



HFCWRT Monthly Newsletter

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- DATE:** Wednesday, December 12th, 2018
- TIME:** Dinner 6:30 PM; Program 7:30 PM
- PLACE:** Camp Hill Methodist Church, Harpers Ferry, WV
- SPEAKER:** Bruce M. Venter
- SUBJECT:** Kill Jeff Davis: *The Union Raid on Richmond, 1864*

The Speaker:

Bruce Venter's major interest is Civil War cavalry with an emphasis on the career of Union general Judson Kilpatrick. He frequently lectures on the cavalry and has led bus tours on the Kilpatrick-Dahlgren raid, the focus of his book, *Kill Jeff Davis*. In 2012 he participated in a re-enactment of Dahlgren's raid through Goochland County where he rode with over 80 troopers for three days, serving as their historian.

Bruce is a past president of the Richmond Civil War Round Table and currently serves as 1st vice president of the Goochland County Historical Society. He has published articles in *Blue and Gray*, *Civil War*, *Patriots of the American Revolution*, *Goochland*

County Historical Society Magazine, *Washington Times* and numerous professional journals. He is also the author of *The Battle of Hubbardton: The Rear-Guard Action that Saved America*.

Venter spent 36 years in public education before his retirement, mostly as an assistant superintendent in school systems in New York, Virginia and Maryland. He holds a B.A. in history from Manhattan College and a master's in public administration and doctorate in educational administration from the University at Albany.

Bruce Venter is president of America's History, LLC, a tour and conference company which he founded in 2010. He lives in Goochland County, Virginia, with his wife Lynne and their beagle "Sally Seddon."

The Subject

Bruce will be discussing the focus of his book, *Kill Jeff Davis: The Union Raid on Richmond, 1864*. The ostensible goal of the controversial Kilpatrick-Dahlgren Raid on Richmond (February 28–March 3, 1864) was to free some 13,000 Union prisoners of war held in the Confederate capital. But orders found on the dead body of the raid's subordinate commander, Colonel Ulric Dahlgren, point instead to a plot to capture or kill Confederate president Jefferson Davis and set Richmond ablaze. What really happened, a how, and why, are debated to this day.

The Meal

A family-style meal will be served at 6:30 PM prior to the program. The cost of the meal is \$15.00 per person. Reservations for the meal **must be made no later than Sunday, December 9th** with Christopher Craig ccraig@laurellodge.com or call at 304-433-1260. The meal will consist of assorted crockpots of chili, cornbread, salad bar, iced tea, coffee, and dessert.

Scoundrel: Created with lofty aspirations, the Excelsior Brigade never reached its potential under Dan Sickles

The Daniel E. Sickles scorecard has two particularly unforgettable entries. The first is February 27, 1859, the day Sickles, a New York Democratic politician, murdered his young wife's lover, Philip Barton Key II, in broad daylight near the White House. The second is July 2, 1863, when Sickles—now a Union major general—lost a leg to a cannonball at Gettysburg while nearly costing the Army of the Potomac victory with an ill-advised decision to reposition his 3rd Corps on Cemetery Ridge. By pleading temporary insanity—the first defendant to do so successfully in this country—Sickles got away with the murder of Key, son of the famed Francis Scott Key. As for the grievous wound at Gettysburg, it fortunately ended Sickles' military career, which had been trouble-plagued from the beginning of the war. That he was in uniform in the first place shows just how desperate President Abraham Lincoln was to forge the type of political alliance he knew was necessary to save the Union—even if it meant embracing a rascal like Dan Sickles.

The prewar notoriety associated with Sickles' name was further exacerbated by a dreadful incident on October 21, 1861. Soldiers in the Excelsior Brigade, a unit Sickles had created and now commanded, were joking and laughing around their campfire on a mild evening in southern Maryland. They had been in the region only a few days, and excitement for their new assignment ran high. It wasn't long before a soldier produced a Confederate cannon ball, one of many that had been fired from the Virginia side of the Potomac River, intended to sink Union shipping heading for Washington, D.C. Someone had brought the ball into camp earlier in the day, and while it was being examined, a substantial amount of powder had been poured out and placed aside. For the bored young men from western New York, the projectile inevitably became a plaything.

Before long, the idea of shoving some sort of ember into the ball's fuse hole took hold—a challenge quickly taken up by one of the soldiers, Private John Rouse of Company E, 3rd Excelsior. Within an instant the ball exploded, sending fragments of iron as well as men flying in every direction. Rouse died almost instantly, Sergeant Michael Daly a few days later. Many others were left to suffer from various wounds.

For Sickles, the exploding ball incident wouldn't be the last in a run of serious setbacks. A few days earlier, on October 11, Sickles' Excelsior Brigade, which he had raised with New York state volunteers, was combined with another brigade to form a new division under Brig. Gen. Joseph Hooker. The 10,000 men or so in Hooker's new division were tasked with suppressing Rebel activity in southern Maryland and in keeping the Potomac open for Union shipping.

Dandy and dastardly: political expediency was behind Abraham Lincoln's choice to keep Dan Sickles in the Union Army.

To his credit, Sickles was instrumental in preservation of the Gettysburg battlefield as a postwar congressman. (Excerpted from an article by Rick Barram from *America's Civil War* magazine)

Lincoln was shot at—and almost killed— nearly two years before he was assassinated

Late one August evening in 1863, after an exhausting day at the White House, Lincoln rode alone by horse to the Soldiers' Home, his family's summer residence. A private at the gate heard a shot ring out and, moments later, the horse galloped into the compound, with a bareheaded Lincoln clinging to his steed. Lincoln explained that a gunshot had gone off at the foot of the hill, sending the horse galloping so fast it knocked his hat off. Two soldiers retrieved Lincoln's hat, which had a bullet hole right through it. The president asked the guards to keep the incident under wraps: He didn't want to worry his wife Mary.