous devil."

Blackburn remained in Canada but was able to slip back into the U.S. in September 1867, bound for New Orleans to render aid in an outbreak of yellow fever in that city and the Texas coast. Blackburn then moved to a plantation in Arkansas owned by his wife.

The Blackburns returned to Kentucky in early 1873. During a cholera epidemic in Louisville, Blackburn urged citizens to boil water. His advice was ignored, and thousands died. Blackburn continued to aid communities (Memphis in 1873 and Fernandina, Florida, in 1877) stricken with yellow fever, the scourge of the South.

To the surprise of many, Blackburn announced his candidacy for governor of Kentucky as a Democrat in 1878. In May 1879 the Cincinnati Gazette, a Republican publication, undertook a full-scale assault on Blackburn for his wartime disease plots. The newspaper dubbed Blackburn "Doctor Black Vomit," a reference to an effect of yellow fever.

No matter. Blackburn was elected. His administration was known for fiscal reform, penal improvements and Ohio River navigation improvements. To alleviate prison overcrowding, Blackburn granted many pardons to sick and dying inmates suffering from appalling conditions. For these actions the governor's critics dubbed him "Lenient Luke."

Though not a candidate for reelection, Blackburn defended his record in a speech at the 1883 Democratic nominating convention. Catcalls and heckling drowned out his

comments. Though he accepted criticism for his reforms, he termed anyone who accused him of corruption “a liar, a base and infamous liar.”

Blackburn opened a sanatorium after he left office but moved to Frankfort in January 1887. In failing health, he died September 14, 1887.

Thus ended another incredible Civil War life and story.

Tom Ayres  
Secretary COCWRT